
The Entertainment Functions of Television

edited by
PERCY H. TANNENBAUM



Psychology Press

The ENTERTAINMENT FUNCTIONS of TELEVISION

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Sponsored by the Social Science Research Council

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Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

1. An Unstructured Introduction to an Amorphous Area *1* *Percy H. Tannenbaum*

Background to the Conference *2*
Conference Proceedings *4*
The Present Volume *9*

2. Entertainment as a Sociological Enterprise *13* *Harold Mendelsohn and H. T. Spetnagel*

Historical Trends *14*
Audiences: A Relatively Recent Social Development *19*
The Conventions of Entertainment *24*

3. The Power and Limitations of Television: A Cognitive-Affective Analysis *31* *Jerome L. Singer*

Some General Implications of the Cognitive Point of View *32*
Basic Cognitive Processes *36*
Characteristics of the Information Media *45*
The Limitations of Television Viewing *50*
The Process of Reading *57*
Conclusions and Research Implications *60*

- 4. The Audience as Critic:
A Conceptual Analysis of
Television Entertainment 67**
Hilde T. Himmelweit, Betty Swift, and Marianne E. Jaeger
- Underlying Propositions 69
Methodology and Procedure 72
Perception of Programs 76
Program Styles and Their Meaning:
 The Cognitive World of the Viewer 81
The Relation of Attitudes and Stylistic Preferences
 to Specific Programs 85
Implications 91
Appendix A 98
Appendix B 102
- 5. Entertainment as Vicarious
Emotional Experience 107**
Percy H. Tannenbaum
- Some Personal Perspectives 108
Genesis of a Theoretical Model 116
Some Research Applications 119
Production-Related Research 121
Repetitive Exposures 127
Concluding Comments 129
- 6. Anatomy of Suspense 133**
Dolf Zillmann
- The Conceptualization of Suspense 133
The Empathy Paradox in the Enjoyment of Suspenseful Drama 140
The Arousal-Jag Resolution of the Paradox 143
The Excitation-Transfer Explanation of the Enjoyment of
 Suspenseful Drama 146
The Research Evidence on Suspense and Enjoyment 150
A Note on Suspense Seeking 157
- 7. Humor and Catharsis:
The Effect of Comedy on Audiences 165**
Thomas J. Scheff and Stephen C. Scheele
- The Catharsis Theory 166
Field Study 174
Experimental Study 175

8. Toward the Integration of Entertainment and Educational Functions of Television:	
The Role of Humor	183
<i>Paul E. McGhee</i>	
Theoretical Considerations	187
The Communicative Impact of Humor: Previous Research	191
Considerations for Future Research and Program Development	196
9. Television News as Entertainment	209
<i>Leo Bogart</i>	
News and the TV Experience	211
The Nature of News	215
The News Format	218
Fact, Fiction, and Opinion in the News	222
TV: The All-Seeing Eye?	226
TV Reconstruction of Reality	233
News, Reality, and Fiction	237
News and Involvement	243
Next Steps in Research	244
Author Index	251
Subject Index	257

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PERCY H. TANNENBAUM

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1

An Unstructured Introduction to an Amorphous Area

Percy H. Tannenbaum
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While most of the research dealing with the mass media generally, and television in particular, has focused on direct or mediated learning from communications messages—from factual materials as such, or lessons and generalizations derived from fictional presentations—one of the more salient facts of media consumption has been overlooked. Most of the deliberate exposure of most people to TV is motivated less to seek information, as such, but in search of something generally referred to as “entertainment.” This cardinal fact is reflected with great consistency in audience ratings in the United States, in similar data from other countries, and in the perennial popularity of certain American and British programs across diverse foreign cultures. It is also reflected in some of the data contained in the “uses and gratifications” type of research wherein respondents are asked to reflect on why they use the medium. Although there is reason to suspect some of the data collected in the latter type of research—if anything they probably inflate the actual incidence of active information seeking and deflate the entertainment function—there is still abundant support for a significant incentive to be “entertained.”

There has, nevertheless, been very little research on the entertainment functions of the media—indeed, a paucity of research on the significance of entertainment in everyday life, quite apart from the media per se. It is one of those phenomena that is around us all the time, a kind of activity shared by most individuals on almost a universal basis, and yet it continues to be neglected. Scholars of television, particularly, avoid this phenomenon at their own peril—in terms of understanding why so many people use television to

such a great extent and what some of the main influences of the medium are on vast numbers of individuals.

This volume is an indirect product of the activities of the Committee on Television and Social Behavior of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). Although its main activities were directed elsewhere, the Committee recognized fairly early in its deliberations that among the neglected items on the communication research agenda was the great appeal of the public media in general and television in particular as means of disseminating entertainment fare on a broad basis. In focusing on TV as a socializing device forging attitudes and behavior patterns (see, for example, the companion volume edited by Withey and Abeles, 1980), the Committee did not completely forget the entertainment content of the medium, but the nature and form of that content, its apparent appeal, its antecedents and its consequences—in short, the entertainment function of television—was hardly touched on.

The Committee collectively realized that if we are to more fully understand and appreciate the television medium and its functions in our contemporary society, a more systematic study of its role as a popular entertainment device is called for. Indeed, one wonders how it has been so neglected for so long, especially considering how dominant sheer entertainment is on television and that, one way or another, the effect of television has probably been among the most researched social science phenomena to date. The time had clearly come, to use the phrase of Elihu Katz (1977), “to take entertainment seriously.”

It is not the practice of the SSRC to undertake and conduct research. Rather, its main role is as a mediator, initiator, and broker. It functions through its constituent committees to foster and promote established and potential new areas of social research, primarily by assembling involved scholars with mutual interests at conferences and through the publication of appropriate books—conference reports, research compendia, theoretical speculations, etc.—for dissemination to the social research community at large.

That was the pattern followed in the present case as well. The Committee first convened a small conference of interested researchers. This volume is a direct development of that conference.

BACKGROUND TO THE CONFERENCE

As with most other such gatherings, there were two issues that had to be addressed early in our planning for the conference: an appropriate agenda and who to invite. Clearly the two are not independent.

Participation

Regarding the composition, we opted for a relatively small group made up primarily of social psychologists who had demonstrated an interest in and/or had conducted research on some aspect of entertainment in the media. We had earlier discussed the desirability of a more broadly based collection of scholars who would address the issue of entertainment from the perspectives of a wider variety of disciplines. However, the judgment was that a more narrowly focused collectivity of psychologists and sociologists—reflecting the composition of the SSRC Committee and, in fact, substantially overlapping with it—was more appropriate for such an initial undertaking. As is often the case with such events, not everyone invited could attend—most unfortunately, perhaps the two foremost workers in this fledgling area were prohibited from participating due to illness—and we ended up with a group of 14 participants almost equally divided between those invited from the outside and Committee members.¹

Agenda

Given the amorphous nature of the concept to begin with, it was apparent that even a relatively homogeneous group of scholars reflected a substantial diversity of interests and approaches. This made setting a formal agenda somewhat questionable. Accordingly, we settled for a relatively loose procedure aiming at modest goals. We sought to get the “lay of the land,” so to speak, by attempting to address the following issues which I, at least, thought to be of sufficient general concern:

1. There was, first of all, the perennial definition issue. What do we mean by “entertainment”? What is to be included and what excluded under this rubric?

2. The motivational issue could not be overlooked. What is it about entertaining materials that provides positive incentives for people to seek it out, often at the expense of other desired or more preferred activities? What “rewards” does it provide for individuals in different settings (e.g., the

¹The participants included Ronald Abels, SSRC Staff; Leo Bogart, Newspaper Advertising Bureau; Aimée Dorr, then at Harvard University, now at the University of Southern California; Paul Ekman, University of California, San Francisco; Seymour Feshback, University of California, Los Angeles; Hilde Himmelweit, London School of Economics; Gerald Lesser, Harvard University; William McGuire, Yale University; Jack McLeod, University of Wisconsin; Harold Mendelsohn, University of Denver; Jerome Singer, Yale University; Percy Tannenbaum, University of California, Berkeley; Steven Withey, University of Michigan; and Dolf Zillmann, Indiana University.

isolated)? Is there anything special about television that enhances these positive functions (other than the obvious fact that it provides a less costly—in terms of time and energy as well as money—means of access)?

3. The nature of the experience: What are the by-products of “being entertained,” particularly of its emotional components? Is the experience a set of conditioned responses such that we react in predictable emotional ways to certain patterns of stimuli, or is it something more intrinsic? Is it merely a question (as if that were not enough) of affect, or are other experiential phenomena involved?

4. The question of consequences, perhaps most important: What are its immediate and long-term effects? Is it something that is experienced and labeled for the moment and then promptly set aside, or do its effects tend to linger on and influence us later? Can the positive emotional responses associated with certain entertaining materials be stored in memory so that some of its excitatory and pleasing components can be experienced upon retrieval?

5. Not least, in what way, if any, does the purely entertaining function help or hinder the mediation of other effects of the message and other subsequent behavior?

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

If the main purpose of the gathering was to assess “the lay of the land,” we found a rather littered landscape. We could not quite come to mutually agreed terms with the various questions posed but did manage to generate a considerable variety of assorted terminology, approaches, concepts, and methods for a conference lasting a day and a half. There certainly was little evidence of any integrating theory or consensus—not an unexpected occurrence at this stage of the game, even if it were considered desirable.

It was, of course, no accident that the relative emphases and different foci appeared to be so diverse among the participants. As noted earlier, there were fundamental differences in how the assembled individuals addressed the subject matter and agenda questions. But just as social scientists have learned to extract some conceptual order out of the relative chaos of assorted data arrays through multivariate techniques, it was possible to extract some degree of latent organization from the relatively unstructured nature of our proceedings.² Our limited sample probably reflects a similar distribution of

²All too often, multivariate analysis is employed blindly as a poor substitute for a decent theory. Better than factor analysis or some such technique, one is fortunate to be blessed with the insight of clever, conscientious colleagues. Bill McGuire is one such colleague, and the following analysis owes much to his assessment of what the conference “churned up” in him.

these underlying factors in the profession at large—in kind, if not necessarily in relative degree—so they are worth considering in some detail.

Conceptual Approaches

There are basically three dimensions that distinguish the conceptual space defined by the “television and entertainment” rubric, when considered in terms of the motives of the investigator. One emphasizes the television medium and is thus more independent-variable oriented. A second is preoccupied with entertainment as a behavioral phenomenon and can be considered to be more dependent-variable oriented. The third focuses on some other social psychological phenomenon (e.g., fantasy), which has some relationship to both TV and entertainment.

TV Focus. Some investigators are primarily interested in the topic at hand as part of their preoccupation with the effects of television, only one of which is entertainment. They usually are concerned with other potential TV effects such as violence, prosocial behavior, political socialization, etc., and somewhere along the line became aware that a main social function of television and keystone of its economic basis lies in its contribution to human entertainment. But such a mediacentric focus is not without its costs, and those with primary interest in the television medium, as such, begin to get uncomfortable when their more dependent-variable-oriented colleagues start talking about the appeals of the ballet, or of participation in sports, or what makes for a popular novel, etc., on the grounds that these other topics distract them from their central point of departure: the impact of television and not of entertainment more generally.

Entertainment Focus. The opposite holds true for those who are attracted to the area via its dependent variable. Such individuals are more preoccupied with what constitutes entertainment and its motivational properties. Obviously, television as a major source of entertainment in our society comes in for some share of attention, but those social scientists with this primary interest tend to feel constrained by confining their thoughts only to those forms of entertainment which are possible through that medium. They roam readily and easily to other forms of entertainment, such as participation in or direct observation of sports, outdoor recreation, music, literature, etc. They avoid addressing other effects of television (e.g., violence, socialization, stimulation of cognitive development, etc.) which have little to do with entertainment per se. They would prefer to grapple with the complexities of entertainment as a common, if not universal, behavioral phenomenon.

Focus on Related Phenomena. The third dimension is represented by scholars with primary concerns in topics and concepts other than TV or entertainment (e.g., the development and function of fantasy, humor, arousal, recreation, aesthetics, sex, and other prime motives). Any one such emphasis may eventually lead toward a consideration of TV and/or entertainment. For some, the dominant paradigm is one where the focal phenomenon mediates between TV and entertainment. For others, it is seen as the primary motive system behind entertainment behavior, or of TV viewing. At times, the phenomenon becomes the main dependent variable and TV and/or entertainment are merely part of an array of antecedent conditions. Either way, such individuals tend to shun considerations of other possible effects of TV which do not particularly involve their central concern, and the same applies to discussions of entertainment where other processes are the main object of interest.

Conceptual Mapping

Given these three main avenues of approach, the conference participants also engaged in identifying constructive means of filling in the defined conceptual space. Although the discussion vacillated between the ponderous and the flippant—as much akin to a parlor game as to an academic committee meeting—we can again discern three underlying directions.

Subdividing the Field. All agreed the “Television and Entertainment” topic was vast and complex. To avoid being overwhelmed it is useful to break down the field into manageable size by sorting and classifying the various entertainment materials available on television into a convenient taxonomy. The relevant questions generated by this activity include:

1. What are the main types of entertainment programs and what are the variants within these typologies?
2. Do the conventional categories of the TV trade (soap opera, adventure story, situation comedy, sports, etc.) serve for the audience as well, and do they match the kind of entertainment experienced?
3. Instead of a content point of view, would it be better to approach the topic of types of television entertainment from the perspective of the different wants and needs which might be met and gratified?
4. How would one go about cataloguing type of television entertainment so as to have the divisions be optimally useful for suggesting novel research problems?

Provocative Contrasts. It is often a useful activity in itself and provocative to further conceptualization to search out the seeming contradictions in the current intellectual ferment of a given area. There was

no shortage of such paradoxes in our relatively short meeting. The following represents a variety of such heuristically provocative dialectics that emerged and that are probably quite common in this area. The questions are obviously raised not for an answer in favor of one or the other alternative but to stimulate appreciation of the complexities of television entertainment.

1. Does television entertainment involve the individual's "getting outside" of themselves, or does it involve intensifying, enriching one's self-consciousness?

2. Does television entertainment involve escaping from one's problems or getting wrapped up in new problems? Is it best explained in terms of negative escapism—getting away from things—or more positively by the attractiveness of the entertaining material?

3. Does television entertain by calming or exciting, either or both?

4. Is a given entertainment experience more intense when the person is isolated or in a social context (e.g., is watching football on television more pleasurable than at the stadium)?

5. How does one explain the paradoxical attraction of seemingly negative material, such as being entertained by suspense and puzzles, by horror shows, by tragedies and tear-jerkers? More generally, why are some people attracted by the exertion, pain, danger, etc., involved in vigorous sports and dangerous recreation?

6. Is what is entertaining socially defined, or is it determined by the intrinsic needs of the individual? How much of the selection of TV entertainment is a matter of deliberate choice and how much is incidental, even accidental.

7. To what extent does entertainment involve novelty versus confirmation of expectedness, as in the ritualized depictions of comedy situations versus the unexpected punch line, etc.?

8. What is the relative appeal of spectator versus participant entertainment?

9. Is TV entertainment mostly a matter of momentary diversion or does it involve more remote, in time and/or place, reoccurrences and fantasies?

10. What are the neurophysiological correlates of using the TV medium, as such, and do they differ with certain entertainment content? Does it primarily involve left hemisphere or right hemisphere functions, or both in some mix?

Terms and Constructs. Not surprisingly, a good deal of the discussion tended to be in terms of other social science concepts that are partially but not fully associated with either TV or entertainment. The following is a somewhat incomplete and haphazard (that is to say, alphabetical) listing, merely to give some insight into the vast range of constructs that are elicited when one pries open the black box represented by the concept of entertainment. The fact that

many of these terms are not better defined than that of entertainment per se certainly does not help our task any.

aesthetics	fun
affect	gratification
amusement	humor
arousal	instrumental acts
art	interest
autotelic activity	leisure
ceremony	novelty
content/style formats	pleasure
diversion	quality of life
empathy	recreation
enjoyment	ritual
escapism	symbolism
excitement	vicarious experience
fantasy/ make-believe	volition

Methodological Considerations

In the course of our discussions, a wide variety of research methods were mentioned in passing, some in connection with brief reports of ongoing research, others as potential tools for exploring new problems. The following represents a selective culling of those that were mentioned, along with the kind of problem to which a given method might be applied:

1. Propositional inventory of related fields (sports, popular culture, literary criticism, movie producers, etc.) giving the accumulated wisdom (some of which may not be all that wise) of what entertains, as judged by a wide variety of people, especially those in the entertainment business who serve gatekeeper roles.

2. Multidimensional scaling techniques that would help us determine how various types of programs cluster, or the judgmental factors characterizing entertainment programs, in order to get some insight into the dimensions of television entertainment.

3. Open-ended interviews of both producers and consumers of television trying to get at what entertains, when the respondent may well be unaware of and unable to articulate feelings about this generic question.

4. Thought experiments, involving imagining how entertainment would be in a different world (e.g., before television, or without print and literature, etc.).

5. Look for the categorizing and relative use of various entertainment materials by different subpopulations (e.g., children, the elderly, the secluded, men and women separately, different social classes, etc.).

6. Use actors, directors, television administrators, etc., as resource people to suggest the main entertainment variables (i.e., those that they believe make a difference in the entertainment value, and hence popularity, of a program, and then test by survey and experimental manipulation.

7. Analyze television entertainment from each of several different perspectives that appear to have some bearing on it (e.g., the psychology of humor, quality of life, factors in best sellers, popular culture, literary criticism, aesthetics, sociology of sports, leisure studies, etc.).

8. Secondary analyses of the Nielsen TV ratings, focusing on program content analysis, demographic characteristics of the depicted roles, etc., to try to isolate certain correlates of relative program popularity. This could readily be duplicated across several countries—where similar, even superior, popularity data are readily available—to look for cultural generality or specificity.

9. Use of “concept-testing” approach used by networks and advertisers as a convenient way of studying the hypothetical variables involved in television entertainment.

10. Study how people choose the programs which they view on TV. Study also the actual patterns of viewing/listening (as in “watching children watch television”) in order to zero in on precise viewing patterns and get insights into the determinants of these patterns.

11. Study the effort people are willing to expend to watch one versus another type of program, by imposing certain devices (e.g., static, with a switch depressor to cancel it, or a treadmill, etc.) between the viewer and the TV set.

12. Study joint choice regarding program preferences to get insights into the meaning of patterns of preference typologies among individuals (e.g., are they likely to address the same or different needs?).

THE PRESENT VOLUME

The diversity represented by the foregoing mosaic of ideas and methods was not totally without its rewards. The conference did provide a useful forum for a once-over-quickly exchange of conceptual approaches, updated reports on current and expected personal lines of research, and the like. Although displeased with the unstructured nature of our deliberations and the lack of a consensus on priorities, we all felt that was an unavoidable feature at this stage of the game and that it was preferable to encourage investigators to pursue their own.

The assembly was also asked to address alternative activities from the perspective of the Committee and its concern with stimulating researchers in the field, other than those present, to pursue ideas in the general area under consideration. What emerged from this discussion was an agreement that the

field could benefit from a more detailed airing of the type and range of activity these various investigators, each pursuing an individual interest under this very broad rubric, could provide. The conference accordingly recommended that the Committee arrange to publish such a volume by asking the conference participants and other suggested individuals to set down their thoughts and use their own research to illustrate what kinds of problems could be addressed, some useful approaches to such problems, and the methodological as well as conceptual difficulties that prevail. Diversified as such a volume was bound to be, it was felt that this could have the desired stimulating effect on potential researchers.

The present book is the result. It is not exactly what we had in mind when the publication venture was first launched, but the best we could muster from a limited group of busy scholars within an already extended period of time. A number of potential contributors did not join in the undertaking at the outset due to existing commitments, whereas several others who did originally agree to participate fell by the wayside as other pressing duties intervened.

The result is somewhat of a potpourri, as it was bound to be from the outset. With no agreement on a sufficiently compelling single model at hand, we purposely opted for each contributor to "do his own thing" and prepare an individually appropriate chapter. As editor of the volume, I did try to impose some commonality of approach, requesting each author to outline a particular theoretical perspective to some aspect of entertainment and television, and to describe issues and problems involved in that approach, using findings from actual research to illustrate salient points.

Clearly, the authors adhered more to the first dictum than to the request for a more systematic approach. One or two chapters are essentially reports of research with the theoretical stance secondary to the presentation of results. Others address an aspect of the entertainment area directly, whereas several make only oblique references to it. Although the total result is not of a single pattern, each contributor does introduce the interested reader to some intriguing speculative ideas, several provocative theoretical formulations, and the results of actual research. Since most of these have not been widely circulated until now, the book may turn out to be the source of fresh ideas it was meant to be.

Organization of the Volume

Since this is a free-lance volume rather than a systematic treatment of the subject, no fixed sequence of chapters is clearly suggested. There appear to be two main classifications of topics—one dealing with more general theoretical speculations, the other focused on more specific TV-content areas—and, lacking any other guide, this is how the materials are organized.

Accordingly, I chose to lead with the Mendelsohn and Spetnagel chapter, largely because it gives a broad, if still selective, historical perspective within which contemporary issues may be examined. All too often, we tend to forget that many phenomena do have a long past, with earlier critical occurrences helping shape, if not determine, subsequent development, as this account of the growth of popular entertainment suggests. They thus provide a sobering counterperspective to the more psychological approach that marks most of the rest of the volume. At some points, it even offers provocative alternative explanations to account for some already observed research results, such as with the arousal research.

There follows the equally broad-ranging though more psychologically oriented chapter by Jerry Singer. One of the more prolific researchers on the use of television by children, Singer has here chosen to introduce the reader to a wider array of psychological theorizing, including man as an information-processing animal, the notion of affect, and ongoing tendencies for the use of imagination. In the process he reports not only on his own research dealing with fantasy, children's learning through entertainment formats, and the like, but also on the brain-hemisphere theory separating logically reasoned, linear intellectual processes from more spontaneous, emotionally tinged neural activity. It is a chapter rich with speculation that any neophyte in the area should find replete with research ideas.

The empirical chapter of Hilde Himmelweit, Betty Smith, and Marianne Jaeger Biberian directs attention to the categories, and their underlying judgmental dimensions, of selected entertainment programming from the viewer's perspective. The subjects are various programs on British television, on which the authors thoughtfully provide descriptive comments to aid the reader in matching the judgmental data to certain content/format characteristics. The rating of various popular entertainment programs as being exciting and stimulating have echoes elsewhere in the volume.

My own account of coming to grips with the field of media entertainment rounds out this more general section. I borrow from personal experiences in developing a set of theoretical ideas centered on the role of emotional arousal through communication. This type of reasoning, coupled with opportunities for production-related research, has led me to a number of applications in actual TV-programming settings. These are touched on, each rather briefly, in an attempt to convey the variety of interesting, often fascinating, problems that greet the investigator in this area.

Dolf Zillmann takes the arousal model several steps further in his contribution. His extension of Schachter's (1964) theory of emotional states to the so-called "emotional transfer" model has spawned a prolific and wide-ranging series of experiments investigating different entertainment content areas (e.g., aggression, humor, sports), with consistent support for the

theoretical paradigm. Here he tackles the very significant but usually neglected issue of suspense content, developing a tightly reasoned conceptual rationale and reporting some intriguing experimental findings in detail.

Operating from a somewhat different theoretical stance, Tom Scheff and Stephen C. Scheele direct their attention at the apparent appeal and consequences of humor and laughter. Along with the Tannenbaum and Zillman offerings, they too invoke a physiological mechanism. They report actual research findings tending to support their theoretical predictions, again providing further speculative grist for the research mill.

The humor theme is also the focus of Paul McGhee's offering. Here, his concern is less with humor as such but the role it—and, by extension, entertainment fare generally—can play in aiding and abetting the use of the television medium as a learning device. His reports of research findings from both children and adult programming sets the stage for a number of hypotheses regarding the use of the amusement in the service of deliberate training.

Somewhat of a change of pace and conceptual focus is introduced in Leo Bogart's final chapter. His specific issue here is the informational function of television, particularly as represented by news shows. His particular concern is with how such programming has become diluted, if not trivialized, by the introduction of "show biz," audience-developing techniques and formats in order to promote higher ratings. His discussion of how such treatments may influence the viewer's distinction between—and possibly the blurring of—reality and nonreality, and the relationship between information and entertainment in shaping such orientations, leads to a substantial agenda for research on TV news.

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2

Entertainment as a Sociological Enterprise

Harold Mendelsohn
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To understand entertainment properly, it is important not to focus solely on individualistic pleasure-seeking behavior. Entertainment phenomena do not take place in vacua; thus they are not likely to occur in laboratory-like situations where historical, aesthetic, and social influences are considered to be either inoperative or unimportant. Rather, entertainment occurs within a context of complex interactions that involve institutions, social norms, group behaviors, and traditions—all of which can be considered to comprise a sociological enterprise.

Further, the sociological enterprise does not function without historical anchorages and aesthetic milieux. Consequently, it is essential to use insights from sociological and aesthetic theory against a backdrop of history in order to provide a comprehensive perspective.

The analytic perspective we provide here is based on five propositions:

1. Audiences for entertainment emerged late in the seventeenth century as a consequence of the break-up of feudalism.
2. As Western society became more and more stratified different social classes vied for visibility in entertainment fare; visibility being equated with legitimacy.
3. The stratification that occurred in the West was ultimately reflected in diverse markets for diverse entertainment fare.
4. As differentiations in tastes emerged, specialized art and entertainment institutions and technologies were designed to satisfy them.
5. Gratifications derived from exposure to entertainment fare are both psychological and social in nature; psychological analysis perhaps serving as necessary but not sufficient conditions for interpretation.

Aiding in making a case from the five propositions are theories derived from the sociology of collective behavior, social structure and social organization theory, social change and diffusion theory, history of ideas, literary, art, and music criticism, and use-gratification theory.

The blending of such a diverse array of observation, theory, and speculation can be expected to produce neither empirical data nor empirically grounded generalizations at this time. What is offered here is an attempt to mobilize historical evidence to support a number of hypotheses relating to entertainment as a sociological enterprise.

HISTORICAL TRENDS

In viewing entertainment from a sociohistorical perspective, it is essential to consider the fact that other than in the simplest societies, "entertainment" is neither monolithic or monotonic. That is to say, as different subgroups attain participatory status in society, they develop and manifest their own unique aesthetic standards, tastes, and expectations. The less stratified a society is, the fewer will be its aesthetic standards, tastes, expectations, and entertainment modes. The more complex the social structure, the more complex will be a given society's entertainment enterprise.

The Sacred and the Vernacular

Prior to the middle of the seventeenth century, the social order of Western civilization was divinely prescribed. Basically, there were only two kinds of people: those who mattered and those who did not. Those who mattered—the aristocracy of the church and state—lived at the apex of the social pyramid, and their lives, their ceremonies, their arts and entertainments were tinged by the sacred. Those who did not matter—the peasants and tradesmen—lived at the base, and their lives were considered vulgar and profane. Their arts and entertainments were less worthy, primarily because they were tainted by a vernacular expression.

For those who mattered, the "sacred" arts and entertainments were forms through which they expressed both their solidarity with the divine and, simultaneously, their aloofness from the lower classes. For those who did not matter, the vernacular arts and entertainments provided simple temporary respite from toil and an opportunity to socialize on special occasions. Because of the participatory character of the vernacular entertainments—singing, dancing, and games—they served to maintain solidarity with others of similar status, whereas their religious roots served to assert the continuity of the participants' tenuous and ritualistic linkages to the divine.

Although it is true that differences between elite and folk arts and entertainments can be described functionally, both the sacred and vernacular

arts and entertainments shared one similarity in that they always have been manifestations of human pleasure-seeking behavior. The distinctive qualitative differences between the two appear, historically, to have been the consequence of extreme differences in the material condition of audiences rather than, as many would maintain, the result of inherent differences either in the intent or function of sacred and vernacular entertainments.

From earliest antiquity, entertainment has functioned consistently to provide pleasurable reassurance to audiences by satisfying their deep-felt desires for distinctive reflections of their own lives. By structuring content in conventional forms that assert a continuity of the audiences' culture, traditions, norms, tastes, and values, entertainment offers gratifications that are quite unlike those that are afforded by art. Where art aims for universals, entertainment is totally culture-bound.

The degree to which entertainment fare reflects what the in-group audience finds desirable and, simultaneously, projects what is considered undesirable in the out-group, will determine the gratifications that audiences receive from such fare. Thus, for example, while the "Grand operas" of eighteenth-century Italy tended to reinforce the value systems of a beleaguered aristocracy, the English "ballad operas" of the same period not only placed the "common man" on the stage, but at the same time, they parodied the elitist-oriented Italian works.

Rise of the Middle Class

The simple duality of social structure that dictated Western society's orientation to and involvement in the arts for centuries was abruptly shattered by the emergence of a totally new participatory social force in the seventeenth century—the bourgeoisie.

The middle class offered an unprecedented addendum to the traditional basic social structure of master-servant. It was an addendum that was to have the most consequential impact on the arts until the present time, for the bourgeoisie had acquired the numbers, finances, and literacy that made them a dominant force both in society and in the arts.

With the rise of the middle class, the two ancient social roles of servant and master were replaced by a variety of middle-class roles that audiences wanted to see portrayed in theatres and in the novel. The literacy of the middle classes gave them access to the printed word, and new institutions such as publishing firms, lending libraries, and the postal service sprang into being to facilitate that access. Their literacy was also a "cultured" literacy which ultimately opened the doors to opera, public musical performance, reading clubs, and salons.

The economic changes that took place produced a rather large social cohort that had money to spend. The spending power of the bourgeoisie enabled them to compete with the royal court for the services of writers,

musicians, and painters for the first time and thus was able to influence the form and content of what was written, composed, performed, and painted. In a relatively short time, the status of the artist/entertainer changed from that of a servant at court whose services could be dispensed with at whim to that of a professional/entrepreneur for hire.

In the political sphere, when the hierarchic order dissolved a new system of social control had to be developed to make policy and keep order as replacement for the old order. Art and entertainment which had previously functioned rather matter of factly in accord with their place in the divine order of things now required rational regulation. Because both art and entertainment could confer and preserve status simply by giving visibility to social groups, attempts to regulate the arts became a more important part of the agenda for the state, and the arts and entertainment became institutionalized for the first time.

The consequence of the changes in the philosophical underpinnings of society that took place was a radically new way of looking at the world. As John Donne said, the "New Philosophy calls all in doubt." It was apparent that another principle had to be developed and that principle was reason.

The result was remarkable. In the space of about 200 years a hierarchic conception of a social system with power emanating from the top had begun to be replaced by an atomic-mechanical model where power was dependent on aggregations of individuals and their social, economic, and political interactions and on the relatively new phenomenon of "public opinion." By the early eighteenth century, art and entertainment had become a commodity, and the artist/entrepreneur's survival depended on offering various publics what they wanted to buy. It was a different world, and although the basic pleasure-giving functions of the arts and entertainment had not changed, their emergence as institutions managed by cadres of professionals and supported by technicians represented a different state of affairs indeed.

By the time the massive migrations from the villages of Western Europe to its cities had reached its peak in the early eighteenth century, a new and powerful aesthetic standard of quality had been added to the prevailing elite and folk standards—the aesthetic standard of the emerging bourgeoisie.

The fact that a totally new sociological entity had emerged on the European scene not only was revolutionary in the economic and political sense, but its appearance marked significant changes in the arts—in how they were produced, disseminated, patronized, and criticized. In particular the notion of "entertainment" itself as a form of common acceptable social behavior came into some prominence at this time.¹

¹The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes the earliest usages of "entertainment," "amusement," and "escape" to convey their contemporary meanings as occurring in the seventeenth century.

Unlike the nobility, the bourgeoisie were neither bound to a particular geographic domain nor to the overwhelming costliness of waging wars either to protect or to expand physical turf. Neither were they few in number. Similarly, unlike the peasants, the bourgeoisie were literate, educated, monied, and lived contiguously to each other rather than in geographic isolation. In brief, the bourgeoisie was an urbanized, literate, educated, and cosmopolitan social force that thrust itself into the fabric of Western society on the basis of its numbers, wealth, knowledge, and disdain for geographic boundaries. As such the new middle-class constituted a powerful vested interest not only in the political sense but in the cultural one as well.

In order to protect its advantageous economic position, the bourgeoisie first attempted to work through established political institutions of the monarchy, church, courts, and parliament. On the cultural level, the middle class was forced to develop totally new institutions in order to guarantee that its cultural interests would be served according to *its* standards and not those either of the nobility or the peasantry. For the first time, then, we see the development of a “market” for cultural fare. This new market was comprised of relatively large numbers (a mass market) who demanded a “popular” culture or a culture that fitted its very own standards rather than those of others. And as previously noted, the middle-class was able to pay for what it wanted. The institutional responses to the cultural requirements of the emergent middle-class were nothing short of explosive.

Consider just a sampling of the developments that took place between the 1600s and 1800s as cases in point:

1. 1607, Monteverdi’s opera *Orfeo* is performed, and by 1613 four theatres in Venice alone offer musical entertainment to a paying public.
2. 1672, John Banister gives violin concerts to a paying public in his London home.
3. 1730–1750, secondhand bookstores, subscription and lending libraries, postal services, reading clubs, and coffee houses come into existence.
4. Mid-eighteenth-century London taverns such as Sadler’s Wells offer public entertainment by paid comedians and singers—entertainment that foreshadows the music hall, vaudeville, “revue,” musical comedy, and “variety” show.

Never before and never since has there been such a high degree of social ferment surrounding the pursuit of “nonserious” social activity. It is in this period that entertainment first becomes the focus of serious intellectual and social concern. From classical antiquity through the patristic and scholastic thinkers of the Middle Ages, aesthetics was treated either as Plato and