

# **IMAGES OF VICTORY, WORDS OF DEFEAT**

**Cultural Criticism Meets The Television  
Networks**

**A SENIOR HONORS THESIS**

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# 1 THE TV MADE ME DO IT

"Americans look askance at television, but they look at it nonetheless."  
--David Marc, *Demographic Vistas*

## THE POWER OF TELEVISION

I have a friend--a writer, like me--who loves to watch television. Her set, a battered but sturdy black-and-white box, perches atop the bookshelf over her bed. On Monday, Wednesday, and Friday she wakes up with a fuzzy picture of Phil Donahue as he scurries around his studio, microphone extended. In the afternoons, if her schedule permits, she likes to catch a few episodes of her favorite soap opera, "Guiding Light." Watching television is a religion with her, and her devotion to certain prime time shows runs deep. She feels especially protective of "St. Elsewhere," "Wiseguy," and "Knots Landing," although she watches numerous others. Some shows she classifies as "entertainment," some border on or epitomize television artistic genius.

My friend's attraction to television may be a more vivid example of television's seductive effects than we normally encounter, but we all can understand and identify with her loyalties. My own apartment, for instance, contains three televisions--almost one per room. Like other addicts, I tend to equate television with release. We watch television because it gives us a sense of release from the day's pressures, a time when we can forget about ourselves and become enveloped by national events on the news or lose ourselves in the troubles and hopes of a fictional family on "Eight Is Enough." We can become absorbed with the romance of "Moonlighting," placing bets on the likelihood that Maddie and David will answer our prayers and finally hook up. Or, sometimes, we can just turn on the television at random and hope to see something interesting.

A lot of people--parents' groups and media "watchdog" groups--complain about the violence and sexual conduct they see incorporated into many television shows. They worry that it influences children and young adults in adverse ways, giving them a

distorted view of life, and encouraging them to support that distorted view and the rewards it advertises. These objections are ironic, I think, given the profound soothing quality of watching television. We don't watch television to get charged up, we watch to become relaxed. A continual flow of images and stories parades across the screen twenty-four hours a day, and comforts the viewer in some unfathomable way: an evening news program dissolves into a half-hour feature-story program, which melts into a situation comedy, which becomes a drama, which reverts back into a late-night news program--and so on.

What we remember about watching television is the stories, not the violence. But the media watchdog groups should not be dismissed, because they point out an essential, if overlooked, element of television: its tremendous addictive potential. These groups may focus on specific trends, but their unspoken concern is with television's ability to draw millions of people to watch. We may tune into a certain program in order to tune out the normal hardships of our lives, but television may be educating us in ways we don't realize.

### **THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT!**

It would seem that we have drawn two extreme points on the opinion spectrum of television: according to my friend, television entertains, but has no lasting effects on her life; the watchdog groups would have us take note of television's very real, largely negative influences. Could we posit some other, less staunch views which could dispel some of the mystery and confusion surrounding this renegade medium? For the moment, we can locate four typical roles of television: to entertain, to educate, to involve the viewer, and to produce profit for industry professionals.

### **Making Believe**

Most people would agree that a chief goal of television is to entertain, even if few people can agree on exactly which shows achieve that goal. How does television entertain? First of all, television programs entertain by providing a variety of genres--situation comedy, drama, action/adventure, talk/interview, and variety, to name a few--that depict popular stories of success. The characters and their lives--the actual narratives--draw us into the television world. But these diverse narratives make up only one element of the entertainment process. A group of non-narrative techniques, such as the soundtrack, filming methods, and flow, are crucial in drawing the viewer into the story.

Earlier I mentioned television's soothing quality, which is brought about by the continual flow of images and sounds across the screen and through the speakers. This may seem like an obvious component of television, but we should be careful not to overlook its significance. We might ask the question: which entertains, or affects, us more--the narratives on television, or the reassurance we have in knowing that those stories are available to us twenty-four hours a day? We can depend on television to maintain the flow, a characteristic unequaled by any other communication medium.

There are two aspects to this flow--a visual succession of images, and a strong aural companion. Visual flow exists in three layered levels, and the soundtrack (dialogue, theme music, and laugh tracks) is usually subordinate to the visual. On the broadest level, we watch the flow from program to program. Within that succession is a flow from program scenes to commercials and back to program scenes. On the most minute level, images flow or proceed in actual camera shots. For an example, we can turn to a short "flow" description of "The CBS Evening News with Dan Rather."

On the highest level of flow, we may turn on "The CBS Evening News with Dan Rather" and then watch "Jeopardy!" and "Kate & Allie" before turning off the set. Next we find the level from scene to scene: Rather discusses the continued military struggle between Palestinians living in Israel and the Israeli armed forces, goes on to

discuss a new development in A.I.D.S. research, then breaks for three or four commercials, and returns with three more stories. During Rather's coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian struggle, we begin with a shot of Rather, perhaps with a box inset to the upper left which shows films of shooting. The scene cuts to a film of the shooting, while we listen to either a reporter in Israel explaining new developments or we continue to hear Rather's version of the events. Then perhaps there is a cut to another film of shooting, or a return to Rather, who finishes the story and then launches into the A.I.D.S. piece. Virtually every story fits these conventions, as do the formats of many fictional programs. This flow of images, scenes, and programs (interrupted periodically by commercials) never ends, and never varies. We must recognize that the potential of flow itself to entertain, or draw in, the viewer--also known as *interpellation*--is just as important as the narrative itself.

The soundtrack also plays a major role in interpellating, or getting the attention of, the viewer watching a specific program. If I watch a situation comedy like "Kate & Allie," the laughter of the studio audience (or the laugh track, if the show is taped without an audience) signals amusing lines. It points me to a remark which should entertain me, especially if I'm only listening to the program and not watching it. In fact, according to some television critics, the laugh track actually precedes the humorous remark, so that we make sure to watch the program in time to "see" the humor.<sup>1</sup>

Music tracks on television shows also interpellate the viewer/listener. In the law drama "L.A. Law," variations of the theme song (which directs the opening credits) are played inbetween scenes to let me, as a listener, know when the scene is over. Depending on the beat and tone, I can predict, to some extent, whether the upcoming scene will be humorous or serious. In some crime dramas, as in many movies, music also foreshadows,

<sup>1</sup> Rick Altman, "Television/Sound," *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 39-54).

or warns, the audience that, within a particular scene, something is about to happen. Both visual and aural flow play important roles in drawing the audience into the story by signalling changes and constantly directing our attention through the narrative.

Perhaps the most conspicuous component in the interpellation process comes in the form of camera work. As a viewing audience, we have become used to a wide range of filming techniques; they have become "natural," or invisible, for us because of our extensive exposure to them, but it's important to notice the artificial nature of many filming methods. The most widely recognized rules (and therefore the most "natural" or invisible to the viewer) include the shot-reverse shot, the dissolve, the imaginary 180-degree filming line (the line behind which the action is filmed--usually where the stage seems to end), and the common practice by actors and actresses to avoid looking directly at the camera (unless, like Johnny Carson or David Letterman, the "actor" is addressing the viewing audience). Together these filming practices are designed to create a realistic story, as well as a "natural" position for the viewer.

The shot-reverse shot, in which the camera first focuses on the actor speaking, then on what or whom the actor is addressing, and then back on the actor, illustrates this intent of trying to create a "natural" position for the viewer best. The viewer gets to watch the action from two perspectives--first from one character's perspective, and then from the position of the character that the first one was addressing. When Alex Keaton speaks to his brother Andrew on "Family Ties," the camera first shows Alex speaking (from Andrew's perspective), and then focuses on Andrew (Alex's perspective). This construction of the filming (borrowed from film practices), enables the viewer to maintain an omniscient perspective of the story, because s/he watches the action from every character's viewpoint.

The dissolve from one scene to another, which has come to mean flashback or memory, is another "natural" convention of filming which furthers our appreciation of the story. In situation comedies, the 180-degree line is a hard and fast rule. We always see

the same three walls of the room in which the action takes place; the fourth--presumably behind the camera--is never shown. Of course, we know that the studio audience is sitting where the fourth wall should be, but we are supposed to ignore the audiences as the actors do, so the nonexistent fourth wall, behind the 180-degree line, becomes a silent tool to promote the realism of the show. The audience accepts the artificial positioning of the camera and the conspicuous audience laughter both by ignoring any conflict between the two, and by accepting the realism which the medium attempts to construct.

Our discussion of the ways in which television entertains us seems to have little to do with the stories themselves, but the process of interpellation--of creating a comfortable, "natural" position for the audience--includes far more elements than merely telling a story. The story of "Dallas" seems to be our reason for watching it every week, but, in fact, the tale of J.R. and Bobby in every episode is told through a set of artificial, but naturalized, conventions which further the entertainment.

### **Not Necessarily the News**

The second major role of television, according to the network newscasters and public television station buffs, is to educate. But perhaps our typical definition of "education" should be expanded to include the element of entertainment that we thought we left behind above. The news programs--from "straight" news programs (like Dan Rather's newscast) to infectious interview shows like "Donahue"--all entertain us while providing information. Dan Rather dutifully covers the "important" news of the day every Monday through Friday, making us feel better informed about global and national events by giving us a concrete basis for our experiences. He appears objective, serious, and intelligent, and he doesn't seem to cloud the truth with partisan concerns. However pessimistic the events, we feel better for having watched the newscast. "Donahue," though in a different format, has a similar effect. Phil isn't afraid to criticize his panelists or the audience if he feels that they aren't seeing the "whole" problem, and he knows when to praise people, too. When the

program is over, not one viewpoint has been overlooked. Both reporters educate the viewing audience, but the process of learning can also entertain us.

In addition to network news programs like Rather's "CBS Evening News" and "Donahue," public television station programs also give us a feeling of objectivity and fulfillment that can be entertaining. When we turn to Channel 13, we know that our deepest concerns will be rewarded with insightful documentaries and tough, quality dramas. We watch public television to learn things about ourselves and the world around us that the networks seem to ignore or take for granted.

Newscasters and public television station buffs try to emphasize that the process of learning through television is limited to objective newscasts and "quality programming," but their standard for judgment, how ever well-intentioned, is a false one. As we've already seen, watching any run-of-the-mill sitcom requires our being able to understand an unspoken system of technical conventions such as filming techniques and expectations of narrative and visual flow progression. As it turns out, watching network newscasts and public television programming also requires using a a similar system of understanding--just try watching any two consecutive newscasts on the same weeknight; you'll find that they rarely consider the same topics important. The implicit definition of what constitutes an "important" issue changes from broadcast to broadcast, because values differ, but you have no problem understanding those differences as a result of your knowledge of cultural priorities.

For the moment, we need to realize that learning, or education, comes in more than one form on television. It is not limited only to newscasts and other forms of factual reporting; we also learn from the ficitonal stories behind many light-hearted sitcoms. News and documentaries entertain us in ways similar to dramas and adventure shows, so it shouldn't surprise us that sitcoms and variety shows may educate us just as Dan Rather and Phil Donahue do, though we may not normally see television in that light.



### Having It Your Way

The connection between audience support for a television show and industry producers, the third goal of television, is highly unique; no other medium promotes such a strong dialogue between the creators and the consumers, or audience--for several important reasons. As we all know, the primary motive for broadcasting a television show--whether on a network or public television station--is to make a profit. It makes sense, then, to create a favorable environment for discussion between the viewer and the producer in order to learn as quickly as possible what shows will be the most profitable. One example of this dialogue is the Nielsen ratings system. The Nielsen ratings of programs are actual boxes on television sets throughout the country that keep track of which shows are watched by each member of the household. Every time we turn on the television set, we make a choice about programming, and that choice is highly respected--even sacred--according to many industry professionals.

In addition, the growth of the "rerun" business, broadcasting reruns of cancelled shows, makes a discussion between the producers who buy syndications of cancelled shows and the people likely to watch them profitable. Television is unique in its philosophy of continuous repetition--films normally only go through one series of releases.<sup>2</sup> Broadcasting reruns provides another, perhaps little-known form of substantial profit, so producers pay attention to suggestions by viewers.

But producers also take note of physical, tangible audience support for particular shows. The soap opera business highlights this unique more direct form of interaction. Changes in storylines are as much a result of the active communication between show producers and the television audience as they are the creations of staff writers. *Soap Opera Digest*, the primary publication for soap opera buffs, provides plot

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the advent of the VCR makes this type of release somewhat obsolete, and marketing strategies increasingly recognize this new phenomenon.

updates, actor/actress profiles, offscreen romances, and welcomes letters by viewers that offer concrete criticism of particular shows.

Another striking example of the audience's power to influence programming schedules comes from a strong campaign to save "Spencer for Hire," a detective drama. In 1987, whole towns (especially suburbs of Boston, where the show is filmed) mobilized and signed petitions to save the show from cancellation. The actors also went on extensive publicity road trips and held "Spencer for Hire" rallies. It worked--the show stayed for another season. A similar process saved the critically acclaimed hospital drama "St. Elsewhere."

Ultimately, not only do television programs interpellate viewers through popular storylines and widely recognized filming conventions, but the industry itself draws people to watch by catering as often as possible to audience programming demands. These realizations should dispel the notion that watching television is a passive experience; likewise, the energy that goes into understanding the priorities of the viewing audience also makes the process of interaction between viewer and producer extremely active, even chaotic.

### **The Profit Motive**

The overarching goal of television industry executives is, of course, to make money--unbelievable amounts of money. The process of yielding profit in television begins with the planning of the fall season round-up, which in turn begins with extensive demographic surveys. After accepting a possible script for a show, like the risky show "The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd," producers conduct indepth analyses of possible audiences, an arduous and costly process that makes an often undependable prediction, but which producers still see as an essential starting point. If a show does not garner a sizable chunk of audience share points in the test run, it will never make the cut to fall or mid-season round-up.

After the show makes its debut, producers use the Nielsen ratings to track audience reactions and understand, in as much detail as possible, how attractive each show is to its respective audience. Even "The Cosby Show," the undisputed leader in the weekly ratings war, is susceptible to critical scrutiny. When it loses an audience share--yet still maintains a commanding lead over the second-place show--there is cause for alarm, and the death bell begins to toll behind production doors. *TV Guide* painstakingly track the Nielsen ratings of each top show, as in this brief account of "The Cosby Show" standing in early 1988, halfway through the season:

"Cosby" averaged a 28.0 rating and 45 share through this season's first 16 weeks, down 18 per cent from the 34.1/53 average it held at the same time last year (translating to an average drop of around five million homes). This 18-per-cent fall is the most pronounced of any of last season's Top 10 shows...Also, "Cosby" garnered better than 50 per cent of the viewing audience just twice in the first 16 weeks, compared with last season when it *missed* that mark only two times over the same span. Nothing can fully account for the degree of "Cosby"'s decline. And while it can't be said that "Cosby" is in trouble, the signs point to the possibility that "The Cosby Show" has passed its peak.<sup>3</sup>

Television producers have a right to be so concerned about the success of the shows they finance. Promoting a television program can mean huge profits--the highest in the entertainment industry--or tremendous losses. As an example, note the advertising fees for "The Cosby Show." As the most popular show, it commands between \$400,000 and \$450,000 for each 30-second spot, for a total advertising revenue of about \$2,550,000 per episode.<sup>4</sup> Problems with the drive for profit arise, however, because an eye on profit, rather than education or entertainment, seems to make producers more narrow-minded about which scripts they will consider for production. They see a show working, and, rather than go on to try a completely new formula, they instead try to replicate the formula of the profitable one, a phenomenon which may lead to poor quality in the sense that fewer and fewer creative risks are taken.

<sup>3</sup>*TV Guide*, (---: Triangle Publications, January 23 1988) A-22.

<sup>4</sup>*Parade Magazine*. (Pittsburgh: Gannett, September 27, 1987) 9.

We have tried to outline briefly what we could consider some widely recognized goals of television. Within those definitions of entertainment and education, profit and dialogue, we have also tried to expand our understanding of how each category can influence and become part of the others. In the next chapter, we will broaden that understanding even further, as we look at some revolutionary views on the goals of television that have developed in the past twenty years.

## 2 TELEVISION AND YOU: THE DYNAMIC DUO?

"We should not mistake an oral medium for an illiterate one."  
--John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*

We have yet to solve, once and for all, the mystery of television. So far, though, we have been able to describe four typical replies to the question, "What is the role of television?" Network producers claim that television's primary purpose is to make money; viewers say that it should entertain; public television buffs and newscasters favor its educational potential; and some industry executives and active viewers like to see it as a programming dialogue designed to please the audience. To some extent, television accomplishes each of these varied goals.

But another group of critics--the cultural critics--puts a radically different spin on the place of television in American life. For about twenty years, this growing group of scholars and commentators has focused its efforts on understanding the medium using theoretical models (such as semiotics, cultural criticism, and film theory) to probe our perception of television in unexpected, revolutionary ways. And no one is better fit to understand television's addictive powers or scrutinize its influences than these cultural critics, who were children of television, and have since become "creatures" of it, organizing their habits to fit particularly attractive programming schedules.

In their musings, they try to step back from television's hypnotic pull in order to analyze the components of television--from the first dollar invested to the unbelievable profit sheets (its economic aspect), from television's intellectual moments to its array of baffling advertisements (its narrative aspect), and from the camera's eye to the final screen image (its technical aspect)--as diverse parts of the same process in a medium whose ultimate responsibility has little to do, they think, with the categories we outlined in chapter one. According to these cultural critics, television's ultimate role is to portray and

reflect underlying cultural values. They claim that the commonly recognized goals--profit, entertainment, education, and involvement--have relevance only within a cultural context: for example, television teaches the "inherent" value of widely held cultural beliefs, and entertains by poking fun at beliefs not consistent with dominant ones. Every line of dialogue, every joke, every camera position--all are grounded in a strong system of shared cultural values, outside of which none of the news events, sitcoms, or advertisements would have any significance.

### A DIFFERENT TYPE OF POWER

Cultural critics grant television more power to affect our view of the world than traditional critics because they focus on a study of the *ideologies*, or systems of cultural belief, that a particular show supports or promotes. Even a fairly uncreative, and even boring, show like "Barnaby Jones," a late 1970s detective show, supports a very specific perspective. Barnaby, a grandfatherly detective, is surrounded by luxury and other temptations of youth, but he holds firmly to his belief in the logic and patience that will yield correct solutions. Because he is the hero, his values are held up as the dominant ideology. Barnaby's Jebediah can never solve the mysteries--he's far too rash and impulsive. And his secretary is only good for talking phone calls, making coffee, and getting the car in time to drive Barnaby to safety.

For cultural critics, what becomes important in analysis of "Barnaby Jones" is not the individual characters, or the way the plot develops, but the beliefs that the characters represent. When Jebediah cannot solve a case, and Barnaby calmly and correctly outlines for Jebediah, and the television audience, *why*, the show is promoting trust in the judgment of older people in society, while rejecting the urgency of youth, which results in faulty judgments, and even danger. Barnaby's secretary also supports this nostalgic, male-centered ideology. Through her fairly passive activities of answering phones and doing some negligible background research, she promotes, or advertises, a

certain role for women. What the viewing audience may see as good judgment on her part may instead be a complacency, or willingness, to leave the "important" stuff to Barnaby, the show's (and society's) real hero. Although she is in a professional situation--ostensibly a positive career move--in fact, she has few responsibilities outside of some typical domestic chores.

This short sketch of a cultural analysis of "Barnaby Jones" demonstrates the shift in priorities of cultural critics. How the characters act (the actual quality of the performance), the complexity of the plot, and the solution to the mystery--normal concerns of the typical television critic--bear little or no relevance in a cultural analysis. A different set of standards, like the cultural role of each character, and the success of her or his judgment, is useful, and can tell us more about how television programs affect us. Whereas a typical criticism of a television program scrutinizes the writers, actors, and directors, the cultural criticism focuses on the culture within the program and how that relates to the culture of the viewer. As another, more detailed example, follow this brief cultural history of television, as developed by the late Raymond Williams, a pioneering British cultural critic.

### THE BIRTH OF A NEW TECHNOLOGY

According to Williams in his book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*<sup>5</sup>, the areas of research that would make television possible entered the initial phase of competitive study in the late 1880s. Two facts characterized this pre-historic phase: people in different disciplines were beginning to envision the technology that eventually would become television, but the research in these diverse fields was not advanced enough to highlight connections among the different areas. No one yet was working to bring together these

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. (New York: Schocken, 1975).

varied disciplines into concerted television research, although different researchers had begun to create a workable notion of the new technology.

In the mid-1920s research became focused enough to make the invention of television a social issue, and inventors embarked on a twenty-year struggle to legitimize financial and technical investment in the new medium. The key selling point of this technology (and all other communication technologies), says Williams, involved convincing people that television would provide a realistic response in technological form to specific, pertinent social needs. In other words, television was cast as a *technological* solution to a *cultural* problem. Specifically, television would provide news in a way that would suit an increasingly mobile society better than the print news media.

Williams traces the complex cultural birth of television within the broad framework of a technologically changing society. He points out that television's function was not limited to relaying news, although a news service would be the targeted format. Mobility in a 1940s American society meant that the family, the sacred organizational unit of American life, was being broken up: the car, along with other forms of public transportation, made commuting to urban areas a habit for many people (primarily men), and made work days significantly longer. In this changing society, television was to take the role of preserving the all-important status of the family by providing news in such a way that a strong sense of contact with other people was maintained. In other words, television created the illusion that the family was still intact.

In some ways, television was tailor-made for this purpose. Because it is a visual medium, viewers are more likely to identify with a story being told on television than if they read the account, or even hear it over the radio. As an analogy, consider reading an article about the famine in Ethiopia in *TIME*. If the article is accompanied by color--or even black and white--photographs, the chances for garnering a sympathetic reaction from the reader increase, because you are understanding the piece in two different ways. Your mind, or imagination, is stimulated in that you read the printed letters and attach some



meaning to them, while the visual image gives the written information a concrete, realistic force because you actually see photographs.

A similar type of identification is characteristic of television. Not only do pictures, or visual images, accompany the oral information, but they also are moving--making our understanding even more complete because they reproduce life in such a realistic way. The three components of television in the 1940s--sound, visual imagery, and movement--made television news stories, and, later, entertainment programs, appear more realistic because together they heightened the identification of the viewer with the story being told. In addition, people preferred having an inferior technology in their homes over traveling to a theater to be exposed to a better technology because of its immediacy. If an implicit concern of executives in the 1940s was to maintain the sanctity of the family, television could fulfill this goal far more easily than any other medium--print or visual.

Of course, the identification process was not picture-perfect. Television did not (and perhaps could not) exactly meet the need for keeping the audience informed about *community* events. (The community, or hometown, was an extension of the family, and therefore also in need of an unquestionably positive image.) While the visual images compelled viewers to watch because of their identification effects, the information conveyed was national in nature; the country had become the community. Television from its inception has ridden this fence of contradiction: while it filled some psychological gap in an increasing mobile society and maintained the loyalty to home and family, it also promoted a national loyalty that displaced the family and the small-town community. This contradictory goal has changed little in forty years.

Williams's analysis of television does not focus solely or even primarily on a critique of the shows. He works outside of the traditional critical framework, offering instead a new perspective on the role of this technology within an existing system of cultural values. He compares the radio broadcasting system to the growth of television, he discusses the

quality of television technology (and comes to the conclusion that, even now, television is an inferior visual medium when compared to film), and he grounds his survey of the uses of television in an account of its social purposes. He focuses on the effects of the technology on the broad social structure, not on its influence among industry executives.

### MOVING TO A NEW CRITICAL POSITION

Since the 1970s, critics have tried to repeat the shift that Williams's book effected, continuously locating discussion of the narrative, economic, and technical components of television in a cultural context. A hallmark concern of this new type of analysis, especially with regard to the stories of television programs, involves moving from a study of the manifest meanings of shows to a long hard look at their latent meanings. The manifest message of "Barnaby Jones" might be, for example, that crime doesn't pay. This is surface meaning of the show. However, as I described earlier, the latent meaning of "Barnaby Jones" lies in its nostalgic faith in the judgment of older people and its traditional view of women--an interpretation which has broader significance for the viewer than "crime doesn't pay." The program's philosophy does not limit its trust in Barnaby to crime mysteries; instead, we, as viewers, are urged to yield to Barnaby's values in every situation. After all, if he can successfully track down a criminal, then his judgment should hold up in non-professional situations also. In this respect, if the show is successful, we are not only interpellated into the story, but, more importantly, we will be drawn into looking at life from Barnaby's perspective.

An exploration of the latent (or unspoken) cultural values of "Cagney and Lacey" might be helpful. "Cagney and Lacey" is also a detective show, but the main characters are women. On the manifest level, the show promotes the notion of women in powerful professional situations--Cagney is a police lieutenant. Sharon Gless, the actress who plays Cagney, has received more than one Emmy award for her performance. But does the show in fact give us a positive impression of female detectives? A closer look at

the unspoken values that the show promotes may give us a better, though perhaps disheartening, answer. For example, throughout much of the hour-long program, Cagney and Lacey are filmed discussing their problems (some relevant to the case they happen to be investigating, others more personal) in the women's locker room. In these locker room/lavatory scenes, each character speaks to her partner while looking into the mirror--fixing make-up, drying eyes, or just contemplating a dilemma.

These filming techniques send a different message than the overt philosophy of the program. Specifically, these visual messages imply that these women are emotional and inept, and often concerned about the wrong things. Outside the bathroom, their responsibilities as police officers are continually questioned by Cagney's supervisor and by the male officers in the precinct. We must wonder as viewers which message "speaks" more clearly and more forcefully: the positive position of these women as police officers, or their stereotypical behavior. A cultural analysis of "Cagney and Lacey" attempts to highlight these discrepancies in order to better understand the various ways in which a specific program may be influencing our own value systems.

We can see evidence of this newfound concern for latent values over manifest ones in Raymond Williams's survey of television. His assertion that television was designed to save the family is a conclusion about the unspoken cultural need for television; no inventors or promoters sold the idea of television by explaining that the family was being threatened, and that, furthermore, television was the ideal solution to the problem. Williams extracts his conclusion--the latent motive for investing in television--from the manifest reality of its birth.

In the upcoming chapters, we will examine in detail the latent values of a few top-rated television shows. We will ask some unexpected questions of "Family Ties" and "The Cosby Show" to help give us new critical perspectives on these most successful programs. We will ask questions like: What does it mean when a sitcom about a wealthy black family tops the ratings? Or: What does it mean when a sitcom that centers on the

escapades of a conservative, chauvinistic young man is second in line? Some questions may be difficult for us to ask ourselves, and even harder to answer because of our loyalties to our television habits. After all, no one wants to be criticized for enjoying these shows--nor is that the intention of a cultural analysis. By asking questions, we don't automatically indict our own belief systems, but we do gain perspective in understanding why we react to television the way we do.

### 3 A COMEDY OF ERROR

*"Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female."*  
 --John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

#### THE NEW AND IMPROVED SITCOM

Perhaps the most fundamental, and even unchangeable, American ideology is our belief in progress. Everyday millions of us get up hoping to accomplish more than we did the day before. Without progress, we would not have the American Dream, which promises equal opportunities of wealth to all people, or the mythology of the frontier--charting unfamiliar forests and mountains in the hopes of a better life.

How television fits into this notion of progress is more complex than some people would think. Watching television seems to be a passive, repetitive process that saps our energy and even displaces the need to do other things. But, on the other hand, every component of television pays homage to progress: the continual flow of images and sounds; the stories of the programs; the unbelievable rate at which new shows are born and others die; the advertisements that urge us to buy more and new, improved products; the drive for profit which greedily asks for even better and quicker revenues--together all of these components reinforce the "inherent goodness" of progress. In this chapter, we will inspect the difficult role of television in its support and denial of progress, through a detailed analysis of a highly successful sitcom, "Family Ties." Perhaps then we will understand more fully how television interpellates us into the ideology of progress.

Time and again we have discussed television's power: its immediacy and the continuous flow of images grants television a seductive power far greater than that of other media. And although at first glance you may not think of a sitcom as a particularly powerful form of entertainment, in fact the many elements that make up a sitcom mold it into a very persuasive tool. What elements are involved? Two major categories exist: structural

elements, and the cultural elements that provide the basis for understanding the structure. There are two types of structural elements: genre characteristics (dialogue humor, slapstick/vaudeville humor, an obvious "family" situation, and the half-hour, resolution-oriented narrative format), and staging and filming techniques (camera positioning, character positioning on the "stage," and laugh tracks).

A cultural study of the structural, or formal, characteristics has very different priorities. Not only does a cultural, or ideological, analysis look at the roles of the two major structures from a different perspective, but it also adds several other avenues of analysis. We can look at the role of each character, the "family," and the sitcom itself as they fit into the broader cultural system in which we view the program. In addition, we can study how the writers of the sitcom set up gender, race, and social class distinctions, both in terms of how they are scripted into the show (the initial presentation), and, more importantly, how characters react to the differences.

### The Scaffolding

To help illustrate some structural concepts, read through the following transcription of a "Family Ties" episode. In the first scene, Alex Keaton (Michael J. Fox) walks in on his brother Andrew (Brian Bonsall), who is playing in the living room with his toys. The scene is broken up by shots, or changes in camera focus.

#### SHOT ONE

*Elyse and Steven sacked out on couch among a bunch of stuffed animals, Andrew is playing in front/right on the floor, laughs from the audience*

#### SHOT TWO

*cut to Alex entering in background, Andy front/left*

Alex        Hey--

#### SHOT THREE

Andy        Shush, they need their rest <laughs>

*pan to Andy and Alex looking at their parents*

#### SHOT FOUR

Alex        They're adorable when they're asleep <laughs>

#### SHOT FIVE

Andy        They're like little angels <Alex laughs>

#### SHOT SIX

*moving to crouch in front of Andy's toys*

Alex        Hey, what's all this?

## SHOT SEVEN

cut back to Andy and Alex front/right

Andy I'm playing garage. Wanna play?

Alex Yeah, sure. *kneels*

Hey, wait a minute. *Pause.* <laughs>

## SHOT EIGHT

cut to close up of Alex holding Barbie by the hair

What's she doing here?

## SHOT NINE

cut to Andy looking at Alex (off screen). Barbie far right, held by the hair

Andy That's Barbie. She owns the garage. <laughs> *Pause.*

This brief opening scene catalogues most of the structural elements involved in producing the narrative and filming the program. We can locate *dialogue humor* from the very start, in shot 3, right through to the excerpt; we know that they are supposed to be humorous because the laugh track highlights each statement. The *family situation* of the program is literally a family--the Keaton household. Other sitcoms depend on extended ("Amen") or surrogate ("WKRP in Cincinnati") families for the network of relationships on which the program is based. Finally, the implicit *topic* of the half-hour episode, proper roles for women, is introduced by shot 9.

There is little slapstick or *vaudeville humor* in "Family Ties"; it usually relies on Alex's sarcasm for its humorous effect. Two shows that do use it, though, are "Moonlighting" and "Perfect Strangers," where the characters pull inadvertent physical pranks on one another. In one episode of "Moonlighting," for example, the typical car chase takes a detour through a warehouse packed full of mattresses, and the sequence is turned into a bizarre parody of both the car chase and circus trampoline acts--an ingenious bit of slapstick incorporated into the narrative of the program.

The *filming and staging techniques* also become obvious when we look closely at the sequence of shots in "Family Ties." The *camera positioning* gives the television audience two perspectives from which to view the action. The opening shot seems to be an indifferent, unattached appraisal of the Keaton living room (note, though, that the shot loses its indifference and becomes a positive comment with the insertion of the laugh track); it anchors the viewer, giving her or him a visual overview of the setting in

which the action will take place. Shot two continues this frontal, spectator-like position. With shot three, though, the camera moves in closer, focusing specifically and solely on the actions of Alex and Andy, and therefore cutting out--literally and metaphorically--their parents.

This move marks a very important shift, because the camera has made a judgment. The viewer is visually drawn into seeing the action from Alex and Andy's perspective. This visual technique of interpellation compares very closely to our analysis of "Barnaby Jones," which pointed out how the show urges the viewer to identify not only with the show itself, but with Barnaby's point of view. On the one hand, the viewer gets the feeling of being above or outside of the action of the program, but, on the other hand, the viewer sees very specific perspectives on the action, and therefore must become involved with it in some way to keep believing in the story, as the camera chooses to frame events and conversation in very particular ways. (Again, see Appendix for further illustrations of camera positioning.)<sup>6</sup>

*Character positioning* on the stage, although in theory a separate way of organizing the action, usually works in concert with camera techniques. If a character has less importance in the resolution of the conflict, then she or he usually occupies a peripheral place on stage. For example, later in scene one, when everyone is in the living room, in one of the overview camera shots, the stage set up looks like this, left to right: Steven, Nick, Mallory, Elyse, Aunt Rosemary (who has come to visit), and Alex (Andy has left the room). The characters are placed left to right in their relative positions of power in the family, with Steven holding the least power and Alex the most. During subsequent shots, the stationary camera focuses on Alex, Rosemary, and Elyse; the family members/characters with less power must actually walk into the frame in order to be filmed. The camera follows only the most important characters' movements.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 198-209.



### "GREAT LADY, MY MOM."

The "Family Ties" episode we've been discussing revolves around the unexpected visit of one of Elyse's aunts, Aunt Rosemary. Through the course of the show, the Keatons (but Elyse first) discover that Rosemary has lost her ability to remember certain things. Elyse and Steven take Rosemary to see a doctor, who informs them after conducting a few tests that Rosemary is probably a victim of Alzheimer's Disease, an incurable condition that can result in a complete loss of memory and impaired movement.

Her illness, a cause for alarm under any circumstances, is especially deadly and "cruel," as Elyse sees it, because of Rosemary's hallowed place within the family. Throughout the show, her role as "keeper of the family history" has been emphasized by every member. She admits her problem with facts when she tries to recite the story of a famous Keaton ancestor, Nora Corrigan, who is seen as the founder of the bloodline. The outcome of the show: Rosemary goes back home to live out her final lucid months alone, despite the offerings by Elyse and Steven to give her a home with them. The episode closes with Elyse reluctantly taking over the role of storyteller, as she successfully recites the story of Nora Corrigan's marriage to "your great, great, great, greatgrandfather Devon."

Amid the pro-family values and respect for heritage, this "Family Ties" episode sends other, less overt, messages about appropriate American beliefs. Below is a partial transcription of scene two in the episode, which will serve as the focus of a detailed study of the *latent* values that this episode in particular highlights (although you can certainly "see" them at work in other episodes). As you read, try to form some ideas about the show's position on women, a theme typical of the show, but highlighted here.

Some questions you may want to try to build opinions on: What do you think the main point of the scenes is? What do the characters say about the proper roles of women in American society? Do the characters agree with one another? Do any of the

characters' opinions reflect your own? Do you think that the values on "Family Ties" are typical of Americans?

## SCENE TWO

### SHOT ONE

*quick dissolve into kitchen, Alex and Andy sitting on far left sink counter drying dishes, Alex hands Andy a dish*

### SHOT TWO

Rose. Now, I'm not saying your grandmother Brenda didn't like your father--she did. *front view of Aunt Rosemary, Elyse, Jennifer. Aunt Rosemary and Elyse are putting things in bowls.*  
It's just that she had difficulty remembering his name.

### SHOT THREE

*pan to include Steven, now Jennifer and Steven*

Steven *in his typical self-deprecating, defeated way* She used to call me Phil. <laughs>

Elyse *turning to Jennifer* I remember even on her deathbed, she wanted me to know how happy she was that your dad and I were together. She leaned over and she took my hand (*Elyse imitating all this with Jennifer*) and said, I like that Phil. <laughs>

### SHOT FOUR

Steven *sarcastically* We were very close. <laughs>

### SHOT FIVE

*cut to Aunt Rosemary and Elyse, Jennifer cut off*

Rose. Great lady, my mom. Held that family together--five kids, no husband. *Aunt Rosemary is looking left offscreen to Alex and Andy*

### SHOT SIX

*cut to Alex and Andy paying attention to her*

### SHOT SEVEN

*cut to Elyse as she walks to the refrigerator and back to the island*

Elyse You know, I think it was your mom more than anyone who pushed me to break free--well, you and her together. You were always telling me go for it, Elyse. You can do it. Girls can do anything. *Elyse is holding and motioning with a spoon in her hand, spooning things into a bowl.*

### SHOT EIGHT

*cut to Alex and Andy*

Alex Andy--motions to put his hands over his ears, Andy follows, Andy also squeezes his eyes shut <laughs>

### SHOT NINE

*cut to Aunt Rosemary and Elyse*

Rose. You haven't changed a bit, have you?

### SHOT TEN

*cut to Alex and Andy, regaining some composure*

Alex Andy and I have a different opinion when it comes to this area, that's all. *clasps hands over knees*

Andy Andy, a woman's place is--  
--in the house--

### SHOT ELEVEN

*cut to Elyse*

Elyse --and--

### SHOT TWELVE

*cut to Alex and Andy*

Andy --in the senate.

### SHOT THIRTEEN

*front view of kitchen; women clap*

### SHOT FOURTEEN

Alex *pulling Andy down from the counter to the floor* Et tu, Andrew?

### SHOT FIFTEEN

*cut to Andy close-up*

An openly sexist position on the role of women, however, is not absent from "Family Ties." Alex Keaton always has something degrading to say about women. In shots 8-18 in scene one (please see Appendix), Alex repeatedly criticizes his younger brother's characterization of Barbie as a mechanic and Nobel Prize-winning physicist who also serves a Congresswoman. It becomes clear to the audience that Elyse, the working mother, has raised Andrew to see women as competent, capable people. (In fact, her excessive example--"a garage-owning female senator with a Nobel Prize in physics"--backfires. Rather than providing a strong role model for female viewers, Elyse's example is so farfetched that the issue becomes trivialized. Women in strong professional roles become merely an object of ridicule, instead of much-needed real-life accounts of female

<sup>7</sup> For example, in the ABC hit "thirtysomething," the happily married woman Hope stays home to take care of her new baby. She is seen by her friends--all single, working women--as atypical and having made a conscious choice to stay home. The audience is continually reminded that she could be at work, but has opted not to.

success in the male-dominated business world.) But, when Elyse confronts Alex's chauvinism, the only defense he can come up with for Barbie not succeeding is her figure. "With a body like that?" he accuses--an illogical equation of physical beauty with lack of intelligence. According to Alex, only ugly women can have ambitions. Attractive women have neither intelligence to succeed, nor the desire--it's just not "realistic." This can also be seen as a subtle criticism of Elyse herself, also a blond-haired, blue-eyed architect and mother.

We can ask several questions of Alex's role as a chauvinist, and how we respond--and how the laugh track asks us to respond--to Alex's comments. Do we laugh when Alex says these things? Is he supposed to be a comic figure or a role model? How do his stereotypical views of women as dolls and mothers function within the show and for the audience? The answer is not altogether clear-cut, but a cultural analysis may shed some new light on our view of Alex Keaton and "Family Ties."

To start, read through shots 5, 6, and 7 again, trying to picture how the drama (the actual staging of the action) is framed by the cameras at work. Do the visual and aural elements work together? Do they send similar messages? First, we will concentrate on the *manifest* and *latent* cultural assumptions behind Rosemary's comments, an analysis of the aural elements.

### **Listen to Your Mother! (Or Your Aunt.)**

In shot 5, Rosemary says, "Great lady, my mom. Held that family together--five kids, no husband." Ostensibly, this is a complement: Rosemary's mother could handle the hardship of raising a family without a husband to support her financially, much less emotionally. In a time period when single mothers were looked down upon and scorned by society, Rosemary's image of her mother commands respect. Even Alex doesn't infringe upon the hallowed memory, although the camera seems to give him the opportunity by focusing on him in shot 6. (Filming tradition dictates that a character be

focused on for one of two reasons: either because s/he has a speaking part, or to film a reaction. Alex offers neither, so we might assume that his lack of a reaction could be an endorsement of Rosemary's opinion.)

If pushed a little farther, we could also read Rosemary's comment in a negative way, however. It is important to recognize the cultural standard implicit in her statement. The lack of a complete family--working father, child-rearing mother, and children--was a stigma that her mother needed to overcome in order to succeed. It would be safe to say that Rosemary's evaluation of the family still holds today, even though we appear to be a more liberal culture. As Jeff Jarvis writes in *ELLE* magazine,

The family is coming back to life. And TV's the proof. It's a simple economic equation. Television makes its money by finding out what we like and selling it to us. These days, what we like more than anything else is 'Cosby'...And what we really like about 'Cosby'--more than Cosby himself, more than his cast, more than his vaunted quality--is his family. The family sells.<sup>8</sup>

While I will take issue with Jarvis' interpretation of why *Cosby* has succeeded in the next chapter, his statement about the importance of the family is accurate, even in these days of liberation, and we can certainly see this cultural belief evidenced in Aunt Rosemary's comment. Ironically, her position reflects in a faint way on Elyse, who seems to have been through a similar predicament--four kids, no husband. In other words, we respect Elyse's ability to bring up four children without much support from her weak husband Steven. The comment promotes Elyse, and all other women, in a maternal role.

### Smile for the Camera!

For our analysis of the visual elements in shots 5 through 6, we first need to introduce a new theoretical concept developed by a British television and art critic John Berger in the 1970s. In a BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) series entitled "Ways of Seeing," Berger discusses the ways in which men and women see and are seen by each other. On the simplest level, Berger explains that women are perceived of and perceive themselves as

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Jarvis, "TV and Family," *ELLE*, (New York: --, September 1987)152.

objects, while men consider themselves controllers of objects. Women have power only as objects; the power that men have depends strongly upon how many objects they control. As Berger puts it:

A man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies. If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence. The promise may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual--but its object is always exterior to the man. A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. [It is always] a power which he exercises on others.

By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her. Her presence is manifest in her gestures, voices, opinionss, expressions, clothes, chosen surroundings, taste--indeed there is nothing she can do which does not contribute to her presence. Presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation, a kind of heat or smell or aura.<sup>9</sup>

Berger goes on to discuss this crucial distinction in much greater detail, but for our purposes, the above description will suffice. His main point: men traditionally have not perceived themselves as objects, while for women, it is the first step in understanding other objects. Men compete for objects, while women compete with their own images of themselves.

As an example, think back to the opening shots of the "Family Ties" episode we've been discussing, when Alex picks up Andrew's Barbie doll and begins to criticize her abilities. The way in which Alex sees Barbie--precisely as a doll, a passive object that he can pick up, scrutinize, and eventually reject--is significant, and the camera acknowledges his position of power over her. In every shot about Barbie, Alex is shown holding her by the hair--a hulking giant whose "presence suggests what he is capable of doing to Barbie." The humorous element in these several shots is lost in the cultural analysis, because we begin to realize that Alex, if given the chance, would attempt to (if he has not already) mold every woman into Barbie.

<sup>9</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; London: Penguin Books, 1972) 45-6.

Likewise, Aunt Rosemary's look offscreen in shot 6 to Alex and Andy accurately illustrates Berger's description of woman's presence. Presumably, we can interpret or "read" her look in three different cultural ways. On the simplest level, Rosemary could be looking at Alex merely to get his attention. This reading would be along the lines of "social courtesy" if we were to assign a cultural significance to it. On the next level, Rosemary could be emphasizing her story of female success (her mother) with a "warning" look to Alex. Such a look would imply that things for women had actually changed, and that the Alex P. Keatons of this world had better accept it. (This is somewhat unlikely, though, because we have had no indication of a conflict between Rosemary and Alex, so we would not expect her to be openly antagonistic.)

The third reading of Rosemary's look, however, takes into account Berger's analysis. According to Berger, in this instance Rosemary would be looking at Alex with the cultural (i.e.--unconscious) understanding that she has already been perceived of as an object by Alex. Therefore, her look is less of a defiant gesture against male authority, and more of a look for approval through male standards of seeing.<sup>10</sup>

Shot 7 seems to be a final pronouncement on proper roles for women. The shot-reverse shot format of the two previous frames (from a close-up on Rosemary to a close-up on Alex and Andy) is discarded for a seemingly objective frontal shot of Rosemary, Elyse, and Jennifer at the butcher's block. In fact, the shot is a rather blunt portrayal of women as Alex would like to see them, and, more damagingly, how he would like them to see themselves.

Once again, if we stare long enough, we find that what Elyse says about women and what we see on the screen contradict each other. (Remember that in the

<sup>10</sup> As another example, watch an episode of the detective drama "Cagney & Lacey" one night. Notice how Cagney and Lacey mull over their problems in the women's room. They are filmed from behind while they look into the bathroom mirror, a widely recognized symbol for woman's vanity. We only see their faces through the mirror, and generally they view each other through the mirror, also. As a result, the symbol for vanity becomes transformed into a method by which these women judge their own presences and that of one another--the only legitimate "objects" for them to evaluate, according to Berger.

opening shots of scene one, what Alex says is NOT contradicted by what we see on the screen. He says sexist things, and the camera seems to agree with him in his assertions.) Elyse says to Aunt Rosemary, " You were always telling me, 'Go for it, Elyse. You can do it. Girls can do anything.'" Her comment reflects the positive attitude toward women that Rosemary introduced into the conversation and show. But what image do we see of the three generations of women? They all are performing domestic chores that typically have been viewed--by both women and men--as exclusively female tasks.

### **PROGRESS, MOTHERHOOD, AND APPLE PIE--IN THAT ORDER**

Up to this point, we have performed some fairly detailed analyses of specific scenes in "Family Ties," but as yet they still seem isolated. Can we now move beyond these specific instances toward a broad interpretation of the program that would explain, in a cultural context, the reasons for Alex's chauvinism, his mother's uphill battle for an independent identity, and Rosemary's gift for family history? To find a working answer, we must move outside the show toward a study of dominant American ideology itself.

It is perhaps no surprise to many fans of "Family Ties" that Alex is the unsung head of the Keaton household. His formidable talent with financing, his ability to confront the crises that threaten the family, and--at times--his moral leadership, place Alex firmly at the top of the Keaton hierarchy. His father Steven, the ostensible head, cannot compete with his son's command manner and his comprehensive list of successes, while not a slouch by normal standards.

In addition to acting as head of the Keaton household, Alex, because of the values he supports, acts as the symbolic leader for the American viewing audience. In Alex Keaton we find the aggressiveness and talent that the media tells us we need to compete in world markets successfully. In simplest terms, Alex stands for unbelievable progress at a time when American supremacy (economically and militarily) is being



severely undermined. The future of our embroiled, beloved nation lies, we think, with the go-getters like Alex, for whom high hopes seem realistic, not hopelessly out of reach.

But Alex has always let us know that he commands a high fee, and the type of progress that he embodies is no less costly. Alex supports very strongly defined conservative beliefs--faith in the dollar, trickle-down theories of economics, and segregationist work policies, among others. Because of his beliefs, Alex also represents a threat to the life of growing liberal values that Americans are trying to embrace. American ideologies are being attacked at home as well abroad; the radicalism of the late 1960s, which Elyse and Steven seem still to believe, has resulted in widespread criticism of current American business policies. Unfortunately, Alex Keaton symbolizes all of the restrictive, traditional ideologies that are under attack, so our faith in his leadership is undermined by his own (and, ultimately, our own) ideologies of progress.

In order for the audience to believe in fully the ideologies that Alex promotes, ideologies that question those of Alex must be portrayed as failed systems of belief. Therefore, the two strongest threats, the moral idealism of his parents, and Elyse's position as a successful female professional are forever under attack from Alex's conservative wit. Whenever another character's ideology does not fit with Alex's, he must rephrase the conflicting value system in his own abusive vocabulary. So moral idealism is replaced by compassionate capitalism, and feminism reverts to motherhood (in spite of the fact that for most Americans the two will always oppose one another).

### **Capitalism with a Heart**

Steven's job as director of the local public television station highlights his unspoken support for the liberal movements of the late 1960s, of which he and Elyse were a part. This liberal birth serves as the "reason" within the show for his moral power over Alex; although he personally carries little practical power, Steven's conscience-guided career has some moral force against Alex's callous, make-a-buck philosophies.

Alex easily dislodges his father's residual power, though, in the rare instances where he repents for his thoughtlessness and turns to a more compassionate viewpoint. In one episode, when his dim-witted sister Mallory contemplates elopement, Alex puts aside his usual stream of insults to guide her through the crisis that makes her want such an extreme solution. On the surface, we are relieved to see that Alex knows how to act compassionate, but our relief diverts attention away from the more subtle insult that his behavior implies.

Instead of actually changing his opinion of his sister, Alex merely changes the object of his ridicule from Mallory to her boyfriend Nick. Not only does Alex want to keep Mallory from eloping (because this would confirm our faith in his evaluation of the situation), but he especially wants Mallory to "realize" how bad a choice Nick is for her. None of the Keatons (with the exception of Mallory, of course) has fond feelings for Nick, a lower-class simpleton who seems equal parts Rocky Balboa, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and Van Gogh. When Mallory takes Alex's advice to hold off on her elopement, two conservative ideologies are confirmed: a faith in Alex's male-centered opinions, and a belief in recognizing and maintaining firm boundaries between the upper middle and lower middle classes.

We should be careful, then, to see Alex's oscillation as part of pattern of repentance and denial, not a signal of actual change. Every so often, Alex has a predictable relapse and becomes concerned for the welfare of the people that normally he would ignore. In fact, such relapses are fairly regular features of conservative capitalism--capitalism with a heart. Like Alex, President Reagan would like Americans to see him as a concerned citizen and father figure. In reality, many Americans have grown tired of Reagan's posturing; they see his speeches as hollow promises that never are transformed into actual policies. By comparison, we can interpret Alex's intermittent values of good faith as rhetorical tactics designed to reassure the viewing audience that his heart is in the work, how ever odious the work might be. Alex's reluctant compassion is, in fact, also

useless posturing that never is realized in ideological change--in the episodes following Mallory's crisis, his renewed love for Mallory has evaporated, and the dependably sexist Alex has returned.

### **Chauvinism with a Heart**

Even more noticable are the attacks that Alex makes on the progressive values that Elyse uses to raise the youngest Keaton, Andrew. Her presence as a successful working mother carries far more weight than her husband's diluted idealism, and, consequently, is much harder to destroy. In the "Rosemary Comes to Visit" episode that we have dissected, the attack on Elyse's professional capabilities (and, therefore, the drive to reinforce her exceptional "mothering" talents) comes from two major angles--Alex's openly skeptical appraisal, and Rosemary's strong presence as keeper of the family history.

Even before Elyse enters the narrative of the "Rosemary" episode, Alex relays to his brother Andrew and the viewing audience his philosophy on working women when he takes hold of Barbie and looks around to find her apron, claiming that her professional accomplishments are not part of the real world. His comments, which he does not restrict only to dolls, reflect indirectly on his mother. Elyse too is a type of barbie doll in American society--blue eyes and blond hair, but an accomplished professional in spite of the stereotypes she must face. Because Alex's viewpoint anchors the scene (ideologically and visually), Elyse's varied talents are diminished.

Ironically, the character of Aunt Rosemary also contributes significantly to Alex's driving viewpoint. She typifies the proper role for women: a family-oriented storyteller with no ambitions outside of the nest. Rosemary's praise for her mother's ability to overcome the financial and cultural constraints in her life and still raise five kids without a husband is the strongest kind of endorsement for motherhood. In addition, Rosemary herself provides a convincing picture of proper female success, if we are to believe the Keatons' warm feelings for her storytelling capabilities.

The final push for Elyse to "recognize" her proper role comes, appropriately, at the end of the episode, when she is urged by her aunt to take over the storyteller position, now that Rosemary's memory is in jeopardy. Elyse, shakily at first, and then with increasing confidence, relays the story of Nora Corrigan for the benefit of her aunt and the other members of the family.

In the end, the criticism of Elyse's professional ambitions comes through as a positive endorsement for her traditional role, rather than as an overt remark about how she has taken the wrong path. She is always encouraged to act as a mother and keeper of the family history, but, on the other hand, whenever she tries to step out of that role, Alex is there to provide symbolic examples of female failure.

The final component of the American ideology of progress is a proper respect for the past. Above all, Alex's view of progress requires that everyone believe in the inherent goodness of the status quo, which means that we should leave business dealings to men, home and family care to women, and interpretations of the past to our elders, who preserve it so well. While our image of Rosemary does not necessarily correlate with apple pies and baked cookies--or any other typical symbols of the past, her eccentricity and her unfailing ability to draw on the ways in which current family events compare to little-known histories provides her with a permanent position as the visual icon for the past. Even her memory loss, which is eventually "blamed" on an incurable disease, is a crucial part of the nostalgia with which we approach the past. Rosemary is relieved of all blame and responsibility, removed of all the weights that might keep her from fulfilling her role as symbolic Heritage; she floats above the realm of reality, reminding us never to forget the past, but also to remember it in the "correct" way--as a sort of retroactive continuation of the status quo, rather than a set of events that might be separate from or even contradicting it.

Perhaps the most important "lesson" to be learned from our cultural analysis of "Family Ties"--or any television show--in this respect is the realization that most, if not all, characters' beliefs have two levels of meaning. They serve to make up the network of ideologies within the narrative, providing conflict, difference, and variety. But they also refer indirectly to belief systems that make up the viewers' realities; more accurately, they comprise an extremely specific and limited version of reality. As many cultural critics have emphasized, the "realities" within which the narratives of television programs are acted out are not objective accounts of the way things are, but, significantly, the way we, as a culture, would like them to be. In the next chapter, we will cover this need more thoroughly, as we study the ideologies that have produced "The Cosby Show."

## 4 THE COLORED TELEVISION SET

"We cannot speak of 'The Cosby Show' without asking how a black program gained record-breaking popularity with an audience that, as measured by the Nielsen ratings, is overwhelmingly white."  
--Ellen Seiter, *Channels of Discourse*

We have now completed a comprehensive analysis of one popular television show. Using prominent theoretical models--poststructuralism, Berger's "ways of seeing," and film theory--we have been able to break down the narrative and technical components of "Family Ties" to draw broader conclusions about the cultural assumptions implicit in the program and the topics it discusses.

With a bit of readjustment, we can use these same methods to analyze any number of television shows. Next we turn to a competitor of "Family Ties" that, in addition, has become the model for other sitcoms to follow, for both moral and financial reasons: "The Cosby Show." Like "Family Ties," "The Cosby Show" ostensibly supports a liberal ideology, that of racial equality. Indeed, many blacks consider the show a triumph because it does not assume that blacks have ever been anything less than equal to whites. The ease with which the Huxtables approach their wealth and spending power (indeed, as if it has never been otherwise!), as well as the undeniably strong symbol of Bill Cosby as creator and controller of the show, send strong messages to television producers and the American viewing audience about the capabilities of blacks in our society.

Can a cultural analysis of "The Cosby Show" enrich our understanding in any significant way--without diminishing the success of the show? As with our study of "Family Ties," we find that Bill Cosby's show about blacks in America does not tell the whole story; it chooses a particular viewpoint that leaves out a crucial sense of history. While it may seem to be the perfect role model for blacks (and whites!) to emulate, in fact "The Cosby Show" can also do more harm than good.

### THE THREE HISTORIES OF "COSBY"

To understand properly the success--and shortcomings--of "The Cosby Show," a program credited with saving the NBC network from prime-time ratings oblivion, we must study the three distinct but overlapping histories out of which it has arisen. "The Cosby Show" participates in dominant American ideology in the sense that it must reflect dominant cultural values in order to be a successful television program. In addition, "Cosby" occupies a highly specific position along the forty-year timeline of television, as a program and, more specifically, as a sitcom. Finally, "Cosby" participates--in an unexpected fashion--in a racial history of blacks and other minorities in America. Every history of which "The Cosby Show" is a part carries significance for the television audience because it is through these histories that we are *interpellated* into the fictional world of the show and the specific vision of America that it presents.

#### An American Dreams....

"The Cosby Show" represents a virtually perfect synthesis of two prominent American ideologies: the drive for material success and the collective, unconscious need of white Americans to show that the civil rights struggle has brought about change. No one likes to think of her- or himself as a racist, and "The Cosby Show" gives us all the opportunity to "realize" that we are not. At the same time, it offers the ultimate picture of American success. Cliff Huxtable is a prominent obstetrician; Clair is a lawyer; their children are healthy, intelligent, and popular; and the family lives in an affluent section of New York City in an appropriately expensive and lavishly decorated brownstone. Whether conscious or not, the way in which these two contradictory ideologies are combined is brilliant.

When we begin to outline the American ideologies that the Huxtables would support, though, we notice that the balance is tipped in favor of ideologies that glorify the drive for material success, while the racial equality concern seems unsupported, almost invisible. A list of these Huxtable/American ideologies might look like this: respecting the

sanctity of the family; believing firmly in the value of a good (i.e.--expensive) education; encouraging children to succeed in school and socially; scorning petty or cruel behavior; learning from experience; supporting the father as the head of the household; and replacing religious faith with satisfaction with a job well done. In the extensive list we find no mention of values that would arise from a concern with racial equality, or even an acknowledgment of racial difference. Indeed, it is as if the Huxtables are not black.

Cultural critics see this as a "significant absence" in the show which can point to one of two things. For the optimists among us, the lack of references to race and a cogent racial history "means" that "The Cosby Show" is part of a post-civil rights culture. In such an era, references to race would be absent because integration would be total. But given the non-television reality of black Americans in the late 1980s, this optimistic viewpoint is, at the very least, idealistic, and as yet still a goal, not a solid accomplishment.

A more pessimistic reading of this significant absence probably hits closer to home. No, or very few, references to a "black" viewpoint exist on "The Cosby Show" precisely because the black viewpoint does not, and cannot, go hand in hand with such obvious professional success. The Huxtable family supports ideologies that bring success, so the black version of American life, which is taut with discrimination, modest incomes, and little leisure time, is not part of the show.

We can see the mainstream ideologies at work in every episode of the "The Cosby Show," just as we studied the gender battles in "Family Ties." For example, the equation of a "good" education with an expensive one comes up in several episodes. The oldest daughter, Sondra, a graduate of Princeton University, decides not to go on to medical school like her father. Instead, she and her husband Elvin, also a graduate of Princeton, decide to open up a "wilderness" store that sells state-of-the-art outdoor equipment and clothing. In the episode that introduces the change, Cliff and Clair become incensed over Sondra's choice, and even demand that she return the money used to pay her way through Princeton--one of the most expensive universities in the country. Sondra



remains firm, though, and her parents and younger siblings reluctantly accept the new, albeit poor, Sondra. In subsequent episodes, Sondra and Elvin are portrayed as misdirected, impoverished youth who try unsuccessfully to peddle their goods and beliefs to their parents and others.

How does this mini-narrative reflect an imbalanced viewpoint? Because the Huxtables equate cost with reward so strongly (i.e.--high cost equals high reward, low cost brings low reward), they literally buy into the ideology of material wealth. Instead of applauding Sondra's ability to make a choice independent of dominant belief systems, they criticize her stupidity. If "The Cosby Show" strives to be a role model for black Americans, what kind of role does it play in this instance? It seems obvious that Cliff and Clair stand for and promote "white" values--the beliefs of the upper classes in America, who equate wealth with success. Such an extreme position would not be so unfavorable if the Huxtables at some point admitted their bias. But they don't. They appoint themselves correct without a shadow of a doubt, and anyone with a conflicting viewpoint, such as Sondra, is ridiculed (because humor is the vehicle for derision on "The Cosby Show) with no sign of remorse.

### **"Father Knows Best": The Sequel**

"The Cosby Show" contributes to television history in two major ways: in its values (the white-centered *ideologies* it supports), and in its form. More than one cultural/television critic has noted the resemblance between the father-oriented values that "Cosby" promotes and the dominant beliefs in "Father Knows Best," a popular program in the 1950s and early 1960s. Like the title says, "Father Knows Best" promotes the ideology of the father. Jim Anderson, the level-headed leader of the Anderson household, resolves all crises with

barely a wrinkled brow and "common sense" wisdom, "speaking softly and carrying no stick of any kind," according to writer Marc Eliot.<sup>11</sup>

Eliot goes on to criticize the homogeneity of "Father Knows Best," and although we may want to update a few of the terms, the following characterization of the 1950s drama could still hold true for "Cosby," despite the overt differences between the two shows:

unimaginative common sense masquerade[s] as [the] middle-American spirit so valued in this 'typical' family. No baseball, basketball, or football teams. No industry, slums, minorities. No bars, no crime, just plenty of insurance policies and patches-sleeve men who sold them. <sup>12</sup>

Although "The Cosby Show" uses different forms of professional success (medical and legal), many of the values defended and reinforced in "Father Knows Best" return to television in "Cosby." The neighborhood, a block in Brooklyn, New York, is remarkably homogenous (that is, the block is composed of mostly white people), although the Huxtables are a minority family. In fact, they seem to be the token minority on the show--an ironic twist on the "fairness doctrine" philosophy of television producers that is designed not to offend any minorities watching a white-dominated show. Instead of being portrayed as stereotypically black, the Huxtables are stereotypically white. In addition, "The Cosby Show" exhibits an unquestioned faith in the authority of the father, just as "Father Knows Best" did thirty years ago. Finally, "crises" are more familial than social or political.

All of these parallels point to a strong tie between "Cosby" and its predecessor. Recall our earlier discussion of the family and Jeff Jarvis's comment about the "economic equation" behind television broadcasting: "Television makes its money by finding out what we like and selling it to us. These days, what we like more than anything is 'Cosby.'" <sup>13</sup> If the conservative nature of "Cosby" parallels that of "Father Knows

<sup>11</sup> Marc Eliot, *American Television: The Official Art of the Artificial*, (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1981) 55.

<sup>12</sup> Eliot, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Jarvis, 152.

Best," it is also a reliable indicator of broad cultural values in the 1980s, which have become increasingly family- and father-oriented under the Reagan Administration.

We can also gain some insight into an understanding of "Cosby" if we place it in a brief history of sitcoms. For all of the similarities we can find between "The Cosby Show" and "Father Knows Best," chances are that we can locate a similar number of differences when we compare "Cosby" to previous sitcoms--especially those that portray blacks. Unlike the earlier generation of sitcoms that centered on black families, like "The Jeffersons" and "Sanford and Son," "Cosby" says little outright about the role of blacks, although it implies much. Whereas "The Jeffersons" repeatedly highlighted the upward mobility of George and his wife, "Weezy," who become wealthy through the profits of a dry-cleaning chain, "Cosby" presents a static economic view of the Huxtable family. The television audience is never led to believe that the Huxtables have had to overcome economic (much less racial) difficulties to get to their present vaulted status. Indeed, like the Anderson family in "Father Knows Best," the Huxtables seem to exude the ignorance of oppression that accompanies continued wealth.

Here again we can see what the "significant absence," or lack of historical or racial references in "The Cosby Show" probably indicates: a strong, even unquestioned, identification with white values. In addition, it's important to remember that an absence of one sort also is an implicit promotion of another, so it would be reasonable to say that the Huxtables, through their unspoken support of white values, advocate a similar position for the viewers.

We could criticize "Cosby" even further along these lines for its refusal to deal with the social problems that wealthy or otherwise influential blacks face in professional and leisure situations. "The Cosby Show" just ignores the social difficulties that many wealthy blacks must face. It is a common complaint of many blacks that, even when they are able to work successfully within the system and become financially

independent, they still must put up with subtle forms of discrimination, like interpreting (and even overlooking) unpleasant office political signals in the office or refraining from going to social functions with their white colleagues. Instead of exploring the social adjustments that come with newfound wealth, "The Cosby Show" assumes that no adjustments need to be made. The Huxtables may be the minority family on the block, but no neighbors seem to notice the distinction.

By contrast, "The Jeffersons" continued to explore and exploit--for humorous purposes mostly--the "blackness" of George and Weezie. While Weezie never was eager to make waves with the mixed-marriage neighbors, George was constantly needling them, and calling attention to his own color. Cultural critics may frown at George's own reverse racism, but we must give credit where it is due. While "The Cosby Show" repeatedly avoids confrontations of any sort, and therefore avoids significant change of any sort, the abrasiveness of "The Jeffersons"--both in terms of the issues the program faced and within the cultural context of its own broadcast--continuously forced the viewing audience to think about the role of blacks.

"The Cosby Show" also differs from other recent sitcoms in its use of humor. Other shows rely largely on the audience's beliefs to make a joke. For example, Alex Keaton's sexism would not be funny if feminism was not a growing movement; the show depends on the audience's liberal tendencies (or at least a general knowledge of them) in order to entertain. "Cosby" humor depends on a very different type of extratextual knowledge, that of the star system. Cliff Huxtable's method of doling out advice--his actual delivery--has ties only to his real-life cohort, Bill Cosby. No other show that is currently popular depends so heavily upon the audience's knowledge of celebrity, or the actor's off-stage personality. Along with Robin Williams, Bill Cosby is one of the select few actors/celebrities/comedians who has been able to successfully translate his comedic talent into television popularity and a distinct onscreen personality.

These two television-related histories of "Cosby" contribute in significant ways to its reception as a potentially controversial show. As the cultural critic David Marc explains, people who were born after television became the primary communication medium have developed a firm personal history of television that includes favorite programs and a sense of where and how these programs fit into the broader cultural belief systems. Every time we sit down to watch a show, we compare it to previous shows within the genre, and shows on our personal list of favorites.<sup>14</sup> We may not realize the ways in which we try to make connections among the shows, but the ties exist nonetheless. An analysis of the historical predecessors of "The Cosby Show"--"Father Knows Best" and "The Jeffersons"--merely takes the comparison one step further, by focusing specifically on the cultural belief systems, or ideologies, within which each show gains its identity.

### **Are the Huxtables *Really* Black?**

As we pointed out earlier, "Cosby"'s contribution to the racial history of blacks is by far its most problematic role as a television program. Unlike other television programs that have centered on black families ("Good Times," "The Jeffersons," "227," and "Amen"--in which George Jefferson is reincarnated as a church deacon), "The Cosby Show" glosses over--if not completely ignores--a "black" viewpoint of civil rights events in America of which the Huxtables were a part. The Huxtables don't draw on their experiences as blacks when they discuss race-influenced events in their lives.

In the episode in which Theo attends his senior prom, Rudy and Vanessa recreate for their parents the senior prom that Cliff and Clair missed during their youth because Cliff was taking finals at college. The years was 1958, but no family member

<sup>14</sup> In an analysis of television comedy, Marc discusses the particularly strong success of the late 1970s episodes of "Saturday Night Live," which depended upon a conscious television history in order to survive. The most effective skits used our knowledge of past and present television programs--and our sense of how they relate to one another--to make the comedy work.

brings up the painful issue of segregation. The late fifties were not tense years for blacks, because they still put up with the discriminatory segregation laws. It is probable that Cliff and Clair went to an all-black high school, but in the account of her senior year, Clair never mentions it. Instead, she talks about typically white worries, like what she did in place of going to the prom--to which she responds: "I called Cliff on the phone, then my sister and I went out to a movie." Did she have to sit in the back of the theater? Was it an all-black theater?

The most outrageous omission of black history occurs in an episode on the civil rights march on Washington in the early 1960s. Cliff, Clair and their in-laws present an ahistorical, or "white," account of the march that warps the event beyond recognition. They speak of love and togetherness as symbols of the march, not the oppression and segregation that brought it about, or the overwhelming tension of the march itself. "The Cosby Show" is unique in its ahistorical treatment of these events. Shows like "227" and "Amen," which are not radical by any means, still present a tempered viewpoint that is at the very least historically fair to blacks.

The effect of this narrowed viewpoint is two-fold: a particular, and potentially critical, perspective on American history is lost, and, as a result, the show gives the impression that blacks in general have achieved racial equality. "The Cosby Show"'s ahistorical perspective ultimately works against social change because it assumes that change has already taken place, therefore sending a message to the American public that the issue of racial equality is unimportant--even negligible. A show that starts out as a strong role model for American blacks actually ignores their struggle.

## MIRROR MOVES

Many critics have singled out television as the medium (perhaps "phenomenon" is a better word) responsible for the corruption and destruction of twentieth-century life. They see it as the center of the worst things about our culture: lazy, repetitive, trite, and futile. Even

the head of the Federal Communication Commission himself once referred to television as a vast wasteland. As the most influential and widely accessed communication media in the world, television has certainly taken its share of abuse, and I've done my best to contribute to the trash heap.

At this late date, perhaps it's silly to think that we could regroup and stare at television with a fresh, untarnished eye. We must, however, try to do just that. Television is many things--it's everything I've covered and far more than I'll ever be able to record--but a cause it is not. One of the hallmarks of cultural criticism is its ability to separate cultural influences from the vehicles in which they work. We could criticize "Family Ties" and "The Cosby Show" for the fail of liberal ideologies until we break from the effort (and at times I think I have), but the fault truly lies not with television as a medium, but the uses to which it is put. It is the people who write for and perform on and make money from television that we should be addressing.

While we cannot fairly say that the writing for "Family Ties" consciously attempts to stymie the rush of equal rights for women through Alex's caustic banter, we have the right, and even the duty, to interpret the show that way and bring our findings to the attention of the producers. The responsibility for change lies not only with the people who have the moral and financial power to monitor what we see, but also--crucially--with the viewers themselves.

## Appendix

### SCENE ONE

#### SHOT ONE

*Elyse and Steven sacked out on couch amongst a bunch of stuffed animals, Andrew is playing in front/right on the floor, laughs from the audience*

#### SHOT TWO

*cut to Alex entering in background, Andy front/left*

Alex        Hey--

#### SHOT THREE

Andy        Shush, they need their rest <laughs>

*pan to Andy and Alex looking at their parents*

#### SHOT FOUR

Alex        They're adorable when they're asleep <laughs>

#### SHOT FIVE

Andy        They're like little angels <Alex laughs>

#### SHOT SIX

*moving to crouch in front of Andy's toys*

Alex        Hey, what's all this?

#### SHOT SEVEN

*cut back to Andy and Alex front/right*

Andy        I'm playing garage. Wanna play?

Alex        Yeah, sure. *kneels*

Hey, wait a minute. *Pause.* <laughs>

#### SHOT EIGHT

*cut to close up of Alex holding Barbie by the hair*

What's she doing here?

#### SHOT NINE

*cut to Andy looking at Alex (off screen). Barbie far right, held by the hair*

Andy        That's Barbie. She owns the garage. <laughs> *Pause.*

#### SHOT TEN

*Cut to Andy and Alex together*

Alex        Barbie owns the garage.

#### SHOT ELEVEN

*cut to Andy and Barbie far right*

Andy        Really, she's in Congress, but on the weekends, she's a mechanic. <laughs>

#### SHOT TWELVE

*cut to Alex, Andy left/low, Alex holding Barbie roughly.*

Alex        I think I see Mom's influence here. <laughs>

#### SHOT THIRTEEN

*cut to Andy, Barbie right low*

Andy        She also won the Nobel Prize in Physics. <laughs>

#### SHOT FOURTEEN

*cut to Alex and Andy, Alex holds up Barbie*

Alex        You've come a long way, now haven't ya honey. <laughs>

*Getting up* Well, let's get back to the real world.

*Holds Barbie by the head, walks behind Andy to other side of play area*

Where's Barbie's apron? <chuckle>

Elyse        *waking up Alex, stop.*

*Mom moves into picture far left*

#### SHOT FIFTEEN

*cut back to Alex*

Alex        Mom, a garage-owning female senator with a nobel prize in physics?

#### SHOT SIXTEEN

*cut to Elyse, Elyse above left*

Elyse        It could happen.

#### SHOT SEVENTEEN



*cut back to wide front, Alex pushes Barbie in Elyse's face*

Alex With a body like that? <laughs>

SHOT EIGHTEEN

*Pause. Cut to close-up of Elyse and Alex sitting over Steven. Elyse grabs Barbie*

Elyse Alex ---

Steven *waking up between Elyse and Alex* what what what's the matter?

Elyse *whining* I don't want Alex playing with Barbie anymore <laughs>

Alex Mom!

Steven *with bizarre discipline* You heard your mother, Alex, stay away from Barbie! *He realizes what he's said, looks at Elyse* What?? <laughs>

Alex Mom, it's just not realistic!

SHOT NINETEEN

*cut to Andy behind Alex, Alex looking over his shoulder at Andy*

Andy If you can't play nicely, you shouldn't play at all. <laughs> *Walks into kitchen, stage left*

SHOT TWENTY

*cut to Mallory and boyfriend Nick as they walk in the front door, stage right*

*Mallory left, Nick right, behind Mallory. Mallory takes off coat, pan back to include Alex as he leans against a wooden beam*

Alex Where've you guys been?

Mallory *putting coats away* At the library.

SHOT TWENTY-ONE

*cut to Alex leaning against post*

Alex No, seriously. <laughs>

SHOT TWENTY-TWO

*Folds arms over chest, looks smugly at Alex.*

Mallory For your information, Alex, I'm reading Wuthering Heights.

SHOT TWENTY-THREE

Steven *carrying toy box across front of stage*

Oh, that's your mother's favorite book!

SHOT TWENTY-FOUR

*cut to Elyse, standing in front of couch, combing fingers through hair*

Elyse I love Wuthering Heights. It's so romantic. Steven, do you remember when we were in college we used to act out the scenes?

SHOT TWENTY-FIVE

*cut to Alex*

Alex *alarmed* Oh no, please don't. <laughs>

*cut to Elyse, not visible expression on face. Doorbell rings.*

SHOT TWENTY-SIX

Alex *getting door* I'll get it.

Rose. Oh hi!

Alex Aunt Rosemary!

SHOT TWENTY-SEVEN

*cut to Elyse and Steven cleaning up, looking puzzled*

Rose. Oh, you darling people, I'm sorry I'm late.

SHOT TWENTY-EIGHT

*cut to Elyse and Steven.*

I hope I didn't keep you waiting.

SHOT TWENTY-NINE

*cut back to Rosemary, camera follows her into living room*

I hope you weren't worried. Airplane travel today is not to be believed!

SHOT THIRTY

*cut to Mallory and Nick*

SHOT THIRTY-ONE

*cut back to Rosemary*

Four hours for my airplane <laughs> and.... *turns to Alex behind her, turns to others*  
What's the matter? Why is nobody moving or speaking? <laughs>

SHOT THIRTY-TWO

*cut to Elyse, combing hair back, standing upright*

SHOT THIRTY-THREE

Elyse It's just such a surprise. We weren't expecting you

SHOT THIRTY-FOUR

*cut to Rosemary*

Rose. Nonsense! I wrote a letter to you about two months ago to tell you I was coming, and I phoned Mallory and had a long conversation with her about it.

SHOT THIRTY-FIVE

*cut to Mallory, motioning "no," looking worried*

*cut to Alex*

Alex Well, that explains it! <chuckles>

SHOT THIRTY-SIX

Mallory *stepping into foreground, apparently ignoring Alex's comment*

No, I'm sorry, Aunt Rosemary, I don't remember it.

*Mallory stops before Elyse. Stage set-up, left to right: Steven, Nick, Mallory, Elyse, Aunt Rosemary, Alex--everyone looking uncomfortable.*

Steven *extravagantly* What's the difference? You're here, we're here--

Welcome!

Rose. Oh, thank you!

*Elyse hugs Aunt Rosemary*

Rose. Oh Elyse, you're still beautiful!

*hugging Mallory* Mallory, you're more beautiful than ever!

*hugging Steven* Steven,...you have such a lovely personality! <laughs>

*cut to Alex*

Alex *Expectantly* How about me? Am I still beautiful? <laughs>

SHOT THIRTY-SEVEN

*no response from Aunt Rosemary as she hugs him*

SHOT THIRTY-EIGHT

*Mallory says something unintelligible, Aunt Rosemary turns around to see Nick*

Rose. Oh and you must be Nick *camera includes all three, Aunt Rosemary offers a hand to Nick, Nick takes it*

Nick Oh you must be.....perplexed, can't think of her name

Rose. You are definitely Nick <laughs> *he smiles assuringly, they shake with warmth*

## SCENE TWO

SHOT ONE

*quick dissolve into kitchen, Alex and Andy sitting on far left sink counter drying dishes, Alex hands Andy a dish*

SHOT TWO

Rose. Now, I'm not saying your grandmother Brenda didn't like your father--she did. *front view of Aunt Rosemary, Elyse, Jennifer. Aunt Rosemary and Elyse are putting things in bowls.* It's just that she had difficulty remembering his name.

SHOT THREE

*pan to include Steven, now Jennifer and Steven*

Steven *in his typical self-deprecating, defeated way* She used to call me Phil. <laughs>

Elyse *turning to Jennifer* I remember even on her deathbed, she wanted me to know how happy she was that your dad and I were together. She leaned over and she took my hand (*Elyse imitating all this with Jennifer*) and said, I like that Phil. <laughs>

SHOT FOUR

Steven *sarcastically* We were very close. <laughs>

SHOT FIVE

*cut to Aunt Rosemary and Elyse, Jennifer cut off*

Rose. Great lady, my mom. Held that family together--five kids, no husband. *Aunt Rosemary is looking left offscreen to Alex and Andy*

SHOT SIX

*cut to Alex and Andy paying attention to her*

SHOT SEVEN

*cut to Elyse as she walks to the refrigerator and back to the island*

Elyse        You know, I think it was your mom more than anyone who pushed me to break free-- well, you and her together. You were always telling me go for it, Elyse. You can do it. Girls can do anything. *Elyse is holding and motioning with a spoon in her hand, spooning things into a bowl.*

SHOTEIGHT

*cut to Alex and Andy*

Alex        Andy--motions to put his hands over his ears, Andy follows, Andy also squeezes his eyes shut <laughs>

SHOTNINE

*cut to Aunt Rosemary and Elyse*

Rose.        You haven't changed a bit, have you?

SHOTTEN

*cut to Alex and Andy, regaining some composure*

Alex        Andy and I have a different opinion when it comes to this area, that's all. *clasps hands over knees*

Andy, a woman's place is--

Andy        --in the house--

SHOT ELEVEN

*cut to Elyse*

Elyse        --and--

SHOT TWELVE

*cut to Alex and Andy*

Andy        --in the senate.

SHOT THIRTEEN

*front view of kitchen; women clap*

SHOT FOURTEEN

Alex        *pulling Andy down from the counter to the floor* Et tu, Andrew?

SHOT FIFTEEN

*cut to Andy close-up*

Andy        There's more of them, Alex. <laughs>

SHOT SIXTEEN

*the two leave*

SHOT SEVENTEEN

*Mallory standing at sink, Nick behind her, Aunt Rosemary at the refrigerator, Elyse at the island, Jennifer standing behind her*

Rose.        It was my mother's idea that you become an architect.

Elyse        You know, I think I remember the day, too. Oh goodness, I think I was 9 years old. *moving to left counter* I was at Rosemary's house. I'd always wanted to be a dancer. I was there, and I put on my ballet shoes, and I danced and I danced and danced (*dancing*).

and when I was through, Grandma Brenda said, why don't you become an architect? <laughs>

SHOT EIGHTEEN

*cut to Aunt Rosemary and Jennifer laughing*

Rose.        *warmly squeezing Jennifer's cheek, Jennifer smiles* And the ballet world has never fully recovered *the camera follows her out, over to Mallory at island*

Mallory     It's great having Aunt Rosemary here. I love when she comes to visit. She's always got great stories.

SHOT NINETEEN

*cut to Nick at sink, Elyse in front of him cleaning counter with a sponge*

Nick        I like hearing about you and Mr. Keaton. You know, stories about the old days.<laughs>

*Elyse listens carefully, looks mildly upset.*

Elyse        I wouldn't call them the old days.

Nick        You know what I mean. Stories from a long, long time ago. <laughs>

Elyse        *Warning* I know what you mean

Nick        I mean stories from way, way back <laughs>

Elyse        *really mad* Nick! <laughs>

Nick            Gotcha *holds up hands in surrender, camera follows Nick to where Jennifer is, Nick leaves*

Jenn.           But it is nice that Aunt Rosemary has those stories from the....very recent past when you were a teenager. <laughs>

SHOT TWENTY

*cut to Elyse*

Elyse           Rosemary is a great storyteller, the keeper of the family history sort of. She'd write letters to everyone, keeping everyone in touch and up to date. *Thoughtfully* It's nice, you know.

SHOT TWENTY-ONE

*Mallory and Jennifer confirm her happiness with glazed smiles. Mallory leaves, Jen follows.*

SHOT TWENTY-TWO

Rose.           *coming in from the dining room, carrying a plate in.* Oh, that's a terrific gang you have, Elyse--Alex, the girls, Andrew, Phil.

SHOT TWENTY-THREE

*cut to Elyse with wry grin, waits*

Elyse           thank you.

SHOT TWENTY-FOUR

*cut to Aunt Rosemary*

Rose.           I think I'm going to go back in. I brought an old scrapbook especially for the girls to see.

SHOT TWENTY-FIVE

*cut to Elyse*

Elyse           Oh, good!

SHOT TWENTY-SIX

*cut to Aunt Rosemary*

Rose.           And a story I'm just dying to tell the kids about my mom and how it was her idea that you become an architect.

SHOT TWENTY-SEVEN

*cut to Elyse*

Elyse           *looking puzzled* What?

SHOT TWENTY-EIGHT

*cut to Aunt Rosemary*

Rose.           Why don't you remember? You were 9 and you were at our house and you wore your ballet shoes, and you danced and danced and danced and danced (*dancing*)--and then my mother just looked at you and said why don't you become an architect?

SHOT TWENTY-NINE

*cut to Elyse close-up, worried, crestfallen even.*

Elyse           I forgot.

SHOT THIRTY

*cut to Aunt Rosemary*

Rose.           Shame on you! *Rosemary leaves the room*

SHOT THIRTY-ONE

*short cut to Elyse again.*

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