26 Myths In and About Television

Entertainment and Economics

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In this chapter, Thomas sets out to puncture a series of popular propositions about television and U.S. culture. Some of these are widely accepted definitions of the function of television; others are commonly expressed judgments of the messages of television.

To begin with, she attacks the notion that television is simply entertainment and therefore of no particular consequence one way or the other. Against that view, she argues that TV is a powerful educational force, a significant source of orientation. She further proposes that television does not communicate commercial messages in advertisements alone, but that its entire output is saturated by economically oriented messages in favor of the status quo. This first section of her argument should be read in close conjunction with Chapters 12 and 13, on media audiences, for it presents a third angle of vision on the difficult problems of interpreting audience responses to media, and of relating media content to the political economy.

In the second part of her argument, Thomas proposes that far from TV being antibusiness, as some have claimed (for example, in its portrayal of corrupt businessmen in such series as Dallas *and* Dynasty*), the medium actually provides potent support for certain myths that sus-*

tain the business order. Her argument here supports Kellner's analysis of advertising and consumerism in Chapter 19, with the difference that she locates consumerist pressures squarely within the entertainment/education diet of television, not simply in the advertisements.

Beyond the myths of consumer culture, however, are other myths of social mobility: that all individuals can advance as far as they want up the economic ladder if they work hard. This "American dream" is a source of continuing inspiration to many who migrate here. Simultaneously, it is a message to the majority still at the foot of the ladder that they have not exercised sufficient ingenuity to make use of the opportunities presented them, that they are lacking in drive. In reality, people achieve very little upward mobility compared with their parents, with the exception of a few sports and entertainment stars, and even these stars' careers usually last only a few years. But the notion that the dream can become real nourishes positive feelings about the nature of the society and self-blame if, despite one's efforts, one does not achieve it. The dream is a source of political and social stability.

The Myths About Television

For decades, critics have bemoaned the state of commercial U.S. television. In general, they say that programming is low-level, unimaginative pabulum. They argue that it serves only two purposes: to entertain a mindless audience and to create a marketing forum through advertisements in which to sell products and services to that mindless mass. It is assumed that these two functions, in combination, are the key mechanisms by which the sellers—network, corporation, and agency executives—get rich.

Although everyone might not hold such a harsh view of television, the two assumptions underlying this view are pretty much taken for granted by most members of our society. These assumptions can be spelled out as follows: (a) Television is an "entertainment medium," and (b) television's primary mechanism for economically supporting the established elite is through "audience commodification." Audiences are thought to be "commodified" through a multistep process: First, they are provided with "free entertainment" (the programming) and, next, research is conducted to find out what programs are watched by whom. Advertisers are then sold time slots within appropriate entertainment periods, where they, in turn, sell products and services to targeted audiences. Thus TV viewers become packaged commodities purchased by advertisers (Smythe, 1981).

In this chapter I refer to the two assumptions stated above as the primary myths *about* television. I use the term **myth** to represent any belief in a culture that is so ingrained in and pervasive among members of the society that, for the most part, what the belief asserts goes without question. In other words, the accuracy of the information contained in a myth is not, on an everyday level, very important. A myth is accepted *as a given*. Thus these two interrelated assumptions are understood as "the way things are" about television. Clearly, if you are a network executive, advertising executive, or sponsor, you will probably approve of the system as a positive example of capitalism at work. If you are a parent, educator, or political activist, you might be antagonized by the "mindless entertainment," the corporate greed you think is behind it, or both. Nevertheless, whether you approve or disapprove of the system on these terms, you also ultimately accept the above-mentioned myths about television: that it is mindless entertainment that supports capitalism by packaging audiences.

This chapter represents an attempt to clean the slate somewhat. Rather than argue for or against the system represented in the two myths, I will question the validity of the myths themselves. Is TV primarily an "entertainment" system? Is television's major contribution to capitalist economy made primarily through selling audiences to advertisers and, in turn, products to audiences?

The Myth About Entertainment

Whatever "entertainment" is—apparently the same phenomenon that induces people to cringe eagerly while watching slasher films, weep while reading romance stories, or cheer as they watch boxers inflicting brain damage on each other—television seemingly does provide it. But when people watch TV, is "entertainment" the only or even the major result of the viewing experience? Let us assume, instead, that TV provides the primary adult *educational* experience.

Statistics show that sleeping is the only activity in which the average American indulges more than television viewing (let alone combined media use). It is ironic that these two most popular activities—sleeping and TV—are commonly viewed as being similar in

nature and effect. That is, we are led to believe that at least two-thirds of the average American day is spent in one form or another of vegetation. Whereas it is probably true that the average person *believes* that most viewing time is spent in the pursuit of entertainment, relaxation, or escape, perhaps there is actually a lot more going on during those thousands upon thousands of viewing hours.

Whatever their conscious motivation, when people watch television, they watch stories (drama or news) showing how "things" work. Television especially provides a window on many matters with which most of us have relatively little or no real-life experience. How police or lawyers operate; what life is like in New York, Miami, Shanghai; what rich people do at the dinner table; and thousands of other pieces of information come to us almost exclusively from television and, to a lesser extent, other popular media. When we are confronted with this information, it is very unlikely that we regard the information as "education"; we would hardly equate TV viewing with listening to a lecture in a classroom. Yet the two experiences may not be that far apart. In fact, the "educational" material coming from television stories probably has more to do with the business of ordinary life—values and ideas involved in our everyday judgments—than does the educational material in most formal classroom situations. Moreover, we may be more receptive to TV information than to that from classroom lectures precisely because we do not view TV stories as education. Indeed, it is unlikely that we would acknowledge or even recognize the source of much TV-gained information because its entrance into our store of knowledge is so subtle. This is why so much mass communication research on the effects of TV is very problematic; researchers often interview people in the mistaken assumption that people can articulate the full meaning of their viewing experiences.

This picture of "TV as education" is not a popular one. When the "educational" component of television is introduced into the debate, it typically appears in only three contexts: discussions of children, violent crime, and concerned or curious citizens. That is to say, "learning" from television is predicted for innocents, sociopaths, and those adults deliberately choosing to be informed through news, public affairs, and documentary programming. In terms of the third group, the fact that we persist in drawing a line between so-called information and entertainment programming attests to this assessed division in function; that is, we assume "entertainment" programming is *not* informative.

Within the discipline of communication, the early hypodermic model suggested "strong" media effects, whereas later models such as "uses and gratifications" theory suggested "weaker" effects (for more about these models, see Ang, Chapter 12). Although there are swings between strong and weak effects models, overall those theories arguing against powerful effects and for weaker ones have been the most popular among both scholars and the general public. Because weak effects theories stress individual differences in media use, they are highly compatible with the meritocratic philosophy of American capitalism, which holds that an individual's choices and actions will supposedly yield his or her status in the overall social structure, the concept of *autonomous individualism* (Elliot, 1974; Messaris, 1977). In the United States we like theories that stress our individual differences and emphasize the control we have over our own destinies.

But although there is considerable evidence to show that different people indeed do interact differently with the mass media, it is premature—in fact a leap in logic—to conclude that people walk away from the mass media with unique, individualized knowledge. Rather, a very limited number of preferences, identifications and, most important, interpretations arise, regardless of how many individual "interpreters" have been studied. These variations in media interaction can generally be linked to broad sociodemographic differences rather than to unique psychological distinctions.

Widespread belief in meaningful uniqueness and self-control helps keep the economic system going, but it does not necessarily mean that the belief is correct. We should also see that the myth of television "entertainment" serves this larger orientation very well. It is a myth that allows us to believe that we are in control of what we learn and know.

The Myth About Where the "Business" of Television Is Located

From a psychological perspective, it is generally believed that people use television to fulfill their own individual needs and that these needs lie largely within the realm of entertainment and relaxation. From an economic perspective, it is generally believed that although this source of entertainment is ostensibly free, its hidden costs are great, charging for that "free entertainment" in the everyday marketplace. Both these perspectives, the psychological and the economic, separate "entertainment" from some other commodity. From a psychological viewpoint, the distinction is between "entertainment" and "information," whereas in terms of economics, "entertainment" is made separate from "advertising." Economic interpretations typically relegate the "business" part of television to advertising (see Kellner, Chapter 19), and it is rare that the "entertainment" itself is understood to be commercially effective and a major component in the economics of both television and the larger world. More liberal economic interpretations acknowledge that the content of the "free lunch" (the "entertainment" programming) tends to reinforce the status quo so that it complements the audience-commodification process. However, this complementariness is traditionally viewed as indirect and vague with regard to the creation of bourgeois consumerism and the maintenance of social order.

It would be intellectually pointless to discount the importance of advertising and corporate structure in television's contribution to capitalism. My argument here is twofold: First, I suggest that "cultural reproduction"—the continuing attempt to reproduce the existing society—is the primary industry of all human societies. All social institutions, including the mass media industry, are but subsidiary firms for the "parent corporation" of culture production. What this means is that popular creations (whether material or symbolic) will generally reinforce the rules and values of the overall system. Put another way, we must look for the possibility that all major cultural artifacts and activities contribute, at different levels and in different ways, to the coordination and sustenance of the established system.

Second, the mythology in television programming reinforces American corporate structure as powerfully as, if not more powerfully than, the more obvious mechanisms of packaging audiences and selling commodities. Whereas television commercials largely sell specific products to a commodified audience, television "entertainment" serves, in part, to sell the audience on the general process of capitalism. Therefore, the teaching of this general process (of earning, buying, and selling) is a prerequisite of audience commodification and an essential contribution to the preservation of American capitalism.

To speak of the mythology *in* U.S. television is to speak of many things. This is not to suggest that the views and values represented on TV are various and conflicting, but rather that, like Proteus, they take many mutually reinforcing forms. Given the discussion thus far, there are two sets of myths *in* television "entertainment" that are most relevant: myths of labor and consumption and myths of social mobility.

The first set includes direct lessons about commercial issues, and the second provides the broader, stage-setting material for life in a commercialized system. Taken together, this mythology is instrumental in creating economic sensibilities that neatly serve the interests of the corporate elite and its reigning social structure.

Labor and Consumption in Television

Theberge (1981) argues that businessmen on American television come in one of three categories: crooks, con men, or clowns. He asserts that "business" is represented negatively to the American viewing public, but there are three problems with this conclusion. First, it can be argued that negative images of businesspeople on TV can be confused with negative images of *rich* businesspeople, and that it is wealth, not business per se, that is stigmatized (Thomas & Leshay, 1992). (Negative images of wealth are discussed below.) Second, it is also important to suggest that television's portrayal of businesspeople represents idiosyncratic images of individuals rather than a systemic characterization of business. That is to say, bad businesspeople on TV are typically shown to be uniformly bad people. J. R. Ewing of *Dallas*, for example, is not simply an evil businessman, but an evil person in all facets of his life, including business. Of course, it would be telling if TV businesspeople were malicious and unlawful at work and yet loving and honest family members, friends, and lovers, but this is not the case—at least not on TV. Thus it is difficult, again, to claim that business in particular is under indictment. Third, the specific TV portrayals of businesspeople are not necessarily the only, or the most important, means by which social messages about labor and consumption are conveyed. If we turn our attention to the seemingly mundane filler of TV drama—those trivial or background events that permeate "entertainment" programming—we see a number of things happening that very much contradict the supposedly negative images of business, commercial transaction, and so forth. These events may be accounted for, at least partially, in the nine myths described below.

MYTH 1: THE INCONSEQUENCE AND INVISIBILITY OF EVERYDAY SPENDING

The world of U.S. television is pretty moneyless. Of course, characters engage in activities that require money in real life, but on

television, the monetary transactions are rarely included, and when they are, payment is typically a fleeting and unconscious gesture. Every night on television dozens of scenes are played out in restaurants, nightclubs, taxicabs, and so forth, but the fact that these things cost money invariably becomes an issue only when comedy or crime is involved. A man, for example, may do some serious gulping (accompanied by an uproarious laugh track) when he discovers his date has chosen a restaurant where he can barely afford a salad. The neglect of everyday spending on TV would probably be dismissed by writers as necessary editing of irrelevant material; however, given that there are many other trivial events dramatized, one might question the function of this particular omission. It might be interpreted that viewers are being shown the pointlessness of seriously considering what is part and parcel of everyday costs. Like the spending of TV characters, our spending should remain unconscious, invisible, and inconsequential. If spending is not invisible, it is probably a laughing matter.

MYTH 2: EXCESS MONEY IS TO BE SPENT

The invisibility of spending on TV refers to money and credit card handling, the normal, everyday transactions requiring payment that are typically overlooked in the television world. Thus the act that for many is problematic, if not painful, is often ignored. However, that money is spent by television characters—especially regular folk—is often implied. What we often see on television are the results of spending—the products bought, the consumerism. Moreover, except for special instances that I will detail below, the purchase of products usually occurs in dramatic contexts where a working- or middle-class character accumulates some extra cash. For example, when Roxanne, a secretary on *L.A. Law*, makes a sizable sum on stock deals, she is immediately seen sporting new, expensive clothes and driving a new car. Indeed, when the money, obtained through insider trading tips, is confiscated, we find that she is dead broke. In a made-for-TV movie, a previously poor writer hired at high salary by a scandal tabloid immediately exchanges her new (and projected) bank balance for luxurious home and fur; an alternative, such as depositing her money in a college account for her young son, is not a choice written into the script. In almost all cases of this type, if and when the character runs short of funds, the plot text usually addresses this problem as new and totally separate from the character's failure to save.

In general, what we see on television are otherwise normal characters living to the ends of, or beyond, their means. Security savings do not seem to be a part of most fictional game plans. When characters do save, it is typically with a future purchase in mind. In fact, the portrayal of the relationship between children/teenagers and money is especially poignant in this regard. When younger characters need funds, it is invariably shown that their savings are close to nonexistent. For instance, almost every show featuring children has produced one or more episodes in which the children must jointly collect their funds to accomplish something important, such as replacing a broken household valuable before the parents return from a trip. Typically, the "wealthiest" of the children can contribute something on the order of $1.06. Moreover, on most shows featuring children and teens, grandmother's birthday check is usually committed to a future purchase before it even arrives. I do not mean to suggest that one should expect children (or adults) to have huge sums of cash on hand, but rather that the television message suggests total and constant moneylessness among the working and middle classes as a standard state, as well as the acceptability of credit debt.

MYTH 3: THE DESIRE FOR EXCESS ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL AS DEVIANCE

No discussion of a "money is to be spent" theme would be complete without the mention of that myth's corollary: There is something wrong with those individuals bent upon accumulation rather than expenditure. On television, this moral bears most heavily on those characters who are currently without considerable wealth (although Western culture also tells comparable stories in relation to the materially endowed, e.g., stories of Scrooge and Midas). Moreover, television speaks to other problems endemic to wealth, as will be discussed later.

This myth is most typically manifested in comedy programs featuring characters whose deep interest in making and accumulating money is supposed to appear as obsessive and, thus, becomes the butt of jokes. The character of Alex Keaton in the situation comedy *Family Ties* is a clear incarnation of this myth. Alex is hardworking, intelligent, and reasonably moral in his choices, yet his profound interest in accumulating capital is portrayed as both strange and comic. *Murphy Brown*'s Miles Silverberg is a softer rendering of such a character; in addition to providing ethnic stereotype, Silverberg's character combines a high-ranking Harvard MBA with social gracelessness, immaturity, and more-than-occasional geekiness.

MYTH 4: CELEBRATION IS A MATERIAL EVENT

A lot of the time, TV characters have special reasons to be happy. There are classic causes of celebration (birthdays, anniversaries, and so on) and less-classic ones (solving a crime case, reconciling interpersonal differences, exceptionally nice weather). When TV characters celebrate anything, the revelry inevitably involves spending money, so that celebration becomes operationally defined as a commercial event. In fact, characters' happiness with something seems to be directly proportional to the money that will be spent in its honor. If the celebration involves reconciliation—"making it up" to someone—then the character's sincerity can be measured by how much the "making up" will cost. As the first myth would suggest, celebration spending is typically done unflinchingly. For example, without careful deliberation, *L.A. Law*'s Ann Kelsey purchases a tremendously expensive wristwatch for her fiance, with whom she has been fighting. But the story is old: In many *I Love Lucy* episodes, for instance, Ricky guiltily relents and allows Lucy to purchase the expensive hairdo and dress. As might be expected, such grandiose gestures are typically shown to achieve the desired effect; on television, this is one context in which good characters can be "bought." We are shown an equation where spending equals love and respect.

MYTH 5: SPENDING DEFEATS DEPRESSION

There may be a gender-coded corollary to the "celebration as material event" myth: Spending is antidepressive. Whereas male characters usually turn to their work when saddened (a relationship discussed below), depressed TV women often go shopping. Although television may not be the primary forum promulgating the notion that commercial consumption helps beat the blues, many incidents in fictional programming certainly reinforce this line of action. In an episode of *Cagney & Lacey*, for instance, Mary Beth Lacey, in a context of feeling inadequate, chooses to buy herself a "smart" hat to help alleviate her insecurities. While such feel-good spending may be thought a marker of women from earlier generations, one need only to observe the young women of *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Melrose Place* to see that the image is young and contemporary.

MYTH 6: MORE CONSUMPTION YIELDS BETTER TREATMENT

In TV contexts where spending is expected (restaurants, shops, hotels, and the like), those characters (presumably) spending a great deal receive excellent treatment. This is not to say that those who refrain from spending a lot are invariably mistreated or that the excellent treatment afforded big spenders is never given begrudgingly or with scorn. The staff in the series *Hotel*, for example, is incredibly pleasant to all guests. Of course, just staying at this luxury-class establishment would usually involve considerable expenditure. The point here is that on TV, spending demands at least superficial respect.

In a society characterized by its size and impersonality, television shows offer what appears to be a certain route for acquiring respect. Rich gangsters and corporate potentates may ultimately be shown to suffer in other ways, but one thing they usually do not suffer is lack of eager subordinates. Moreover, although it may not always be the case that TV's small tippers, cheapskates, and nonspenders are harassed, it is not uncommon to find them reviled or the butt of jokes. Disrespect (e.g., haughty insolence from a salesclerk) meets TV's nonspenders often enough to create a standard of expectation. Thus viewers are shown that "good" treatment might be directly proportional to the money they give.

MYTH 7: CHEAP IS VULGAR

Although homespun philosophy may argue that the simple things in life are what count, and TV characters may even mouth such sentiments, the portrayal of vulgarity is, more often than not, characterized by cheapness in deed or demeanor. An episode of *Dynasty*, for example, shows the then semivillainous Sammy Jo eating corn dogs (and other fast food) in an impromptu "picnic" in the Carrington mansion. Although the tone of such a scene could be endearing or charming, this one is not. Sammy Jo is characterized as vulgar; the "ladies" of the show dine on respectable food at elegantly set tables.

Ironically, television does sometimes indicate the vulgarity of spending, but it is important to realize that such dramatizations are usually confined to spending by the rich. It may be shown, for example, when a typically evil or buffoonish rich character flaunts his or her wealth through lavish tipping. Good rich characters (the few there are) are rarely portrayed as ostentatious; these may be the only characters for whom the "less is more" doctrine is shown to work positively. When lavishness is enacted by middle- and working-class persons on television, these acts are generally shown as kind and generous behavior.

The myths articulated above are omnipresent foliage in the scenery of U.S. programming. Myths concerning work and consumption also abound in typical stories. To recite each fully would require a much longer text, but the two myths that follow should adequately suggest the pattern to which the general ideology subscribes.

MYTH 8: SATISFACTION MUST BE EARNED

This myth mutates in a variety of social contexts. It may emerge, for example, as "Idle wealth breeds evil" or "Easy money is dangerous," but, collectively, such myths proclaim that hard work is the only key to understanding and appreciating the meaning and marvel of money. Thus in the older *Hill Street Blues*, for example, a young police officer wins substantial money in a lottery and then encounters many more (serious) problems than those existing in his life prior to this "run of luck." Similarly, after inheriting vast wealth in *Beverly Hills 90210*, Dylan encounters corruption, bad luck, and other misery. The philosophy also extends to nonmaterial issues. A TV romance plagued with difficulties in its early stages has better chances for meaningful survival than one that seems smooth sailing from the start. Actually, such "nonmaterial" parables can be interpreted as metaphors for the fundamental money-earning lesson. In any case, that satisfaction must be earned teaches workers to appreciate the current fruits of their labors and to feel assured that they have properly paved the way to appreciate riches that might accumulate. However, because it is all too possible that, in real life, labor will largely beget more labor, another lesson typically accompanies the one teaching that "satisfaction must be earned," as the next myth shows.

MYTH 9: WORK IS INHERENTLY SATISFYING (ESPECIALLY REAL WORK)

When one examines the major differences between "good" and "bad" characters on TV, proportionally a higher number of "good" characters hold legitimate jobs. Moreover, of all working characters, the "good" ones are more likely to find satisfaction in their professions beyond the acquisition of money and power. The contrast between the 1980s serial *Falcon Crest*'s Angela Channing (a not-nice character who is forever scheming and making new power plays in the wine business) and Chase Gioberti (a decent character who is continually concerned about his vineyards) exemplifies this division. On *Melrose Place*, the good, working-class mechanic Jake even breaks off a romance with the scheming entrepreneur, Amanda, thus demonstrating this correlation between positive work ethic and moral rectitude. It is, of course, eminently important to teach "labor as its own reward" to a real world of inequitable compensation and false meritocracy. Indeed, this lesson is most powerfully conveyed by portraying already-wealthy characters driven to experience the reality of their ownership, as shown, for instance, in *Dynasty*'s very rich Dex Dexter, clad in work clothes and hard hat, laying oil pipeline. From the other side, several television plots per season revolve around a middle- or working-class character willingly foregoing "promotion" or job advancement involving more money but less "honest" work. Both Steven Keaton of *Family Ties* and Kate of *Kate & Allie*, for example, rejected job advancement for the sake of honorable considerations. More recently, *Beverly Hills 90210*'s Mr. Walsh, a good husband and parent, has on more than one occasion put his family before his job. In fact, basically good characters are often moved to give away ill-gotten riches (as when the very poor janitor in *Frank's Place* anonymously leaves thousands of criminally obtained dollars at an orphanage and thankfully resumes his post as janitor). Even the not-spotless *Roseanne* has quit a needed factory job when it meant compromising her ideals. These types of portrayals suggest that the value of work is not ultimately to be measured in the material payment received.

The above nine myths are among the many specific lessons on television encouraging the precise kind of work and spending habits benefiting the U.S. economic structure as it is currently calibrated. The myths of social mobility that follow are geared to a broader understanding and rationalization of the worker's place within that system.

Social Mobility in Television

In the United States, wealth and power are not evenly distributed, yet the relatively impoverished masses work very hard keeping the system afloat. Three interrelated messages regularly dramatized in U.S. television serve to make this system of imbalanced conditions acceptable to those who might otherwise find cause to object.

MYTH 1: THERE'S ROOM AT THE TOP

This first message emerges in television's distorted portrayal of the socioeconomic structure; that is, real-life statistics are distorted. Content-analysis research has borne out time and time again that the world of television is dominated much more by middle- to upper-class people than is American real life. Poorer people are simply not represented too often. Similarly, the occupations of television characters tend to lean far more to the professional, if not glamorous, side of the employment spectrum, whereas the masses of everyday workers who are needed for the overall real-life system are not proportionally portrayed. Although such "misrepresentations" might be "explained away" in a variety of ways (Thomas, 1986), it can be argued that the relatively heavy-viewing American public is being taught indirectly that wealth is more plentiful than it really is. High school seniors might be more inclined to apply to Harvard if they believe there are 5,000 openings rather than 800. In the maintenance of the social order, widespread belief in a roomier upper echelon might also suggest that the possibilities of upward social mobility are good. This sort of message, then, sets the stage for social mobility myth 2.

MYTH 2: ANYONE CAN ACHIEVE

Another theme popular in U.S. television is that, given the wide-open arena suggested in social mobility myth 1, anyone has a decent chance of accomplishing upward social mobility. Considering the continuing characters of U.S. TV drama, the majority of those who are wealthy or "better off" are portrayed as not having been born that way. Some have worked their way up (e.g., George Jefferson, Jonathan Hart, the Huxtables), some have married money (e.g., Krystle Carrington of *Dynasty* or Suzanne Sugarbaker of *Designing Women* and *Women of the House*), and some have vastly compounded a smaller fortune (e.g., Blake Carrington). TV news and interview programming similarly recounts such stories by chronicling the climbs to fame of celebrities such as Sylvester Stallone and Roseanne, and by publicizing the awarding of grand sums to formerly poor lottery winners.

In all, television may give us the decided impression that upward social mobility is quite feasible; however, this is not where television's ideological "story" ends. The ending is not always a happy one, and characters most definitely fall. The third social mobility myth makes the equation complete by indicating where trouble may be found.

MYTH 3: IT'S NOT SO GREAT AT THE TOP

As described, television suggests that there is a wide-open area for upward mobility to which everyone has a decent chance to ascend. These myths provide hope for the future, but they are not necessarily sufficient for the present. A message that can temper immediate hostility is dramatized in the third myth—that it's not so great at the top. This message may be translated in several ways, such as "Money doesn't buy happiness," "You can live on love," or "Wealth/power corrupts."

In daytime-television serials, the poorer families usually display a loving harmony that is in stark contrast to the interpersonal conflicts found within the very wealthy families. During prime time, misery and constant trauma await the Ewings of *Dallas*, the Carringtons of *Dynasty*, and so on, but the Waltons, the Ingallses, Dr. Quinn and her family, and others of their ilk are essentially at peace (Thomas & Callahan, 1982). Indeed, one of the reasons that nighttime serials may concentrate on the rich is that serialization requires "running" problems—serious complications—that can continue from episode to episode. Such problems on television are largely confined to the wealthy. Poorer or middle-class people are usually placed in contexts (often comedic) in which their problems can be resolved in half an hour. Still, even in comedy, the distinction between the evil rich and the decent poor can sustain as in, for instance, the contrast between the Simpson family and their show's Mr. Burns.

Made-for-TV movies also keep this myth alive by presenting many sentimental stories of poor people surviving in loving harmony. Similarly, many scenarios—particularly in docudramas—show characters who cannot find happiness in supposed wealth and success (e.g., variations on the "poor little rich girl" theme). Often these movies take viewers into the world of glamour, power, and wealth, and portray that terrain as insidiously treacherous. It seems that the only happy wealthy characters on TV are those who live below their means while doing good deeds (e.g., *Diff'rent Strokes*'s Mr. Drummond or Commissioner McMillan of *McMillan and Wife*) and/or those who enrich their lives by risking death weekly (e.g., Jonathan and Jennifer Hart).

Again, the message in question is not limited to TV fiction, but appears quite regularly in news and documentary programming. Sonny Von Bülow is still technically alive in a coma, but this high-society matron's sad destruction received coverage hundreds of times more powerful and lengthy than that given to the numerous other victims of violent crime. The murder of the wealthy "Scarsdale Diet doctor," Herman Tarnower, by the headmistress of a private school was one of the few stories that competed with the Von Bülow saga. Barbara Walters interviewed all the relevant players; the network news took viewers into the very exclusive Newport, Rhode Island, and Scarsdale, New York, estates to query neighbors and show the "trouble in paradise." Most recently, the O.J. Simpson murder trial is frequently understood to portray the dark and downside of the fast-and-loose life that follows great and celebrated wealth. Clearly, it is not that we are taught especially to mourn Sonny Von Bülow or Herman Tarnower, or people like them; rather, the lesson is that wealth has an unseemly side, no matter how atypical the object lesson may be.

Collectively, what the three myths of social mobility provide is a rationalization for lives that are less than glamorous, powerful, or wealthy. Although viewers are taught to have hope if wealth and its concomitants are what they really desire, they are simultaneously instructed to be grateful for the prices they don't have to pay.

A Final Note

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the problems involved with pay television and VCRs. What is happening, it is asked, to the "business of television" when viewers can watch for hours without being confronted with advertisements, or when they can electronically zap the commercials? Clearly, if the concern is with the selling of specific products and/or the welfare of specific companies, such questions are pertinent. However, to the extent the concern is with a general decommercialized broadcasting system—a concern with the possible elimination of bourgeois consumerism—such worries would seem to be unfounded. American "entertainment" television, with or without commercials, contains a very rich economic lesson plan, as has been detailed in the list of myths presented here.

In a sense, the myths *about* television—that it is mindless entertainment, the only persuasive moments of which occur in advertisements and candidate debates—conspire with the myths *in* television. Capitalism is sold in our living rooms on a daily basis. However, in a society long wary of the hard sell, the most persuasive educational forum is probably one that seemingly offers only relaxation and choice.

Further Questions

1. Are some groups in the audience—such as men or women, recent immigrants or long-term citizens—more likely than others to accept the myths discussed in this chapter?
2. What, if any, experiences have you had that contradict these myths? How do people you know deal with the conflicts between their lives and television's "reality"?
3. Are these myths stable over time? Are there any new or alternative myths emerging?