Homer at Home: Myth, Image, and the Ideology of Television

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To begin, let me quote a passage from E. M. Forster's first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, first published in 1905. The scene is the Opera House of the imaginary Tuscan hill town of Monteriano.

> "…soon the boxes began to fill… Families greeted each other across the auditorium. People in the pit hailed their brothers and sons in the chorus and told them how well they were singing. When Lucia appeared by the fountain there was a loud applause, and cries of 'Welcome to Monteriano!'…
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> "The climax was reached in the mad scene. Lucia, clad in white, as befitted her malady, suddenly gathered up her streaming hair and bowed her acknowledgement to the audience. Then from the back of the stage--- she feigned not to see it--- there advanced a kind of bamboo clotheshorse, stuck all over with bouquets. …they all knew the clotheshorse was a piece of stage property, brought in to make the performance go year after year. Nonetheless did it unloose the great deeps. With a scream of amazement and joy she embraced the animal, pulled out one or two practicable blossoms, pressed them to her lips, and flung them to her admirers. They flung them back, with loud melodious cries, and a little boy in one of the stageboxes snatched up his sister's carnations and offered them. '*Che carino!*' exclaimed the singer. She darted at the little boy and kissed him. Now the noise became tremendous. 'Silence! Silence!' shouted many old gentlemen behind. 'Let the divine creature continue!' But the young men in the adjacent box were imploring Lucia to extend her civility to them. She refused, with a humorous, expressive gesture. One of them hurled a bouquet at her. She spurned it with her foot. Then, encouraged by the roars of the audience, she picked it up and tossed it to them."[1]

I have chosen to quote this passage, which we can assume is only slightly exaggerated from ones Forster actually witnessed in Italy, because it illustrates the characteristics of a classic, communal performance[2]. These characteristics include:

> 1. An audience and performers who are clearly defined, but are familiar and visible to each other, appear in close proximity and are continuously interacting on several different levels.
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> 2. An audience that is heterogeneous across class and age, but one with members who share a common understanding of its own cultural norms.

3. Both individual audience members and the performers improvise and test certain public roles. These roles are then either validated or challenged by the rest of the group.

4. The audience and performers share the collective task of creating a myth, understanding implicitly *both* its significance and its provisional nature. This myth remains permeable and always potentially subject to challenge and collapse. When successful evoked, however, this myth is more compelling than the objective reality of the performance.

5. Both the myth and the performance that contains it only exist in a particular place and a particular time. Although performances can be repeated and recorded in texts, each living iteration will be different and will have different results and meanings.

"*Myth is a type of speech…,"* Roland Barthes has written, explaining that myth is essentially "…a system of communication, … a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form."[3] It therefore follows that myth, like language itself, can only be created and learned in public, by the sort of interaction a public performance involves.

The original audiences for virtually all theatre that we now consider important were tiny and provincial by modern mass-media standards. For most of human history, relatively small and culturally homogeneous groups presented their collective myths in living performances created for and by themselves. Whether the narrative appeared as Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre, a medieval mystery play performed outside a great cathedral, or was presented by Jacob Adler on the stage of a Second Avenue Yiddish theatre, the relationship between author, performers, and audience was intimate and confined, limited in extent by the reach of the unamplified human voice. Small, marginal, and even oppressed groups had their own identity myths and performances, which often filtered into the larger society.

In historical models of performance, then, the validation of myth and performance only takes place on an intimate level. The audience plays an indispensable role and its role is *local*. George Arliss, the Anglo-American character actor, described one such audience from the South London theatre where he began his career in the 1880s:

> The patrons of the drama seldom showed resentment for anything done by an established member of the company, but woe to the newcomer who took the place of some departed favorite and who failed to come up to their expectations. They would listen with terribly obvious patience for a long time and then some hardy regular Saturday-nighter would cry, "We've heard enough." This was the password that let loose the sinews of war, and a vigorous fusillade of boos would almost surely follow[4]

The reality created by such performances was a collaborative construction jointly created by audience and performers.[5] Writing for a city with roughly the population of today's Dayton, Ohio, Shakespeare makes frequent allusions to this process of illusion and myth making in his plays. "Can this cockpit hold the vasty fields of France?" he asks, rhetorically, in *Henry V*. "Or may we cram within this wooden O the very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt?" The obvious answer is "no," at least not without the "imaginary forces" of the audience, which Shakespeare invites to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts."[6]

British historian Norman Davies has noted Shakespeare's success in creating, through his history plays, the collective narrative of Great Britain: "The bard may have been careless about event-based narrative, but he was very interested in other ways by which the past is remembered--- in myths, legends, ideas, and popular misconceptions."[7] Davies quotes the distinguished Oxford medievalist V. H. Galbraith "It is one of the penalties we pay… that our memory of [Shakespeare's] history plays, however imperfect, will outlast the most lucid account of the history books."[8]

Let me turn to the nature of television.

Television is, so far as I know, the only medium to have its entire political, economic, and corporate structure--- even its ownership--- planned out for it before it was invented. This was the structure originally developed for radio. Commercial radio broadcasters, in fact, anticipated and prepared for the development of television in the 1920s, and began experimental television broadcasting by the end of the decade.

By the time television broadcasts became widespread in the late 1940s, the entire structure of radio--- including the three major networks, a government regulatory structure which eliminated amateur broadcasters, economic support provided by commercial advertising, many of the sponsors, and much of the original programming--- had been transposed into the new medium, which quickly replaced radio as the leading broadcast medium for news, variety shows, and dramatic entertainment.[9]

The structure and technology of commercial television radically altered the nature of performance and myth making. With television, the audience becomes invisible not only to the performers but also--- and more critically--- to itself. This is a change even from cinema performance, in which audience members can still see and hear each other, and then can gauge the group's reaction to what is presented.

Television also changes the audience for performance from a relatively small, local, and specific group to a dramatically larger group, numbering in the millions, whose interests and tastes are no longer tied to a specific location, class, or ethnic group. By reaching massive numbers at a relatively

low cost per individual, television essentially made all other forms of performance economically obsolete. Whereas a theatre could survive, and even prosper, with a local audience numbered in thousands, in commercial television, even audiences numbered in many millions are regularly considered not economically viable. Thus television has the tendency to drive out the minority voices, the performances created for a specific or even marginalized audience that once formed the very core of theatre.

Like many technological media, television also tends to blur distinctions. The boundaries of myth making, so carefully delineated by Shakespeare, are quite deliberately confused. Television mixes live and recorded performance, fact and fiction, myth and reality in ways that were simply not possible with theatre.

Television imposes a complicated and largely invisible system of censorship. Whereas Shakespeare had only to avoid offending the Lord Chamberlain and a few politically important individuals, television is subject to the censorship of commercial sponsors, producers, and executives as well as politicians, government agencies and various citizen groups.

Sponsors direct television content not only to maximize profits, but also to avoid programming that conflicted with the messages of commercials. One reason for the early demise of the live-television dramas of the 1950s was their way of presenting everyday problems as complex and rooted in the human condition. The story line of commercials, by contrast, always implies that a product quickly, easily, and finally solves every problem. The result was often a conflict between content and sponsorship that "made the commercial seem fraudulent."[10]

The Cold War politics of the early television period--- and its McCarthyite pressure tactics on the media--- also made television reluctant to explore anything that might be considered politically controversial. As a result, television has always been highly self-censoring and has severely limited the range of subjects it presents to the public.

Because of this self-censorship, television ideology proceeds primarily by omission--- editing out material either because it is too controversial or because it does not appeal to an audience that is broad enough or commercial enough. The formulae of television become a kind of compromise. Controversies of private life are acceptable because these attract attention and suit the needs of the sponsors. But in many other areas--- especially in the realm of serious politics and national myth making--- much is grossed over or left out altogether.[11]

It is a common fallacy to assume that technology changes human beings in some fundamental way. It does not. Although media and technology change culture in major ways, the biology of the human mind and the basic way it analyzes the outside world remains the same. Just as plant adjusts is growth as size depending on its surroundings, so the mind and behavior adjust to fit these changes. Therefore to me the key to understanding media is through understanding transformations--- the way one stage in human development changes in response to changes in its environment.

Television almost immediately sensed that its very technology changed the relationship between performance and audience. It tried to simulate, via every means at its disposal, the spontaneity and close relationship to audience that live theatre had always provided. Hence the insertion of "laugh tracks" into television comedies, hence the invention of the "studio audience" --- an entity that is not a true audience but actually part of the performance.

Hence the introduction, most recently, of "reality television," a type of performance as consciously manipulated and false as anything else on television.

Because the essential message of commercial television must always be: "there is a product to solve every problem," there is always a split between the apparent and actual content.[12] The apparent content is always a disguise or a distraction from the televisions true aim to sell products. Thus television is, by its very nature, impermeable. It has become the projection of images--- a series of changeless icons--- which cannot be modified or truly shared by an audience. They can only be embraced or denied.

Projected globally, television-as-image is politically dangerous. Because television cannot fully represent minority views---especially foreign minority views--- those who are left out of its mythology are left without a complete identity. The outsiders' only recourse is to break through the television barrier by staging political events so catastrophic and visually spectacular that they can no longer be ignored[13]. Thus we are increasingly assaulted, in real life, by pathological Hollywood scenarios copied from television movies.

In his 1953 essay, "Television as Ideology,": Adorno points to the "pseudo-realistic" as the core of the television ideology. "The psychological process that is put on view is fraudulent--- in a word, *phony,* for which there is utterly no equivalent in German."[14] Of course, all performance is "pseudo-realistic." The difference that Adorno sensed nascent in early television was on a different order of deception, one which steals myth-making from the heart if the community and replaces it with an impenetrable image, created for the ends of a few. The results of this change will continue to unfold.[15]

[1] E.M. Forster, *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1993), p. 67-68.
[2] I am borrowing this term from David Thorburn ("Television as an Aesthetic Medium," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 [1987]: 161-173). Thorburn writes: "Homer's oral epics, the plays of Sophocles, Aristophanes, Plautus, even Shakespeare, continue to be experienced as narratives and as performances in our own day, but we fool ourselves when we imagine or pretend that contemporary versions of such texts very closely resemble their original, communal enactments."
[3] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 109.
[4] George Arliss, *Up the Years from Bloomsbury: An Autobiography* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1927), p. 51.
[5] In his famous play within a play, Shakespeare describes, in satirical terms, this give and take between performers and audience in creating a metaphor for reality:

> *Moon:* This lanthorn doth the horned moon present---
> *Demetrius:* He should have worn the horns on his head.
> *Theseus:* He is no crescent, and his horns are invisible within the circumference.
> *Moon:* This lanthorn doth the horned moon present. Myself the man i' th' moon do seem to be.
> *Theseus:* This is the greatest error of all the rest. The man should be put into the lanthorn. How else is it the man i' th' moon?(*A Midsummer's Night Dream,* V, I).

[6] *Henry V,* prologue.
[7] Norman Davies, *The Isles: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 509.
[8] Quoted in Ibid., p. 506.
[9] For details on the early history and organization of television, see Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Televison,* 2nd edition, revised (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
[10] Ibid., p. 163.
[11] It has been noted, for example, that as the Al-Qaeda terrorists made final preparations for their September 11 attack, American television was obsessed with the private life of a minor American politician.

[12] Although paid and public television were supposed to eliminate this split, they have not, in fact, altered the basic premise of television, which has changed the economic covenant between performance and audience. The covenant of commercial theatre was "pay us a fee, we will give you a wonderful experience, and then we will go away." The covenant of all kinds of television is "pay us forever."
[13] The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City were the culmination, and to some extent the perfection, of a long history of attempts to penetrate and subvert television to promote the cause of "outsiders." These terrorists grossly underestimate, however, the ability of the medium to absorb such images into its own mythology, as almost immediately occurred with the September 11 events.
[14] Adorno, op. cit., p. 65.
[15] Beyond the scope of this paper are the implications of the World Wide Web, which one again give voice to many minority and marginalized voices. As television and Internet-type technologies merge, the basic effects of television may change or even reverse.