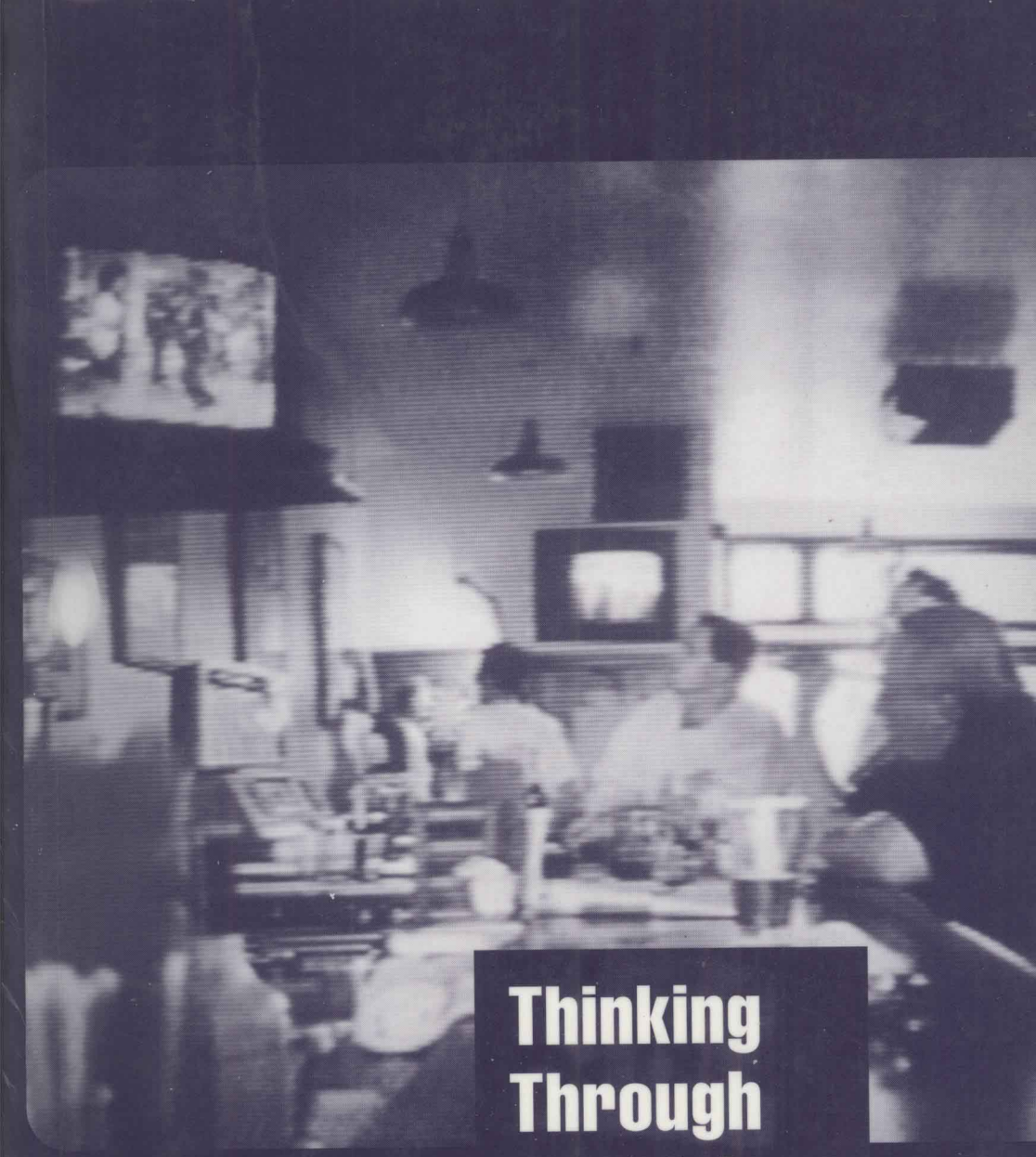

Thinking Through Television

Ron Lembo

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Contents

Introduction: Situating my experience with television

In my studies of television, I have wanted nothing less than to, figuratively, get inside people's heads to determine the mindfulness that emerges from their use of the medium, and, further, to understand its ritual significance within the culture of television use. In doing so, I have wanted to gain a better understanding of the roles that the structural features of television and the broader, meaningful context of everyday play in giving shape, or form, to this mindfulness. I have wanted to know how it is that television viewing actually becomes a ritual practice for people, and what participation in this ritual as opposed to others means for people over the long run.

In research that I conducted with working people over several years, research that included indepth interviewing, watching television with people, the completion of viewer diaries, and more casual conversations with people at work, in the home, and elsewhere, I found that one third of the people included in my study used television in a continuous manner on a day-in and day-out basis. Watching television, they said, served as their primary form of relaxation and enjoyment during the time they spent away from work.

What I have come to call the "continuous" use of television is familiar territory to me. Like the people I watched with and talked to, I, too, grew up with television and, as it was for many of them, the television was on much of the time when I was at home. Watching television or just having it on needed no explanation or justification in my family. The same was true in my changing circle of adolescent friends. In fact, for countless working- and lower-middle-class people who inhabited the many towns and small cities in the New York metropolitan area during the 1960s, watching television was an indispensable part of living everyday life.

I, my family, my friends, and my friends' families – all of us enjoyed watching television. At times, we reveled in the pleasures it provided.

Television gave us Judy Garland and Bob Hope. It gave us the Cartwrights and The Barkleys. It gave us Matt Dillon, Kitty, and Chester. It gave us all the families we came to know so well: among them, the Cleavers, the Nelsons, the Ricardos, and the Reeds. Television gave us Ed Sullivan, who let us see The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, The Who, and The Animals, along with countless other British bands that soon faded into obscurity. It also gave us *American Bandstand* and *Soul Train*, where we first saw Smokey Robinson, The Four Tops, The Temptations, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave, among other singers and performers. Television gave us the *Laugh-In* of Rowan and Martin and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. It gave us Steve Allen and Johnny Carson, and their countless late-night guests. Television gave us Walter Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley, and other big name journalists who, on the way to becoming fixtures in our homes, told us what was going on in America and in the rest of the world, too. Television gave me and my brother and our friends a common currency of sports action and sports heroes: Mickey Mantle and Willie Mays, Joe Namath and Jim Brown, Bill Russell and Jerry West, Muhammad Ali and Howard Cosell, to name just some of the sports figures who made an enduring impression on all of us. And television gave us marches and demonstrations for civil rights, it gave us urban rioting, the Vietnam War, and student protests against the war. I could go on and on in this way, and still my recollection of the role that television played throughout my childhood and early adolescence would not be even close to being exhausted. Hardly. What we saw on television almost automatically became what we talked and argued and agreed with one another about. Television was that significant in my life, and in the lives of others like me who came of age in the 50s, 60s, and early 70s.

Looking back on my childhood, especially the grammar school and junior high years, I can see now that, aside from the shows and stories we followed or the characters we liked and disliked, television viewing was an activity of varied and sometimes ambiguous meaning for me and my family. My earliest memories of television involve the Saturdays and Sundays that I spent with my older sister watching cartoons and various movies that aired throughout the afternoon. I can recall, too, those Friday and Saturday nights when my mother, and, later, my mother and stepfather, would go out for the evening. With some hesitation I am sure, they entrusted my sister with the responsibility of "baby-sitting" me. When her time was not taken up talking on the phone with her friends, it was typical for us to make popcorn, ice-cream floats, a cake, or some other treat and tune into late-night movies such as *The Mummy*, *The Invisible Man*, or *Frankenstein*. Even now, I can still recall the frightening feeling that would

come over me when we watched horror movies such as these. After my sister and brother left the house, it was my mother, my stepfather, and me that constituted our family.

In the simplest sense, watching television was a way for the three of us to be together – to be in the same room, at the same time, and share our experience with one another. The endless succession of programs, most of them formulaic, were just distracting enough to enable our watching together to become a kind of conflict-free, or conflict-neutral, environment. While the conflicts and tensions that perhaps prompted arguments at other times were still there, nevertheless, we looked forward to settling into the comfort zone provided by television. Even if we communicated little of what outsiders, particularly middle-class people, might have regarded as matters of substance, we were together, we did share ideas, and, perhaps most importantly, I think that at the back of our minds we all understood that television brought and kept us together.

Over time, watching television came to be an important way for us to share our lives together. To this day, I can still recall the warmth and comfort – the safety, even – that came with watching *Kojak*, or *Baretta*, *The Rockford Files*, or any one of so many other police, detective, or western shows with my stepfather. Because little else was shared between us, watching these kinds of shows together became a way for me to learn about his life. Oftentimes, Sal's commentary on the settings, the characters, and the situations that they found themselves in, or his comments on the stories and their moral implications, prompted him to recall instances from his own life that somehow resonated with what he saw or heard: his experiences growing up in Brooklyn in the 30s and 40s; the recollections he had of his mother and father and brothers and sisters; his still vivid memories of the war and army life; his post-war experiences; his gambling; or even his casual encounters with the wiseguys and politicians who frequented the New York restaurants and bowling alleys in which he worked. Our roles were reversed when he began to watch sports with me. Since this was my area of expertise, I could offer background information on particular teams or players to help him make better sense of the games or events we were watching. I taught him about some of the differences between college and professional basketball, about why one or another play might have been selected at a particular time by the coach or quarterback in a football game, about what a hitter might be looking for, or why a pitcher pitched a batter the way he did at different points in a baseball game – and, in all of this, I revealed something of myself, too, by recounting my own involvement in the school sports or playground games that were so central to my life at the time but which, for one reason or another, he never seemed to attend or ask about.

Through all of this, my mother had little to say, since she did not ordinarily watch these kinds of programs. When they were on, she chose instead to busy herself in the kitchen. Things changed for her, however, when we tuned in to *The Ed Sullivan Show* or any of the other variety shows regularly featuring the likes of Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, Dean Martin, Bob Hope, and Sammy Davis Jr. During these times, the three of us sat and watched together, and my mother, too, would have stories to tell: about her parents coming from Italy and settling into life in America; about her early years in school; about the basketball and football games she went to with her friends; about the various jobs that she and her brothers and sister had when they were growing up; about her ballroom-dancing days, or about how she learned to cook or be a beautician. Along with mealtime routines and the extended family gatherings that took place on holidays and birthdays, it was our time watching television together that provided me with the sense of what everyday life was like in two of the many Italian–American communities in and around New York City in the years before I was born.

But our television viewing was not always so focused on programs, nor did it necessarily prompt the kinds of recollections that I just described. Not at all. In fact, in our house it was commonplace for me or my stepfather to turn the television on when we came into the house. Either way, it was just "on" much of the time when we were home. (Curiously, my mother did not care to watch television when she was home alone. She preferred instead to take care of her housework, which she did most of the time.) With the television on as a kind of background for us, my stepfather, I, and sometimes my mother, too, might sit and watch for a bit, depending upon what was on and what could hold our attention; but it was just as likely that any one of us would be up and about the house, talking or attending to any number of other things. I was perhaps the most attentive of all three of us, since some of my favorite shows – *Abbott and Costello*, *Soupy Sales*, and *Superman* – were on later in the afternoon. But, even with these shows, watching television for me did not necessarily preclude my doing other things, like homework for one, or categorizing my stamp or rock collection, doing household chores that were assigned to me, or even reading. In our house, television had acquired a kind of permanent presence.

We sometimes recognized, both individually and collectively, that having the television on as much as we did kept us from doing more constructive things with our time. But we also knew that television provided us with so much in terms of the persons, places, and events we could see, or the stories and the character's lives which we could enter so easily, and, because it did, whatever recognition we had of its power often faded rather quickly. None of us was ever at a loss, really, when it came to finding other things to do.

My mother and stepfather had work and bowling and family and friends. I had my hobbies, besides watching television, and I also had my cousins, my friends, and the sports we all played together. All of this was important in defining what was meaningful in our everyday lives. But so, too, was the ritual of watching television. In addition to bringing us together and fostering a sense of togetherness, our continued use of television sometimes diffused or deflected our energies for doing what we ourselves understood to be more worthwhile things. The regularity of my television watching often placed me one step removed from reading, or talking with my mother and stepfather without the television on, or really losing myself in the world of rocks or stamps or model cars and trains. I can see now that all of these things were more imaginatively engaging and, ultimately, more personally rewarding than watching television, but in an emotionally troubled family such as ours, where the initiative for undertaking more productive activities was in one way or another often stifled anyway, the turn to television was a path of least resistance. So, in addition to the worlds outside our own that television gave us access to and allowed us to enter so easily, television viewing also provided a distinctive kind of imaginative space, one that enabled me and my family to avoid asking more revealing questions about ourselves than we ordinarily did.

Outside my home and the world of my family and friends, watching television took on yet another meaning. When talk about television surfaced in my encounters with middle- and upper-middle-class people, be they junior-high or high-school classmates, their parents, or other adults in town, suddenly, my viewing habits became something suspect, something that I felt I needed to hide. Confronted by more educated people, people who had, in society's eyes, made something of themselves, I felt embarrassed by my close and continued contact with television. The fact that neither I nor my parents limited television use or that we did not watch shows that were deemed, again, in society's eyes, to be more informative or educational, and therefore more enlightening, was taken by me at the time to be indicative of a personal deficiency or some sort of character flaw. To speak about my familiarity with television would mark me, I thought, as not only less educated than they were, but, in a more insidious way, as a less capable and competent person than they were, too. Among my family and friends, television viewing was a source of pleasure. It also served as an important way of knowing the world; and, on occasion, it provided me with insights that were unobtainable elsewhere. But in the world of middle-class values and tastes, a world that we inevitably had to enter, television viewing often resonated with numerous hidden injuries of class and ethnicity.

I offer this brief account of my recollections regarding television because I think that how I used television when I was growing up, the role it played in my home, as well as the broader significance it carried in my life, all figured importantly not only in the questions I asked as I researched other people's experiences with television, but also in the answers I formulated and the conclusions I came to as I made sense of the accounts they provided to me. I shared with many of the people that I interviewed some common experiences of class in American culture, and, partly because of that, something of a common vocabulary of television use, too. This was especially true in terms of my formative years at home with my family and out on the streets and in the playgrounds with my friends. Like me, the people I talked to and watched with often lived through the stories that television provided for them. Some of them told stories, too, or had stories told to them around the television, in much the same way that I did. Like me, some of them simply kept the television "on" much of the time when they were home. And, like me, when they entered the world of middle-class values and tastes, they sometimes felt the embarrassment associated with watching too much television, and the defensiveness that came with having to justify it.

But, when these particular people met me, I was a sociologist as well as someone who watched television. Despite the similarities of class and television use, at the time of my research, our lives were, in fact, very different. None of them had undertaken graduate work, let alone at a place like Berkeley, which symbolizes prestige, privilege, and power. The jobs they had were similar to those that people in my family and in the families of friends had when I was growing up, but these jobs were certainly different from the research and teaching positions that I now held. Many aspects of their family situations resonated with what mine used to be, but, at the time of the research, their families were arranged very differently from mine. They had hobbies and spare-time activities that were different from mine, too. And many of these people had chosen or were burdened with very different responsibilities – regarding their families, their friends, their communities, indeed, their futures – than those that I faced at the time of my research. In short, despite affinities of class and, in many cases, race, and, despite the world of television viewing that we had in common, these people had different values and valued different things than I did.

Others that I interviewed lived lives that more closely resembled mine at the time of the research. Many of them had completed college, and some had gone on to do graduate work in various fields, as I was doing at the time. They were engaged in professional work, much as I was. The rigors and requirements of completing my graduate degree made me recognize, as

they did, the value of making productive use of one's time. When these well-educated, professional people spoke of television, they often did so disparagingly. They made it clear that they knew the difference between, on the one hand, PBS programming and "higher quality" network fare, and, on the other hand, the more formulaic, run-of-the-mill programming that constituted the bulk of what commercial television had to offer them over the years. Distinctions such as these had become more familiar to me, too, as my colleagues, friends, and acquaintances were drawn in increasing numbers from the middle and upper middle class. The values and tastes held by my middle-class respondents were becoming my own. While I recognized and, in some cases, shared the hierarchy of tastes they cultivated, or the values and value distinctions they made, because I had grown up differently from them, what it was that led them to these values and tastes remained somewhat of a mystery to me.

I say all of this to make it clear, first of all, that I am a user of television. Television was and still is an integral part of my everyday life. Like other regular users of television, I am situated with the medium in particular ways, due to my class background, my class position, my gender, my ethnicity, my whiteness, and other factors, too. None of this is inconsequential when it comes to what I see (and hear) when I watch television, or how I see television working in other people's lives and in the culture more broadly. Second, my past experiences with television were very much like the present situation (at the time of the research) of some of my respondents, and the television viewer I had become resonated in important ways with the experiences, both past and present, of others. I am not, then, a disinterested investigator of television, of television viewing, or of the people that I interviewed and watched television with. Yet, as an analyst, I have reconstructed the experience that my respondents had with television as something other than my own. This proved to be one of the more objective and enlightening moments of the social research process. In the end, the validity of my account rests on the fact that achieving this kind of objectivity goes hand in hand with my continuing to recognize the inextricable links that exist between my own subjectivity and the subjectivity of the people whose patterns of television use I write about in the pages that follow.

Beyond mine or anyone else's personal account of television use lie the social facts of the viewing culture. Casual observations and prevailing opinions to the contrary, television use is actually a quite complicated cultural activity – both to participate in and to study. Considering the variety of patterns that can comprise television use as a cultural activity, it is the pattern of continuous use, a pattern in which different activities start, stop, and occur simultaneously with television viewing, that is perhaps the most

complicated of all. Partly because of this, but due to other factors as well, the social facts of continuous use have been underrepresented if not neglected or altogether ignored in the scholarly literature pertaining to television. Among other things, this book is my attempt to correct such an oversight, to fill in some of the empirical and theoretical gaps in television studies, and, in the process, to provide an occasion for ordinary, working people to have a say, however indirectly, in expanding the parameters of what academics claim to know about the viewing culture. As I said, the social facts of the viewing culture encompass a wide range of viewing practices – wider, certainly, than this pattern of continuous use – and in this book I will discuss other patterns of use in some detail, and will also account for important similarities and differences among the patterns of use that emerged from my research. So, for example, in addition to meeting Dennis and Brenda, who are "continuous" users of television, you will meet "discrete" users, people like Jeanne, for whom television is merely one of numerous other focused activities that have become a part of her everyday life. You will also be introduced to "undirected' users, people like Steve, for whom the daily use of television involves an almost constant struggle to keep it under control so that it does not interrupt or overrun his desire to get other things done in his life. In the process, the cultural complexities of television use will be made that much clearer. But, again, it is continuous use, including what I will later call the "disengaged" forms of sociality that comprise it, which is at this point most in need of sociological explanation.

Situating television as an object of study

It was not until I encountered critical theory in graduate school that the power of television emerged as an intellectual issue for me. In the work of Adorno (1957; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1972), especially, I was directly confronted with a profound and carefully crafted argument that understood mass culture, including television, as an ideological form of capitalist domination, pure and simple. For a life-long viewer who admittedly enjoys watching commercial television, taking this perspective seriously invited a collision of worlds. I continued to read critical theory, and, even as some of its major weaknesses became clear, including a fetishism of high culture and an ignorance of the complexities of many traditions of American popular culture, including jazz, the analytical power of this perspective stayed with me. The interrogation of my own and others' viewing practices, both past and present, continued, as Adorno, Marcuse (1964), and other critical theorists became some of my most persistent and

challenging critics. Time and again, I posed questions to myself. Among them: What did my television viewing really mean? Was I dominated by television in the ways that they said I was? Or, what did it mean to say that I was not dominated by the ideology, or the standardizing power of television? How was I to know if it was I or the television that was really in control of my viewing? On what basis could I even make such a judgment? Was there a way to understand what television viewing in general meant?

When I first began asking these questions, satisfactory answers were in short supply. Critical theory was *that* challenging to me. But, the more I read, I came to realize that television, and television viewing were much more complicated than either I or critical theorists, had imagined. Certain strands of thought in the work of Dwight Macdonald (1983), Edward Shils (1969), and Gilbert Seldes (1957) – noteworthy American critics of mass culture – resonated with the neo-Marxism of critical theory, but others validated the democratic tendencies at work in television, television viewing, and in the reception of the popular arts more generally. They recognized that there was more than ideological domination at work in mass culture, and this idea figured importantly in my continued reflections on the meaning of television viewing.

I saw, for example, that my own personal life became politicized in small but not insignificant ways in the 1960s and early 1970s, partly as a result of what I saw on television. The carnage and the political schisms of the Vietnam War, the protests that marked the civil rights and anti-war movements, the often-times violent police response to sit-ins, marches, and demonstrations, and the lyrical and rhythmic challenges to normative order found in rock and roll, soul, and rock music – all of this found its way onto television screens and into my life. It provided me, and television viewers like me, with ways of seeing and thinking that were not available to us at home or school, the two places where we spent most of our time. Even though these social conflicts and tensions were often depicted in ways that muted, to say the least, their political force, nevertheless, they were there, on television, something that authorities and media gatekeepers would have preferred to not have happen.

Furthermore, the writing, acting, and directing in a wide range of entertainment programs enabled critical insights to emerge regarding a variety of contemporary issues. The stories and characters presented on shows such as *Eastside/Westside*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Outer Limits*, *All In The Family*, among others, often supplied fresh perspectives on familiar things, or provided depictions of worlds that were altogether different from our own. I mention all of this simply to say that, when it came to television viewing, to *my* television viewing, there was much more than ideological

domination at work. Curiously, none of this figured importantly, if at all, in the work of critical theory.

Over the years I spent toiling away in graduate school, I became more deeply involved in studying what it means to watch television. I soon came to realize that nothing less was at issue in my studies than an intellectual understanding of the fate of people's ability to think for themselves and to act on their own terms in a culture that was dominated by large corporations which increasingly controlled the production and distribution of ideas and images not only on television, but on radio, in films, and in newspapers and magazines, too. As my studies progressed, discourses regarding television's power continued to be set off against many of the more practical claims to truth regarding the meaning of viewing that emerged from my own and others' everyday experience with television. A disjuncture took shape in my thinking with regard to power, one that was not going to be dissolved, displaced, or bridged all that easily.

Enter cultural studies, where elaborating on what was at stake in this disjuncture was in my mind one of the strategic purposes that propelled the work of Hall (1975, 1980; Hall et al. 1980), Hoggart (1966), McRobbie (1991), Morley (1986, 1980), Thompson (1966), Williams (1983, 1982, 1974), Willis (1978, 1977a), and others. Despite the newfound concreteness afforded me by notions such as encoding and decoding, discourse and text, the act of reading, dominant, oppositional, and negotiated interpretations, practice, and so on, I found that much of the cultural studies' work on television remained, in a peculiar sort of way, abstract. It worked one step removed from what constituted my practical realities of television use. This was especially true when it came to my encounters with poststructuralist accounts of power and resistance and theories of postmodernity. As my readings expanded to include the work of Deleuze (1983; Deleuze and Parnet, 1987), Foucault (1980, 1970), Lacan (1977, 1968), among others, I quickly became aware of subtleties regarding the workings of power and complexities in accounting for subjectivity that complicated my thinking about television use. In the place of ideological domination, I now saw multiple discourses working simultaneously or at cross-purposes, even, to constitute the power of television. Similarly, in place of naïve notions of consciousness and action, I saw multiple identities or subject positions that, like discourses, worked simultaneously and at cross-purposes to constitute resistance to power.

Nevertheless, even with all these sophisticated notions regarding the multiplicity of discourses and subject positions, the person who used television remained ambiguous to me. Not only that, but the very attempts by poststructuralists to clarify the socially constructed nature of subjectivity