

OLD STEREOTYPES NEW MYTHS

Vaudeville is not dead. It's alive and well on TV. It's sponsored. Ed Sullivan proves it. As vaudeville once was America's major folk entertainment, Sullivan and the sub-Sullivan TV shows that ape his variety make it happen for the widest possible cross-section of America. Some people watch some of the shows some of the time, and some of the people watch some of the shows none of the time; but sooner or later everyone, as proved in the musical *Bye Bye Birdie*, watches Ed Sullivan.

Sullivan's variety mixes his audience. Youngsters tune in to watch Neil Diamond and catch a scene from *Man of La Mancha*. Oldsters tune in to see how Fred Astaire or some other old timey star is holding up, and they stay to watch Creedence Clearwater Revival. On Sullivan, everybody ends up being exposed to things they wouldn't necessarily choose to watch: like, especially, Swiss Bell Ringers and Yugoslavian bear acts.

When The Beatles sang "Let It Be" for Sullivan, however, some of those exposed went up in arms over McCartney writing the lyric "Mother Mary comes to me." Sullivan received national mail, and local radio stations banned the song. The conservative gripe: no rock group should take the name of Mary in vain; Christ's mother deserves respect. When lyricist Paul McCartney revealed that his own mother's name was Mary, the stations over-ruled the prescriptive censors and the song has become a Beatles classic.

TV is a mass medium. If a 45-rpm record is a million seller, the rock group is a success. If a TV show attracts a million viewers, the network bounces it off the air. TV talks in terms of fifty million viewers a night, watching one hundred million dollars of commercials pushing mass-produced products.

TV influences, in program and promotion, the collective mass mind.

Of the estimated 213 million television sets in the world, about 78 million are in the United States. The Soviets have 25 million; the Japanese, 20.5 million; and the United Kingdom, 19 million. TV helps make you who you are.

And when TV *talks* about successful format and surefire formula, TV *means* that stereotyped characters without personality and stereotyped situations without depth are easiest for the mass audience attracted to the small screen. TV gauges its average program level to the twelve-year-old viewer. Does TV underestimate its viewers' capacity? Are idiotic game shows like *The Dating Game* and nitwitted situation comedies like *The Beverly Hillbillies* really necessary?

Consider the success of that sitcom formula we'll call "Daddy Is a Dummy." Through many TV seasons sitcom husbands like Blondie's Dagwood, Harriet's Ozzie, Lucy's Ricky, and Mary Tyler Moore's Dick Van Dyke bumbled and puzzled their way through situations which only the wife could solve. Talk about Women's Lib! Many recent shows have done away with Daddy altogether: *The Lucy Show*, *Doris Day*, and *Julia*. Seems these merry widows can't say anything nice about Daddy, so they don't say anything at all.

On the other hand, Mothers have gotten the same boot. *My Three Sons* went motherless for years. *Family Affair* is held together by a dirty old man. John Forsyth's *To Rome With Love* is an Italian version of his previous series *Bachelor Father*. If stereotypes are a clue to where the mass mind is,

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then American psychology is preoccupied—no matter how comic TV makes it—with broken homes.

But are homes broken by death, divorce, or disappearance some fearful new plague caused by TV? Of course not! Critics too often look for cause and effect where cause and effect is a puppy chasing its own tail.

Can you say TV violence is the cause of violence in the streets? For years we have had situation comedy on TV and we have never had situation comedy in the streets. If anything, society is the cause of television. It is within the mass medium of TV that our mass mind surfaces with our mass preoccupations.

MASS MIND STEREOTYPE ARCHETYPE

Psychologist Carl Jung claims some experiences are true for all people at all times. We all remember our individual life-experiences. Actor Lee Marvin, for one, claims he can remember the womptime before he was born. Jung contends that besides our personal memories we each participate in the Collective Memory of Mankind.

As each one of us unconsciously remembers our personal birth, so, says Jung, does the Collective Unconscious of collective mankind remember the human race crawling up from the evolutionary sea into creation on the shore. Perhaps Jung's theory explains why the ocean can hypnotize us into hours of staring. Our Collective Unconscious is re-living faint echoes of that time of collective birth.

Fairy tales, Jung says, because they are composed and retold over long periods of time by many different people, reflect collective patterns of human attitudes toward family, parents, brothers, sisters, guilt, and security. The Bible stories of Cain and Abel with Adam and Eve—while finally

written down—were, according to the most modern scriptural exegesis, originally folk tales which—if Jung were consulted—would likewise measure the collective hopes and fears of the people who heard and modified and told them.

Today the folktale and fairy tale, like the classical tales of Greece and Rome, are still being told. But this time, instead of around the nomadic campfire or the medieval hearth, they occur as television tales.

TV is the folk-medium of our time.

Jung saw patterns emerging in folk and fairy tales. He called these constant repetitions *archetypes*. These archetypes included basic *plots*, basic *characters*, basic *places*, and basic *things* common to all human experience. In America, the TV-movie Western is a basic archetypal plot that has been around since before Good confronted Evil in the medieval morality plays.

President Nixon, whose favorite star is John Wayne, has wondered publicly, “Why it is that the Westerns survive year after year with such popularity. Although this may be a square observation,” the President continued, “it may be because of the satisfying moral structure of the Western as an art form: the good guys come out ahead, the bad guys lose, and there is no question about who is to be admired.”

The Western has long been established as a TV staple.

The *Bonanza* format of a Good-Guy Family fighting not to be dispossessed of their land has been repeated constantly in *The High Chaparral*, *The Big Valley* (wherein a Mother, Barbara Stanwyck, replaced the Father, Lorne Greene of *Bonanza*), and *The Men from Shiloh* (aka *The Virginian*). The archetypal plot here is Adam fighting not to be driven off his property in Eden. The updated version of the Western is the police-detective series like *Hawaii Five-O* where Good Guys battle to save the Eden of their tropical paradise from Bad Guys.

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TV's attitudes are often contradictory. Still they are no more ambivalent, program to program, than the multiple myths which feed into our TV literature. In the Western, for instance, the raw land is considered good. The West is as much an Eden as Marlboro Country. When somebody from a Western goes "back East" or "off to the city," chances are he or she will be ruined. The city is considered an evil place. On the other hand, the city is often the best of all possible worlds. Just ask *That Girl!* (Christianity, since its beginnings, has, by the way, always been an urban phenomenon. St. Paul traveled city to city; and Augustine wrote of "The City of God.")

Sometimes, the myth of the country meets the myth of the city, so a cowboy-in-the-city TV series like *McCloud* is born. In New York City this last autumn, at the west end of 42nd Street, facing toward Times Square was a gigantic Marlboro billboard. Starting at the fifth story, the Marlboro Man lighted his cigarette in his cupped hands. Tall in the saddle, he stretched all the way up to the eleventh floor. Six—count 'em—six stories of rawhide male, smack in the heart of America's largest city, saying, "Come to Marlboro Country." In *McCloud*, TV's version of the Oscar-winning movie *Midnight Cowboy*, the myth of the West moves in on the myth of the city. It is no sudden accident of American psychic history that detective McCloud walks 42nd Street dressed as a Marlboro Man. Riding in from the West, he is the Good Guy come to save the city from crime and pollution.

And every social worker knows, the East needs saving. Ever since James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking frontiersman Natty Bumppo fled the East, Americans' salvation has lain in the West. John Steinbeck's family of Joads in *The Grapes of Wrath* migrated West to California—the Promised Land. "Go West, young man," Horace Greeley said, and go West they did. All except F. Scott Fitzgerald's not-so-great

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Gatsby who went East to seek his fortune and paid with his life for living *East of Eden*. The very Journey West has become an American myth in itself. (Didn't the Mamas and Papas sing the lure of "California Dreamin'" and didn't the Beach Boys "Wish They All Could Be California Girls"?) It is significant that motorcycling East on their road trip across America, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper were murdered for, thematically, journeying in the wrong direction!

The archetype opposite to the man who retains his Eden through true grit is, obviously, the man dispossessed of one Eden and in search of another.

A constant TV hero is the traveling cowpoke, whether he travels by traditional horseback, by motorcycle (*Then Came Bronson*), or by car (*Follow the Sun, Route 66*). Sometimes this man who is "looking for something" is as vague as Ben Gazzara in *Run for Your Life* or Patrick MacGoohan in *The Prisoner*. What these restless and pursued men have in common is their dispossession from Eden.

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It is archetypally true that no human likes to blame himself. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. Cain blamed Abel. Our small-screen TV heroes, like the mythical heroes of old, fix the blame for their guilt or dispossession wherever they can: on people, places, things. Black comedian Flip Wilson says it for all of us: "The Devil made me do it!" The Devil, however, is long gone. In his place now stand many alternative archetypes.

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"A woman is a sometime thing." So George Gershwin wrote in the archetypal American musical, *Porgy and Bess*. In how many fairy tales (and how many novels, plays, and telefilms) does the Archetypal Evil Stepmother replace the dead

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Archetypal Good Mother? In “Let It Be,” is The Beatles’ Mother Mary much different from Cinderella’s Fairy Godmother or Dorothy’s White Witch in Oz? Like *Bewitched*’s Samantha or the mothers in *The Partridge Family* (based on the musical group, The Cowbells) and *The Brady Bunch*, these ladies come in time of trouble to help. Just like Donna Reed used to in the 1950s.

The Good Women are the opposite of those Evil Women who plague not only Hansel and Gretel but also the likes of the heroes who have troubles with ladies on *The Name of the Game* or *Bracken’s World*. To test the application of this archetype to you, confess: Every one of you reading this has been, at one time or another, so angry at your mother that you knew you had to be an adopted child. Your real mother could never treat you like this.

* * * *

Parents and other strangers. In his revolutionary book, *Do It*, required reading in many universities, author Jerry Rubin writes, “You’ve got to kill your parents.”

Literal people who believe “one *only* equals one” immediately miss his metaphor.

The archetypal myth behind such an extreme generation gap rarely leads to a hack job like Lizzie Borden’s. But there is a rebellious bit of Lizzie in every child. Or there should be. Your parents need to “die” to you as parents if you’re ever to become independent and if they’re ever to become your friends. Once you’re older isn’t it true you don’t really need them as parents, and can better do with them as wise friends?

Be that as it may, the ancient Greek expression of this had Oedipus killing his father, ruining his mother’s life, and blinding himself. In another classical myth, Telemachus was fated to search for his father Ulysses. This is the same archetypal plot as Johnny Cash singing as a father on TV

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about “A Boy Named Sue” or Walter Brennan’s old series, *The Guns of Will Sonnett*. Will Sonnett combined the archetypal place of the West with this archetype of the missing father who must be tracked down by his son.

Ever since Adam glommed down on Cain for killing Abel, the three males with their wife and mother Eve have served as the Archetypal Family. Soap operas like *The Secret Storm* pick up on this intra-family turmoil. The fact that millions of viewers watch the soaps each afternoon indicates a common enough chord is struck to label Family Turmoil as an archetype. To get a look at this Family Turmoil Pattern—without the dulling Soap film—try Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and Edward Albee’s *American Dream* or *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Then add a little *Romeo and Juliet*, a little *Lion in Winter*, and a little *Death of a Salesman*.

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Stereotypes differ from archetypes. Archetypes are the nitty-gritty essence of persons, places, or things that everyone who has ever lived has to some degree or another deeply experienced: like birth, fear of death, guilt, love, sex, anguish, and so on. Stereotypes, on the other hand, don’t run so deep. Stereotypes are shallow siphonings off the top of archetypes. An archetype conjures the essence. The stereotype settles for the easy surface, the facile generalization. Bernard Malamud’s novel and due-for-TV film, *The Fixer*, plunges deep into the guts of the archetypal suffering Jew. Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* deals somewhat with the superficial stereotype of the Jewish protagonist as a shrewd businessman.

Hollywood in the seventies is more famous for its Television City Studios than it ever was for MGM. More TV shows than movies are currently shot in the former film capital of the world. Yet Hollywood, from the old movies

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like *Birth of a Nation* (1915) up until this latest TV season, has more often than not settled for the easy stereotype, the laugh-getting racism.

In the thirties all Hollywood Negroes, like Stepin Fetchit and Rochester, had “rhythm,” were lazy, and afraid of ghosts. Would Butterfly McQueen, Scarlett’s black maid in *Gone with the Wind*, be possible in 1971? By the end of the sixties, Hollywood was into a new stereotype. Blacks became “noble.” Male and female Hollywood created them. They could do no wrong. The handsome Sidney Poitier rose to stardom with the rise of this limited stereotype. This TV season stereotype has evolved into more realistic presentations of Black people on screen. Over sixteen series currently feature Blacks in more dimensioned roles than ever before.

In Chicago, Black filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, director of last year’s controversial racial movie, *Watermelon Man*, has a new film creating a new kind of liberated Black protagonist—who is no sidekick or servant—starring in a provocative movie whose title explains itself: *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*.

Such an array of Black talent in human roles on big and small screens means, we all hope, the final demise of the Negro stereotype. The only Negro with rhythm among this season’s performers tap dances Saturday nights on the reactionary *Lawrence Welk Show*. Welk dedicates his variety hour to telling it like it isn’t about race, college, and life in our American cities.

Black Professor John Oliver Killens of Columbia University reported to *TV Guide* the criticism of Black TV shows made by a blue-collar Black man: “Ain’t no Black shows. They’re just shows with Black people acting like they White.”

One of Killens’ students in a Black Culture class said: “That cat in *Mission: Impossible* is the natural end. He’s the White folks’ handyman. They should call that show *I*

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Was a Stooge for the CIA. Nevertheless, Blacks are no longer invisible men on the small screen. (Read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.) The Negro has surfaced in the seventies in as many roles as are—despite racial controversies—humanly possible.

The objection to *Mission: Impossible's* Greg Morris, although debatable, is right on the difference between stereotype and archetype. To begin with, Morris' skills are dramatically depicted as being technically way beyond those of a mere "handyman." Secondly, he fits into the Jonathan-David Archetype. Jonathan befriending King David is archetype opposite to Cain killing Abel.

Older even than the Bible story, this archetype of two men in partnership recurs repeatedly. In "modern" literature, the seventeenth-century Cervantes' "Man of La Mancha," Don Quixote, rode with Sancho Panza. More recently, the Cisco Kid had Pancho, the Lone Ranger had Tonto, *The Mod Squad* had Clarence Williams in a *Three Musketeers* variation. Remember the outsider, d'Artagnan, the fourth Musketeer, who joins up to bond with the original Three?

These cross-racial partnerships grow directly out of Fenimore Cooper's American tradition. In frontier times, Leatherstocking had his faithful equal, the Indian Chingachgook. Is—as Killens' student implies—this Jonathan-David Archetype necessarily demeaning to one of the partners?

Joe Buck in *Midnight Cowboy* had Ratso Rizzo.

Dragnet's Sergeant Friday has his Gannon.

Adam 12's veteran Molloy has his rookie Reed.

* * * *

William Ross Wallace, in the nineteenth century paid tribute to Woman Power with "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."

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In the twentieth-century teleconomy, the hand that pays the bills is the hand that rules the networks. A recent magazine advertisement for “Sponsor Power” belonged to General Telephone and Electronics:

We own Sylvania TV.

We’re worried about some of the shows you see on your sets.

It’s not enough for us just to make good TV sets. We also want to make sure you get...good, tasteful, intelligent shows on them. For a purely selfish reason: we want to keep you from being turned off to TV. Our sponsoring of quality shows like *CBS Playhouse* is not enough. We believe that the shows shouldn’t be hacked to bits by “a few words from the sponsor.” We don’t interrupt any of our specials with commercials.

Now *that* sounds like a responsible sponsor. Most network programmers and advertisers stand guilty as accused by *TV Guide* of “contempt for the American public.” Do as many top network executives, as Triangle intimates, admit their primetime programs are trash? Do as many advertising executives buy time on programs they know are trivia? Generally speaking, it’s those Nielsen Ratings that convince networks and advertisers of what the public wants.

Arthur C. Nielsen’s company, a market-research firm, spends less than fifty percent of its time on Nielsen’s infamous *TV Index*. A low Nielsen rating can axe a network show no matter what the critics say, or how a good percentage of the viewers feel. Nielsen’s *TV Index* scores how many families and what types of viewers are reached by sales pitches at any given minute. There’s no point in Playtex Living Gloves (“Glamorous Housework Gloves for lovelier hands in just nine days”) sponsoring the *Monday Night NFL Game*.

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Nielsen's yardstick is important to sponsors paying a primetime minimum of \$15,000 to \$20,000 a minute; and up to \$140,000 per minute for consistent Nielsen topper, *The Bob Hope Show*. The terror of the Nielsen rating is the constant American terror of quantity over quality. Neither Nielsen nor the sponsor asks how good is the show, or how much do viewers enjoy it. The ratings exploit only: How much can be sold how fast to how many.

Nielsen claims a scientific cross-selection of American homes for his projections. His electronic Audimeter, attached to these "representative" home receivers, reads once a minute the channels viewed in each sample home. Nielsen projects on a premise long used by newspapers, magazines, and radio: for every letter received, pro or con, there are at least ten readers or listeners who haven't bothered to write. Ten letters equal the opinions of one hundred people.

Nielsen's spread of Audimeters connects by telephone cables to computers at the Nielsen home center in Chicago. Sponsors can know immediately how many viewers have seen their commercial.

There is a flaw in Nielsen's ointment, however. Nielsen services businessmen, and businessmen are notorious for their resistance to new ideas.

The TV that hit the US in 1947 is not the TV of 1971. TV, like all else, evolves. Viewers have assimilated the TV set into their total environment. The businessmen have not caught the new pace. Their nineteen-forties' sensibilities have not re-conceptualized TV into its seventies' role. They cannot believe that not all viewers still sit deliberately in front of their TV sets the way families gathered around the tube to set endurance records in 1951.

They cannot understand the changing sculptural quality of the TV set itself in the aftermath of nineteen-sixties psychedelia. How many young viewers turn off the sound, distort the color intensity, and put the picture into a horizontal

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roll while they listen to hard-rock albums on their stereo record players.

Does business really not realize that the American tribe has taken the TV set to its archetypal heart?

We gather around the TV the way we once gathered around the colonial hearth and the western campfire. We gather round and watch re-tellings of the old stories of life and love and death. We sit on the floor and mourn the deaths of Kings and Kennedys: Martin, Jack, and Bobby.

Often, too, we switch on the electronic sculpture of the TV set and more or less ignore it, the way we hang a painting in the livingroom: mostly to glance at it, and to study only occasionally.

* * * *

Little children, as usual, lead the way. The TV set has been part of kids' environment since infancy. They play all morning in front of the twenty-four-inch screen inadvertently hearing sound and seeing picture. They give the set attention only when it interests them. They play before it like children before a hearthfire, hardly conscious of its presence until it is desired like food or warmth, information or entertainment.

Primitive peoples, living close to their archetypes, build shrines in their dwellings for their gods and totems. The TV set is the American shrine. Around it we hear vague reminders of the old myths. TV technology is the latest re-telling of the old archetypal truths we deep down so much like to re-hear.

Re-imagine the TV set.

Don't condemn it because businessmen make it less than it could be. Plenty of good vibes happen in this most encyclopedic and educational of all media. Be critical, but relax into its possibilities.

Think Jung!

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As Good Mother Mary counsels, “Let it be.”
Let it happen.