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Essay: Television and Fraud - The Quest for Art, Beauty, and Truth in TV Land

The invention of the Gutenberg Press brought significant changes to Western society. But those effects are considerably diminished by the impact of television. No other medium is quite like television, and no other medium could have the same potential impact on human affairs. As an art form, television stands alone in its unique ability to represent nearly every other kind of art form. Like film, it has the exceptional advantage of combining visual and audio into a single medium. But, unlike films the power of television is that it can transmit drama, dance, music, comedy, and sports, as well as informational reporting, political and community events into 150,000,000 homes simultaneously. Television is both vivid and immediate. It can make events and issues seem clear and real which are remote and complex. Part of television's potency lies in the intimate sense viewers believe they feel when "meeting" the great figures of the world and actually "seeing" major events as they are happening. For the price of a television set, viewers can go anywhere in the world without leaving the comfort of their homes.

Although some would argue that television is an art form, it at least "contains"---transmits---art; and some would question even that. However, text is considered an art form, and shows contain text; therefore, any show, regardless of its quality, would necessarily be art. Though, in reality, quality can't be defined (except by cultural---or other---defined standards), so the quality of television shows is irrelevant when defining them as art. This is also true of any other art form: quality does not determine its status as art.

Among television's more unusual distinctions is the ability to perpetrate a hoax or commit fraud, which can have extensive national, or even, global impact. If fraud were to surface in other art forms---for example, in painting or sculpture---the ramifications would be relatively marginal. Some negative results may affect a particular segment of society, but overall the impact would scarcely be measurable. Though difficult to conceptualize, fraud could also be perpetrated by newspapers or magazines. But, in these cases, the effects would be confined because these media types have specialized focus, thus, a limited scope of readership. Although never intended as a hoax, radio's airing of the now infamous Orson G. Wells radio play, *War of the Worlds*, caused a near panic in some areas of the country. A hoax by radio, then, could have potentially disastrous results. However, this would only have been possible in the pre-television era, when every home had a radio and was the main source of entertainment and information. Such was the case during the era that *War of the Worlds* was broadcast.

Radio no longer dominates in American households. Today, television has taken the reigning position. Kent Anderson mentions in *Television Fraud* that it's estimated that over ninety percent of American households have a television set (xi). The typical American spends an average of four hours a day watching it. The sheer breadth of television's possible influence is staggering. More than any other medium, television has an audience which cuts across all lines of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, economic status, and education levels. Watching television has also become the primary free-time activity for Americans. Considering cable television, specialized stations, and the major national networks, the television industry enjoys one of the most extensive audiences of any medium. As a result, the potential impact of fraud could be substantial, for television's influence is considerable.

In 1955 a phenomenon occurred in the form of a television quiz show. The fraud which grew out of the success of this particular show eventually brought about the temporary demise of all quiz shows on television. The show was called *$64,000 Question*. Originality wasn't a basic ingredient of this show. In his book, Anderson discusses the rules and format of the show. He explains that of twelve different categories of questions, contestants picked one question. A new category then replaced the one selected. If answered correctly, contestants won a specified sum of money and could risk their winnings on a more difficult question, doubling the amount, or leave. The ultimate plateau was $64,000.

The appearance of secrecy surrounding the handling of questions was an elaborate feature of the show. The questions were supposedly kept in a vault by a bank officer at the Manufacturers Trust Company. During the show, the bank officer sat conspicuously behind a desk, flanked by two uniformed security guards, and handed the higher-valued questions to the show's host. When contestants wished to attempt a question at the $8000 or higher level, they had to enter what was called the "isolation booth," a soundproof compartment containing a microphone and a window facing the audience. Inside, the booth was brightly lighted for the audience to observe, for maximum effect, the contestant's mental strain when attempting to answer an arduous question. At the isolation-booth level, the contestant received a Cadillac convertible for a consolation prize if a question was missed.

Within a few weeks of its first airing, *$64,000 Question* became a raging success. Anderson mentions: "The audience . . . swelled at an incredible rate. *Newsweek* called it 'the greatest question and answer routine . . . since Socrates packed them in on the Agora'" (8). The show was the most meteoric event in television's brief history and was soon the top-rated program on television. "Few entertainment enterprises ever experienced such a phenomenal surge in appeal," says Anderson (9).

Success breeds imitation, so, as would be expected, many quiz shows soon appeared to claim their share of the money that could be made from giving money away. Few, though, were as successful as *$64,000 Question*. And, quiz show mania was not limited to the United States. Imitations of the United States quiz programs began appearing in other countries, like Great Britain, Italy, Brazil, Sweden, and Mexico. But not just capitalistic countries and ideologies were drawn to the appeal of winning big money. Anderson explains that "even the anti-capitalism of the *Daily Worker* was captured by the allure of [the quiz show craze]: it had a $64,000 fund drive at the height of the quiz mania" (35). If Karl Marx weren't already resting comfortably six feet downstairs, such a scandalous display of capitalism by an anti-capitalistic organization would likely have laid him there prematurely.

The popularity of quiz shows created another phenomenon: winners became overnight folk heroes. The heroes were the big money winners. Viewers were greatly impressed with the contestants' extensive knowledge and the grueling mental pressure they endured, and they were thirsty to know everything about their new heroes. The mass media was eager to display the new heroes to this fascinated public. Accordingly, each hero's personality was publicized as much as their winnings. These ordinary and previously unknown people represented part of the American dream---modern-day Horacio Algers. Their new celebrity status propelled them on a "brief publicity-laden life of tours, awards, endorsements, and commercial requests" (Anderson 10). They were also offered new careers and opportunities to publish; had their life stories, complete with full pictorial layouts, displayed in magazines; and they met dignitaries in many fields and in many countries. In addition, these heroes frequently appeared on other television programs as guests. This unexpected celebrity status gave them fame and wealth well beyond their winnings from the quiz show. But it also meant a loss of privacy, although most didn't seem to object.

What could account for this highly unusual popularity of quiz shows and the contestants who were big winners? Many saw it as America's crass pursuit of materialism, and media criticism seemed most frequently to voice this opinion. Robert Lewis Shayon, a critic known for his colorful insights, had a different opinion of the phenomenon. He saw a resemblance between the quiz programs and Sophoclean tragedies. Like Sophocles, the quiz shows used nonprofessional actors for its participants. Anderson relates:

> To Shayon, a contestant in the isolation booth grappling with difficult questions had all the basic elements of Sophoclean drama: struggle, dismemberment, death, and renewal . . . 'He is face to face with the very meaning of life, with the most desperate crisis of his aspiration .... [The] audience . . . who pity and fear . . . observe (courtesy of the clever, naked, searching camera's eye) how they are dismembered by the trial, the suspense, the unendurable torment of the hero who is expiating publicly their private unacknowledged sin of greed. (22)

Perhaps greed, to some degree, figures into the popularity of watching these shows, but other factors seem more compelling. Shayon's explanation seems plausible. The viewer, more than merely being entertained, has all his senses stimulated and is ultimately rewarded with a cathartic

outlet when the hero triumphs. The whole event represents the trials which we face in everyday life. People of all ages are entertained by television programs and are provided with a new door to media personalities through which millions of people can reach to feel a *"sense"* of contact with them. Television personalities and the new heroes, after all, appear regularly and reliably either daily or weekly, without regard to weather, local disasters and tragedies, or war and world famine.

Observing people win large sums of money, for some viewers, must be like wish fulfillment. The television screen represents a kind of dream to drift off into, like sleep, and the show a dream experience. The quiz shows (and other programs) symbolize what the viewers want for themselves. According to Walter Benjamin, the actor is a signifier. In this case, the contestant is the actor, signifying the wealth, status, and recognition the viewer probably won't ever have. The viewers' lack is represented by the contestant. To other viewers, the winning contestant is a surrogate, or a displacement for some threatening element or thoughts in their own lives. Many people are struggling with disturbing situations like divorce, children in trouble, financial difficulties, or even appalling thoughts like wanting to harm or kill another person. Rather than seeing the contestant as a signifier, these people use the image or action to remove themselves from their own worlds of dismaying stress and fear. Marya Mannes explains the lure of television in "The Television Pattern:"

> Steady viewers are characterized perhaps more than anything else by their passivity… Television is distraction and solace for millions on whom this civilization has imposed the crushing weight of emptiness. To them, young and old, the turning of the knob is The Way Out. (20)

It's conceivable, too, that the television screen functions as a sort of mirror, replaying the mirror stage of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Some viewers who use television as a distraction have not established a secure or firm identity, or they are exceedingly dissatisfied with their own perceived image. For them, the television screen may simply be a mirror reflecting an image they see temporarily as a displacement for their own, thereby superimposing an identity they imagine to be their own. This other image, then, would also be a signifier or place holder for their own identity.

Studies have been done which support to some degree these speculations. The essay "Adult Fantasy Life and Patterns of Media Use" discusses studies which were conducted in an attempt to find whether the content of individuals' fantasies has any connection to types of media viewing. One study found a significant correlation of a personality type they term the "full-headed model" with the use of particular media content. The "full-headed" model is characterized by:

> An over production of certain types of fantasies and daydreams to which the individual would rather not attend . . . When a person's inner fantasies and thoughts become too aversive and unpleasant . . . almost any sufficiently distracting external stimulus will be used to drown them out. Television . . . reduces negative affect . . . by substituting someone else's thoughts for your own . . . It is simply the easiest [way] . . . for shifting one's attention away from one's miseries. (88)

"Full-headed" individuals have frequent violent and fearful fantasies. Television, in their case, acts like a neutralizer. Their thoughts can be shoved aside by focusing on the activity which appears in front of them on their television screen, similar to the viewer who would use the contestant as a surrogate.

Taken in a broader context, television viewing can reveal the subconscious mind of a culture. The types of shows which are favored by a culture's majority could be clues to its psyche. Our culture, for example, likes programs with sports, violence, crass language, and bathroom humor. Oddly, these are all strong preferences of young boys. The heavy emphasis on sports and violence could reflect the dominating influence of our patriarchal heritage. The desire for crude language and off-color humor could indicate that this culture is still in a juvenile state of mind. Based on the strong desire that Americans exhibited, as

a culture, for the quiz shows and the contestants, might suggest some kind of significant lack within the culture at that time.

Regardless of the reasons why the quiz show became so popular with viewers, television networks and sponsors wanted to profit from the public's overwhelming interest in *$64,000 Question*. The show's sponsor, Revlon, announced that the company's earnings for 1955 had risen nearly 200 percent over the year since the show began. So, with that kind of bottom-line success, within a short time the airwaves abounded with quiz shows. Says Anderson: "The quiz business [was] a richly rewarding vocation for contestants and televisions producers alike" (23).

The television industry loved the quiz shows because they were among the least expensive shows to produce, even considering the large amounts of prize money. The sets were minimal, and there were no actors to be paid. Sponsors were equally enamored of them. Any show which commands a wide viewership usually translates into increased sales for that show's sponsor. The quiz show craze, then, afforded some nice opportunities for ad agencies and sponsors, as well as producers and contestants. Like Revlon, some of these sponsors later experienced similarly astounding increases in profits when sponsoring a popular quiz show. Jacques Lacan's belief that desire is the fuel of all human behavior becomes evident when considering the sponsor/producer relationship of, not just quiz shows, but of all shows. It is, of course, quite simply the desire for money.

Desire is closely connection to greed, and success not only breeds imitation, it also often breeds fraud and deceit, bedfellows of greed. As the quiz shows proliferated, the pressure increased to draw audiences away from competing shows. Sponsors desire only high ratings. If ratings fall prey to Newton's Law of Gravity, the sponsor cancels; then, the show joins the apple's fate---it's dropped. But the profusion of quiz shows on the television screen, however, was possibly becoming satiated with money, because after a couple of years, the public began losing interest in quiz shows, which falsifies the critics' claim that their popularity was based on the viewers' greed. Mark Goodson, the producer of *The Price is Right* (a popular show which gave away consumer goods, instead of money) summed up well the appeal of his new show: "Money on television has become just a lot of numbers, but an icebox is still an icebox" (Anderson 87). The viewer was apparently becoming more interested in seeing something more concrete; perhaps the materialistic nature of the American public was showing.

Shortly following the dynamic success of *$64,000 Question*, a new show appeared called *Twenty One*. It later became one of the more significant competitors to *$64,000 Question*. After the first few shows aired, the producer of *Twenty One* noticed that most of the contestants "seemed to stumble to victory. . . and [he] quickly sensed that some form of contestant control was necessary to produce a more exciting contest. Showmanship would have to take precedence over honesty" (Anderson 46). Knowing about unethical procedures used on other shows, he also decided against leaving things to fate for his show. If he did, the show would likely fail. Some other shows had already begun coaching contestants (contestant control) to make their show more interesting. Hours, even days before the show went on the air, a staff member would question contestants, probing for what they knew best. Then questions were framed around this knowledge. Sometimes it was done so subtly that the contestant was unaware of the true nature of the questioning. The coaching *Twenty One's* producer instituted, however, was more thoroughly deceitful. His methods went well beyond probing. He provided questions and answers to specifically chosen contestants before going on the air, in addition to coaching. This gave him control over how long certain contestants were on the show, and he was able to maintain a high level of excitement by the use of ties, etc.

To stay alive, it was imperative a show kept its audience. If players weren't exciting, ratings dropped. Viewers responded favorably to certain personality types and to big winners. In the interest of giving the audience what it wanted, and for their show's survival, nearly all producers began rehearsing their contestants---who were also often given scripts to memorize. Thus, contestant behavior was predetermined as much as possible. Later, other shows, as well as *Twenty One,* hand-picked contestants they wanted to win, provided them with answers and told them exactly what to do, what to say, and how to react. For example, contestants were told how long to wait before answering, how to dab the sweat off

in a sense, vote with their money, receiving more of the same---products and shows---until they stop viewing and buying. However, it is *quantity*---not quality---that they get for their vote. There is no incentive to produce quality---only the minimum that the consumer will tolerate. Quality is an integral part of Beauty. Mass culture and mass art can achieve only mediocrity, lacking in quality. Beauty, then, cannot be found in television programs, a product of mass culture, or the culture industry. The business of television programming aptly fits Adorno's description of the culture industry. His observation that mass art has lost individuality, and that appearances of difference are only an illusion, without a doubt, applies to television.

As an art form---an art form without Beauty---can television answer the question: "What is Truth?" To answer, another question must be asked: "What can be trusted about images seen on television---or in films?" Nothing. The very essence of these media is deception. It cannot be avoided. Everything about them is manipulated. Viewers witness only what the camera's eye wants them to see. Sound is controlled; sets and scenery are controlled; makeup and appearances are controlled; people are controlled. As a natural consequence of that, events are controlled. "Real" people seen on television are like cyborgs: they are completely unreal, made of a series of minute dots on the television screen via an electric current. They are 100 percent technology.

Most television shows are not live, so ultimately what passes before the viewers' eyes is the end product of the cutting room process. Film, of course, submits to the same process. Because of the cut-and-paste performance of the cutting room, when watching a film or television program only multiple fragments are seen. Even when the programs are shown uncut or live, the multiple-fragment syndrome is still present because the camera moves constantly from one point to another producing just a series of pictures, not necessarily coherent. The whole picture cannot be seen when looking at a two-dimensional screen. The third dimension will always be missing. (Derrida's absence?)

Though all images on television and film must be manipulated, the purposeful and willful manipulation of events for the purpose of influencing public opinion is called "framing." Framing occurs even on such seemingly objective and neutral programs as the news. In 1990, a study was conducted to examine the framing process on network television news as it applies to visual art and artists. In his essay, "When Art Becomes News," John Ryan comments: "A main point of these studies is that news is less a mirror than a social construction possessing the ability to "frame" events for its viewers" (870). Frames give the viewer subtle clues of a negative or positive nature. Some framing techniques are tone of voice, choice of words, body language, facial expressions, use of humor, what is shown as well as what is not shown, what is said as well as what is not said, use of camera angles to portray level of involvement and social roles, and so on. Ryan explains the extent to which framing occurs:

> Studies of television's ability to frame reality have focused on such diverse topics as political campaign coverage. . .coverage of political violence and terrorism. . . stories on trade unions and strikes. . . coverage of war and peace issues. . . and the routinization of seemingly nonroutine stories. (870)

All these studies found incidences of framing.

A typical example of framing involves the artist, Christo. When introducing a news story about Christo, a well-respected national news anchor, David Brinkley, used the pejorative term "alleged artist" when referring to him. And Tom Brokaw, another national anchorman, called him a "self-styled" artist, another term to infer skepticism of the artist's legitimacy. A field reporter for Brinkley's show "interviewed" Christo but only gave him four seconds to explain his art, but most of what Christo said was unintelligible because of his heavy accent. The camera then returned to Brinkley, who was shown laughing. Two weeks later, Brinkley did another two-minute story on the artist. Ryan comments on the film clip, which was shown on that program, about Christo and his project: "Through clever editing Christo is made to look somewhat foolish" (880). The study found that all major network news shows subtly ridiculed Christo by inferring that his art should not be taken seriously---even that his work shouldn't be considered art. It seems peculiar that a medium which is only a marginal art form, and has no Beauty, should be so arrogant in its

their brow with a handkerchief, and so on. These methods proved extremely successful for *Twenty One*, and the ratings increased to the level of *$64,000 Question's*.

Ultimately, shows that used deceptive devices were the most popular. Above all else, producers considered these shows to be entertainment. To them, it was just show business and they were providing what the audience responded to most favorably, and they obviously weren't beyond implementing devious means. After the frauds were exposed, one of the producers commented about the unethical planning procedures of his show: "Our purpose was entertainment ..... that is what we were really scheduling. We were scheduling the entertainment" (Anderson 108). By making the statement twice, this producer certainly reveals his own nervous qualms about what he did. Though it is probably true that these types of shows were primarily entertainment, many producers clung to this argument to defend their use of deceptions. Could anyone really complain, though, about how the shows were put together? An artless producer of *Treasure Hunt* may actually have stated it best when he said: "If a sponsor wants to give away loot, it's his own business how he does it" (Anderson 91). An unidentified spokesman for a popular show called *Dotto* commented:

> Look, this may be a quiz business to the housewives of America, but to us, it's the entertainment business. There's no reason for the public to know what happens behind the scenes. If you buy a $5.80 seat to a play, why should that entitle you to go backstage?" (Anderson 155).

Many people felt this was a valid point.

There's no doubt that what was done was deceptive, but no crime was perpetrated. That is, no laws were violated---other than the law of ethics. There was also no victim. The purpose of commercial television is to encourage the consumption ethos. A show must have money in order to be produced. Mannes explains in *The Reporter* that "television is a mass medium that is supported by the sale of goods, and the more people look the more people buy" (19). So, if viewers enjoy the shows, the sponsors usually make money. Thus, for the quiz shows, viewers are happy, sponsors are happy, contestants are happy, and producers are happy. The entire television industry is a triangular relationship with the viewer, the sponsor, and the producer: one cannot survive without the other two. In the case of the quiz shows, heavy pressure from advertisers (greed) to produce increased ratings for "their" show---resulting, of course, in fatter bottom lines---was ironically one of the reasons for the conception and implementation of the frauds.

But was there really no victim? *Technically*, there was no law broken; and *technically*, everyone was happy, and no one was hurt. But what about Art? What about Beauty? And what about Truth? Though *technically* the programs on television are considered art, a more accurate name should possibly begin and end with "technological communications media for mass consumption and deception." The network's (show's) tie to advertisers is a symbiotic relationship---one depends on the other for life. The necessity of mass dissemination forces an appeal to the widest possible population---a mass audience---so the advertiser's message receives maximum exposure. The "truth" is that the advertising corporations actually compete for air time with the shows. They consume the very vehicle of their message. The percentage of air time given to advertising has increased enormously since the 1950s. Advertisers want more exposure (air time), and the networks and producers want more money. As a result, the viewer gets less and less entertainment value. Plus, the consumer must pay more and more for products to pay for ever increasing advertising costs. Advertising grows like a cancer. Once it's started growing, it cannot stop. It must continue to grow until, possibly, at some point it self-destructs.

In order to appeal to as broad a market as possible, shows are purposely made bland, thereby hindering development towards quality. The proliferation of quiz shows, exploding out of one successful show, is a cogent example. All had a similar format, varying only in the outward appearance. Because the development of new formats is viewed as too risky, producers stick to what has proven successful *once*; thus, successful shows are imitated incessantly. Anything successful, then, becomes a formula until totally rejected by the public. The public must buy, so the attitude is to give them just enough to stimulate their buying instincts. This chain of events is a consumption triangle forming Theodor Adorno's idea of the matrix of production and consumption, in which the consumer is stuck in the middle. Viewer/consumers,

presumption that it should inform a nation of what art is---especially in the forum of TV news, whose "authority" doesn't come from any claim to art, but to unmediated "truth."

Though framing can be---and is---used in any news story, this particular study found that the art world is singled out consistently in a long-standing use by all networks of the ridicule frame. Ryan remarks about this negative framing of art: "The fact that the art world is deemed marginal is itself part of the framing process---that is, its portrayal defines it as unimportant, and this defined lack of importance justifies its depiction as such" (887). The public, then, for many years has received from national network news shows a constant stream of negative messages regarding the art world. When framed news items are broadcast nationally by popular news anchors, the message is indeed profound. Ryan mentions that the same events can be used differently by "differing symbol-producing systems" (886). So, it's possible to receive different messages of exactly the same event---even the same film clip---when shown on different news casts. Further, it was found that public opinion can be influenced accordingly, depending upon how the event is framed. If this is true of supposedly objective news shows, what can be believed of anything on television? Was fraud and deception limited to the quiz shows? Where *is* Truth?

Perhaps today the quiz shows no longer use the deceptive practices which caused such a ruckus in 1959, but what about the news shows and other programs? An editorial in The Economist says:

> The problem of deception goes far beyond the question-and-answer programmes. It includes the pretence (sic) that rehearsed discussions are really unrehearsed, the use of recorded laughter to prop up comedians' flat jokes, the practice of telling audiences when to applaud, and the strange no-man's land, somewhere between honest exaggeration and downright misrepresentation, where so many advertisements hover. (725)

Deception is woven into every area of television and advertisements.

Perhaps television's most damaging deception is the destruction of sacred ceremonies. Ceremonies through the millennia, until the advent of mass media---namely, tv---produced a sense of bonding among the participants. Gatherings of people for religious events or celebratory events are important primarily for the bonding of a community or other subculture. Now millions of people view spectacular events of a ceremonial nature on television, such as the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diane, and they feel as though they are there. Viewers are deceiving themselves to believe this. They sit in a room watching a picture of electric dots on a screen in a box, either alone or with a few other people. But, it's not possible to feel the same excitement and magic the crowd at the actual event experiences. A crowd generates special excitement and passion which is totally absent when the event is viewed on television. Television viewers have not bonded with anyone else who saw the event on television nor with the people in the crowd. Can you imagine watching on television the events at Woodstock and believing you actually experienced it? The mass culture of television perpetrates the ruse, which encourages the public to believe they are actually participating in telecast events.

Benjamin's thesis that modern media destroy aura is sadly true, especially concerning ceremonial events. The *aura* is missing from ceremonies which are broadcast on television. The viewer is totally on the outside of the experience; the shamanistic quality does not extend to them, and there is no way to bond with other television "participants." In *Media, Culture and Society*, Paddy Scannell points out that "the slow erosion of auratic authority and the decay of charisma historically coincides with the gradual establishment of television as *the* universal electronic mode of communication" (156). The television industry has robbed the television viewing public of the Aura of Beauty, of the shamanistic quality, and of the bonding process associated with participation at the actual event; and at the same time, creating the myth that watching television *is* participating. The commentator of the event partly performs this function of deception.

Where is the Truth? The true fraud caused by television resides in framing, in providing a misconception of a "sense" of participation or "intimacy" with people seen on the screen, and actually exists as an integral part of the medium itself. The fraud and deceptions of the quiz shows in the 1950s sent a short-lived ripple of disbelief and anger. In fact, nothing really changed as a result of what happened then. The

FCC instituted a useless ruling, the networks had some other types of shows "cleaned up," and the public settled back into their easy chairs like catatonic featherweights and continued to watch increasingly more television. The quiz show frauds were only an aberration to the true fraud and deception. Once out of mind, the public feels all is right with television again, and they continue to rely on this medium for the major part of their entertainment and news. But there's an undercurrent of loss they are oblivious to: the destruction of aura---an earthquake which threatens to swallow up the essence of the already weakened spirit of mass culture's automatons. In TV Land, there is no truth and it's all a fraud.

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