

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with a subtle vertical gradient. Scattered across the cover are several stylized, light green leaf motifs, each consisting of a small branch with two leaves. These motifs are positioned at various angles and locations, including the top left, top center, top right, middle right, bottom center, and bottom left.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND TELEVISION

Paul Monaco

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SOCIETY, CULTURE,
AND TELEVISION***

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Preface

All books originate somewhere and at a specific time. This one had its genesis during an afternoon's conversation with my friend Marty Seligman at his home just west of Philadelphia several summers ago. It was then that I decided to write a basic, readable book about television to clarify the nature of the medium and its relationship to society and culture.

The deeper sources that brought me to write this book were convoluted. For two-and-a-half decades, I have been exploring how the media arts of film and television both resemble and are different from the traditional arts. At the heart of this matter is the nature of art itself and its development during the course of the twentieth century. In recent years, I have also become increasingly interested in claims about media "effects" upon society and culture. I have been astonished to discover that so much that is believed about these so-called effects is so poorly reasoned.

Since that summer day when Marty and I had our long conversation, bipartisan congressional support passed the 1996 Telecommunications Act that was signed into law by President Bill Clinton. It mandates that V chips be installed in all new television sets sold in the United States so that certain programming can be blocked, and also requires a mandatory rating system for television programs. Underlying the Telecommunications Act are widespread myths about television, society, and culture that have been promoted for decades. While I see occasional glimpses of public and professional skepticism about these myths, they are nonethe-

less proving difficult to dislodge. As a step toward that goal, this book asks its readers to think through a welter of claims about television, society, and culture. In so doing, I have taken to task commonly held ideas about art, popular culture, technology, and the media and their “effects.”

My understanding of television has benefitted enormously over the past several years from conversations that I have had with three of the medium’s masters: the directors of episodes for several of TV’s most popular programs, Jerome Courtland (*Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Knot’s Landing*) and Jeff Meyer (*Coach*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *The Closer*), as well as the producer/writer for *Star Trek: Voyager*, Brannon Braga.

Throughout this book I acknowledge those many authors who have influenced me positively, as well as pointing out the other researchers and writers with whom I strongly disagree. No written comments, however, can adequately express my thanks to my wife Victoria O’Donnell. Her own writings on propaganda and persuasion, as well as in television criticism, are a continuing source of inspiration to me. In admiration, I dedicate this book to her.

1

Storytelling and Television

I went to college in New York City during the early 1960s. One of my best friends was a fellow student named Scott. He was an English major who liked to write and fancied himself to be a sort of beatnik poet. After graduating with his bachelor's degree he entered the advertising business and succeeded on Madison Avenue. By his mid-thirties, Scott was the president of a major agency. He was living in a grand apartment on Manhattan's upper east side and dating glamorous women. He had a weekend condo in Sag Harbor on the Long Island shore and afforded himself the best of everything.

Then, in 1978, I heard that he had given it all up. He resigned his position at the ad agency, completed the paperwork to pass his apartment on to an old girlfriend, bought a small used car and headed west. He was "dropping out" big time, disappearing with nary a trace. Several years later, I heard that he had wound up in the most remote and isolated part of Nevada, in a tiny hamlet with a gas station, a bar, and a handful of adobe houses. For a number of months he was able to live there off the cash he had taken with him when he left New York City. But his former lifestyle had not enabled him to save all that much and, in dropping out, he had closed his bank accounts and destroyed his credit cards.

This remote part of Nevada proved to be healing for Scott. He loved the openness of the place, its clean air and tranquility. He went to sleep hearing coyotes wail and awoke to the sounds of hawks as they soared at dawn. Recognizing that he would need some income to continue living this idyllic and simple life, he was delighted to hear one day that a

bartender at the hamlet's saloon had quit. He applied for the job and got it from the owner, an elderly woman named Rose who owned the largest ranching operation within 300 miles. Rose liked Scott and trusted him from their first meeting. She gave him the bartending job on a single condition: if anyone ever came into the place and announced that "Savage Sam" was coming, Scott would clear the bar and close it immediately. He agreed.

For about a year everything was fine. Scott enjoyed his work. The atmosphere in the saloon was mellow and steady. His customers were nearly all old-timers, former cowhands and the like, whose stories he enjoyed. Late one afternoon, however, a bruised and bloodied man weakly pushed open the saloon's swinging doors, staggered to the middle of the room, muttered "Savage Sam is coming!" and collapsed. There were only three customers in the place. Two of them, seated at the bar, jumped up and ran out the swinging doors. The third, a loner who always drank at the small table next to the wood stove in the back of the room, leaped up and jumped out an open window. No problem clearing the place.

Before he could gather his wits, however, Scott glanced over to the swinging doors at the front of the saloon. A man on horseback had ridden up. Sitting atop his massive shoulders was a live bobcat. Scott began to tremble and hyperventilate. The man, who was seven-feet tall and rippling with muscles, grabbed each of the swinging doors at their tops and swung them open. As he did, he pulled the hinges off one of them. He strode to the bar, stopping directly across from Scott. The bobcat bared its fangs and hissed. This giant of a man looked over at the fellow who had collapsed on the floor and spat a wad of tobacco in his direction. He turned back to Scott, who was trembling and covered with sweat.

"Give me a drink," he yelled.

"Wha' . . . what do you want?"

"Whiskey!"

Scott turned; tears were welling in his eyes. Having grabbed a bottle of the bar's best bourbon, he steadied himself enough to take a shotglass in the other hand and returned to the bar. The giant of a man looked angry. The bobcat held on tighter to his shoulders and hissed again! Scott's hand was trembling so badly that he poured as much whiskey on the bar as he did in the shotglass. When it was full the stranger grabbed it and swallowed the drink.

“Give me another.”

But before Scott could pour it, the man reached over and grabbed the bottle out of his hand. He pulled off the pouring spout, threw it aside, and began to drink directly from the bottle. He stepped back from the bar as he did. The bobcat hissed again and flailed its paw in the air. The man drank in loud, steady gulps. Scott closed his eyes; tears were running down his cheeks and onto his shirt, which was sticking to his skin now because he was covered with so much perspiration. He opened his eyes at the sound of the bottle crashing on the floor when the man threw it down after finishing the last drops.

Turning away from the bar, the stranger belched, looked quickly around the saloon, spat again, and in the same motion drew a hundred dollar bill from his shirt pocket and threw it on the bar. Scott was frozen in his spot. The stranger turned and headed toward the door. Scott watched him. Then, lunging forward, he picked up the hundred dollar bill from the wet bar, and called out, “Wait! That bottle of bourbon only costs eighty dollars; you’ve got change coming.”

The stranger was nearly to the door, when he turned his head: “Change? I ain’t got time! Gotta get goin’. Ain’t you heard? Savage Sam is comin’!”

Put simply, the structure of the Savage Sam story can be summarized:

1. In college one of my best friends was a fellow student named Scott.

This is a statement that the reader (viewer/listener) is likely to take at face value. It is to be assumed that what is coming next is a personal recollection. You might be led to think that the story about to unfold took place while both Scott and I were in college or that it is about something that I witnessed firsthand. Actually the story is about neither. My claimed connection to Scott turns out to be inconsequential. It is like a “teaser” or a “hook” at the beginning of an episodic drama or a sitcom on TV. Watch how, in the first minute and a half or two, before the first set of commercials on nearly any television episode, a scene is presented that is intended to draw in the viewer and to dramatically pose the question as to where the story is headed.

2. After the tease, the second part of the story describes success, wealth, and

possible happiness: the life of an up-and-comer in a New York ad agency living in the fast lane.

3. Scott abruptly leaves New York City for Nevada. Little is told as to why he does this, or how he came to that decision. In the story, there is no detailed inner revelation of his thoughts and feelings behind this departure.
4. For a while he leads an idyllic and peaceful life in the hamlet in Nevada, but he needs money to keep living there.
5. He gets a job as a bartender on the single condition that he'll clear the bar and close it if he ever hears that Savage Sam is coming.
6. One day a battered and bruised man comes in and collapses and the bar clears; another giant of a man, with a bobcat on his shoulders, comes in and demands a drink.
7. Punch line!

Only items five and six are absolutely necessary for the joke to work. The rest of the story consists of elements and details that could be changed or omitted. Individual segments of this story, for example items two, three, and four, might each be taken as the premise for three different and complete seasons of a TV series. In such an instance, each of the situations provides an "arc" or trajectory through which a character passes. Item five could provide the premise for a complete season also. Item six, however, is not a premise but an action, and item seven provides a resolution.

From the story of Savage Sam, which is based on a joke told to me many years ago, we could plausibly have sufficient material to form the kernel of an idea from which to produce a TV series lasting several seasons. The series would be held together from season to season by the central character Scott. During each season the arc would present him with different problems: for example, item two, working with colleagues at the agency; satisfying clients and keeping them happy; moving up the ladder; becoming president of the agency; item three, living in the fast lane; going in and out of romantic relationships; holding things down at the agency; deciding to buy a condo in Sag Harbor and not somewhere else. Optionally there may even be enough here for yet another season, namely item three-and-a-half. This would be based upon Scott becoming disillusioned with the advertising business and life in the city; finding the people around him to be shallow; discovering that he wants something else in life; item four, Scott's initial experiences and adventures in desolate Nevada; the folk of the hamlet and its surrounding area; seeing his money run out; getting the bartending job at the saloon; item five, his

life as the bartender; old-timers and their tales; a romance with a young woman who works on a ranch near the saloon; an episode with the city slickers who get lost and drop in; the Savage Sam resolution.

The premises on which episodic television are based, and also the scripts that are written for such series from week to week, are highly formulaic. They follow common patterns. Many people believe that because they can see through these formulas that they can write such scripts themselves. It may look simple, but it isn't! Only a small percentage of the people who try writing scripts ever succeed in seeing them produced. Of those who do have scripts produced, an even smaller number are able to sustain media writing careers. Television scripts are less like traditional literature than they are like blueprints for building houses. They are subject to constant rewrites and changes. In writing for television, teams of writers, perhaps up to as many as twenty for a prime-time sitcom or drama, may toil together to grind out a single episode. Or else members of the writing team may take turns writing specific episodes which are then pulled apart and reconstructed.

In the movies and in television the unit costs of production are high, ranging from one to two million dollars for a typical half-hour TV episode (which actually is just twenty-one or twenty-two minutes long to accommodate the commercials) and forty to seventy-five million dollars for a feature film for the big screen. Therefore, it is vital for the storytellers in these media to try to build in a substantial degree of predictability in order to hedge against the high financial risks of these projects. This is done by finding characters and situations that hold up well over time. But such familiarity and repetition must be kept alive by having the writers come up with inventive shifts and subtleties that push the formula in slightly different, and sometimes unexpected, directions.

Stories on episodic television, much like the tale of Savage Sam, can be picked up and followed even if a listener/viewer misses a significant portion of what has come before. Television's patterns of repetition emphatically reinforce this by the fact that programs are packaged in series. Viewers know from week to week who the central character(s) is (are), what the relationships are between the characters, and where the action is taking place. When it comes to TV, familiarity breeds contentment, not contempt. We can tune in, be distracted, come back, and, when worse comes to worse and our viewing of an episode is disrupted entirely, know that in the same place at the same time a new episode will be back again next week.

Primarily, TV is about story telling. In general, effective stories are based on the tensions created between opposing forces. Court cases, either criminal or civil, provide great story material. They are based upon adversarial relationships, between the state and the accused, between a plaintiff and a defendant, or between a victim and the accused. Much of what goes on in society that becomes newsworthy can be presented as involving tensions between individuals, political parties, races, special interests, social classes, or nations.

Some degree of conflict or tension is necessary for any good story line. Stories are at their best for television when they are highly accessible, easily understood, fall within a range of plausibility, and strike viewers as familiar enough to fit easily into patterns of repetition. The differences between effective stories for television tend to be small and subtle. Their appeal is in the comfort of familiarity they provide, not in their ability to uproot or to shock us. They succeed in direct proportion to large numbers of people becoming accustomed to them. They are best liked and most admired precisely in those instances in which a familiar formula is taken and modified slightly.

In everyday English "telling stories" means fabricating fibs or white lies. But a story, as a story, is neither good nor bad in a moral sense. Narrative structure is simply a way of ordering experience in a compelling and dramatic manner. Telling something as a story potentially makes it become engaging. Mastery over its narrative elements makes the telling of a story more entertaining, a word, by the way, having roots in the Latin *entare* meaning to hold. Instead of telling the Savage Sam story at the beginning of this chapter, I might have just stated its central idea in one line: "Things aren't always what they seem to be." The value of a story is in its telling, and that telling is elaborated and embellished in the nuances, the twists, and the turns of any particular rendition of any specific tale.

It is astonishing how literal-minded and inaccurate so much criticism of television has become. Donella H. Meadows of Dartmouth College advances this claim: "Have you ever looked at the script of a TV show, even a news show, even a sober PBS documentary? There is no logical flow. The words are there as commentary on the pictures. The pictures are chosen not to build up a sequence of thought, but to engage the emotions. Sustained intelligence is hard enough in a visual medium even if that were the intent of the producers which it rarely is."¹

Let us say, however, that we are producing the Savage Sam story as

a video to air on television. As written, the story begins with a reference to my having known Scott in college. We might show pictures of a bucolic small town campus, although that is inaccurate because the written version begins: "I went to college in New York City." So, alternatively we may elect not to show the viewer anything that places the campus in its geographic context. We might just show a group of undergraduate men and women in a dining hall. We might show a crowd of student-aged people huddled together in the bleachers at a football game. We might show someone studying alone in the library. We might show a graduation ceremony. And so on. Some pictures fit, while others don't! If we show the launch of Apollo 13 from Cape Canaveral, or if we show wolves foraging in the woods, or if we show the Frugal Gourmet preparing a soufflé, or if we show a tankful of tropical fish, then none of these pictures fit the script information: "In college, I knew a fellow student named Scott."

The pictorial content that we choose, and how we go about filming or taping it, has everything to do with the logic of what the audience sees and hears. Do we begin with a long shot, looking down from a high vantage point, of Scott as a tiny figure crossing an empty campus on a gray and misty morning? Do we begin with a close-up of his face as he studies intently in the library, with the camera pulling out from him to reveal a softly lit and muted ambience? Do we start with a medium shot of him in the midst of a boozy bunch of fellow students cheering at a football game being played on a sunny afternoon?

The content of each of these shots conveys information. Elements such as the lighting, the colors, and their contrasts convey mood. The length of each shot conveys intent. A twenty-second shot of Scott walking across an empty campus carries a different value than if it were only five seconds long. The angle of the camera and its focal length from the subject, the lighting, and the action that occurs within the frame are all choices. They are hardly arbitrary, capricious, illogical, or meaningless, as critics like Donella Meadows claim.

In a different story, the visual choices would be different. If the voice opens, "In college, I knew a fellow student named Scott," and we see waves rolling in on the shore, then the voice-over may next say: "I really got to know Scott that weekend that four of us went to Cape Cod in April of our senior year." Or the voice might say: "Scott loved the ocean. He talked about it all the time and wrote poems about the sea that he'd read to us late at night in the dorm." Pictures are not arbitrary.