

The Importance of Being Ernie: Taking a Close Look (and Listen)

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The television programs produced by Ernie Kovacs (often acted in, written by, and directed by him, too) from 1950 through 1962 on all three television network broadcasting systems in the United States, as well as Kovacs's appearances on other programs, constitute a major and singular contribution to the history of North American television as an entertainment communications medium. Kovacs's productions, usually made with a group of long-standing collaborators, and his intermittent guest appearances are even more important to any consideration to developing an aesthetics of the medium. Such a claim is not hyperbolized. There is a large body of journalistic responses through four decades, a series of TV and home video "tributes" to Kovacs and his works, a made-for-TV feature film on Kovacs's troubled personal life, a substantial number of productions and comedic sight gags that rely on his innovations, an archival collecting of the Kovacs productions and memorabilia at museums and libraries dedicated to television history, and a wealth of academic histories and critiques that affirm his seminal achievements in the medium. There is also Kovacs's own 1957 novel *Zoomar*, which centers on a protagonist in television advertising who acts as a surrogate to present, in almost manifesto fashion, many of Kovacs's principal ideas concerning the nature of TV and its limits and freedoms. Today there is a Kovacs discourse that is a shorthand way of registering the complexity of certain identifiable productions within the environment of network television at certain historical moments and some of the kinds of values and propositions that seem to be both affirmed and distressed within the larger discourse of television itself by Kovacs's productions and the responses to them. The Kovacs discourse is distinctively important as its discursiveness is registered in both elite and popular manifestations and at the often separated levels of both theory and practice. Its very heterogeneity is worth attending to for its relevance today when the power of the networks is waning and vulnerable, while other video aesthetic possibilities, earlier aborted or suppressed by professional codes, are being reconsidered in the new arrays of linkages and markets.

This text has divergent strategies for approaching the Kovacs material; in recognition of its rich complexity as a series of sign-functions, I begin, reasonably enough, then, in a spirit of disobedience or resistance to the linear narrative of chronology, a resolve that is gained from the experience of the material at hand—particularly the humor within the productions—which itself always

deliberately resists a textual unity and which would frown upon too ordinary a method of description or presentation.

Much of what is privileged as independent, irregular, or "off-beat" in relation to the predictability of television programming—Pat Paulson's appearances on the *Smothers Brothers* as a TV executive or presidential candidate; the satirical *SCTV* programs; the pre-Python program *Do Not Adjust Your Set*, written and performed by Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin on BBC; today's *Gary Shandling* or *David Letterman* shows, which break with the "fourth wall" of television; and what is loosely referred to as "artists' video"—all took up the challenge set by Kovacs in his sporadic and sometimes sustained productions (which isn't to say that they were all directly influenced by him). These kinds of "oppositions" or "resistances" are understood as such precisely because they differentiate themselves from *real TV* as a horizon of understanding; however, they remain equally "fascinated" by network TV's determining codes and cognitive style, just as the Kovacs productions did before them.

It is my hope that this text registers some interruptions of current meta-theory, which so negatively dominates discussions of TV, and also interrupts cultural studies based in singular versions of ideology. It also attempts to interrupt the autonomous discourse of art video by showing some relations to TV often neglected. Taking my cues from the aspects of Kovacs productions and sketches of Ernie Kovacs and his collaborators from excerpts of television shows of the 1950s and early 1960s as they appeared in graphic black and white, and mostly gray, on the three national network systems, I am attempting to sunder transparency.

The analysis is based on a much wider viewing of other Kovacs material including his spot involvement with other programs like *The Perry Como Show*, *The Festival of Magic* (in which his TV "magic" is contrasted to physical tricks) and his hosting activities on *The Tonight Show* and other talk and game shows. It does not take into account his film career (ten motion pictures) nor does it investigate his complicated relationship to the financial, administrative, and sponsorship determinants of all his productions—the institutional factors.

Beyond Perfection

The "Eugene" episode (November 24, 1961, ABC) primarily directs us to one Kovacs production technique and to a major thematic preoccupation of most of his other programs. The program announces itself with a rolling English text (like a silent movie insert, which reminds us that Kovacs himself once hosted a program called *Silents Please* devoted to rerunning early films on TV) to tell the audience that in the usual cacophony of noise that is television, this program will be *dedicated* to silence. Kovacs's sustained thirty-minute sketch *isn't* completely silent, showing how much we can trust what we read, as sound effects

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are used sporadically and effectively to underscore many of the motions and gestures of the actors and of the props (e.g., an absurdly small phonograph player accompanied by a full-volume orchestra). But, even with these obvious and deliberately contradictory aural exceptions, the introductory text does announce *difference* as a consciously exercised meaning-structure, and it announces that difference in relation to the already established conventions of television.¹

The form and content of the rolling text draw attention to the medium of television itself. It presents a notion of self-referentiality—of pointing back to itself—which is a standard project of modernism as understood in aesthetics.² In other words, Kovacs's text is used to announce the creation of a consciousness of the process of perception as reception or of the program's self-consciousness of production or, in short, it announces itself as critical reflection.

But the use of written text does not necessarily privilege literature as Kovacs's difference from other television. It also announces clearly that television is usually a medium of *sound*. And this is where self-referentiality is emphasized throughout this production. For all that it is advertised, sold, and theorized as a *visual* medium, network television, in particular, is primarily an *aural* medium—to the point that silence is considered a defect by both audiences and producers. Audiences, confronted with silence, will assume that the hardware isn't working properly. And TV professionals have gone to great lengths to assure the fidelity and constancy of sound tracks. The increase in volume, which is built into "short-burst" commercials is sure testament to the professionals' understanding of the vital importance of sound, and the history of showing the boomed mike as a mistake of production is a cliché icon of this deeply embedded value.³ This simple, but unusual, idea of televisual difference as critical reflection, acts to foreground the structural considerations of production with a knowing audience complicity (in itself a unique concept of the audience as receptive and intelligent) is the rare cornerstone of all the productions under consideration.

Television does not require the sustained gaze of films—TV is far too encumbered with environmental context to fill our perceptual field of vision, which is one of its major ontological differences from film at this time. Nevertheless, this, too, is shifting with the technological convergence occurring through large high-definition TV (HDTV) formats. TV is conventionally *full* of sounds that hyper-realize the identity of the visual (by repeating what is being seen or by using cliché musical cues to *overdetermine* the image). This, plus the traditional codes and genre formats, which are internalized by the culture to seem almost "natural," makes the visual content of TV easy to imagine by virtue of what is being heard. This is equally true of made-for-TV movies, although you may not be able to identify the color and type of car (or gun or girl) going over the cliff without a swift glance. A simple experiment for any-

one still convinced that TV is primarily a visual medium is to turn it against the wall and listen to a few programs. That many programs, like *All in the Family*, are directly simulcast on radio is further affirmation. Indeed, the earliest criticism of television as being nothing more than "radio with pictures" would still seem to have some critical currency in relation to much contemporary programming.

Thus, the beginning of "Eugene" acts like a manifesto of the Kovacs aesthetic—a concentration or privileging of *visuality* in the medium—effected paradoxically and necessarily by a careful attention to the role of *sound*. In "Eugene," TV's "little man," the persona played by Kovacs, like Charlie Chaplin's "little fellow," at one point pulls a tiny phonograph player from his sports jacket pocket. He then pulls a miniature record from another pocket and proceeds to plug the record player into an electrical outlet conveniently attached to his own trouser belt. With, then, no "real" source of power, Eugene puts the needle down on the record, and it immediately skips to the end. But, *despite this visual evidence*, we are still treated to a long excerpt from a full orchestra at full volume. This complete separation, the contradiction of the visual evidence from the sound evidence, is typical of Kovacs's humor or "crazy" or "formal" comedy in general.⁴

Kovacs invites a viewer to watch carefully as well as to listen attentively to TV by underscoring its separate modes of production, undermining the reliability of the gaze that covertly functions in the social conventions of watching films or television. When Eugene removes a book called *War and Peace* from the library shelf and begins reading it, each turn of a page brings a soundtrack effect of horses charging, bugles calling, cannons firing, and so on. He (we) hears the explicitly mass-media sounds of warfare as he "reads." With *Camille*, another book he "reads," Eugene hears the sounds of soft consumptive coughing. Then, as he takes *The Old Man and the Sea* down from the shelf, Eugene is deluged by rushing water accompanied by the sounds of ocean waves until he can push the book back into its slot whereupon both the water and the sound end. And so on. The highly conscious use of the rupturing of the aural and the visual dichotomies in Kovacs's productions act to foreground the techniques and technology of production by pointing to the interdependence of mediated signs in the creation of meanings. Kovacs consciously exposes the technological "nature" of a television production, emphasizing that this construction is not essentially natural, not necessarily *real*, but, instead, that our understanding is dependent upon and constituted by technological mediation. This full disclosure of the operations of television production to and for the audience permeates the Kovacs material and suggest a thematic unity to all the works, one which raises it beyond a simple gag structure that is equally common to vaudeville performance and film.

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A viewer has only to look at the introductions to other Kovacs programs to know that the same notion—a structural unmasking or releasing—is used to announce them *all*. One program begins with the camera out of focus (a technical difficulty common to early television); then, as it gradually comes into focus, it is possible to see Kovacs rubbing one of his eyes and saying that, although we thought it was our set, it was really just him adjusting *his* retina’s focus. Not incidentally, Kovacs is wearing a black-and-white vertically striped shirt, a literal “vertical-hold” sign. This identification of the camera, not as a transparent window but as an *acknowledged mediator*, guarantees viewers an awareness of what it is that they are partaking of with him. In this and other program beginnings, Kovacs is often sitting in the control room in front of a technician complete with headphones and a set of monitors recording each of the camera views. It is obvious, then, how a Kovacs production answers the understanding of the imposed force of TV’s technical imperative through, at least, the practice of the “live” aesthetic.

With the majority of Kovacs’s productions, neither the technology of the production nor even its producers are hidden. Rather, they are celebrated, put to the foreground, exposed as intimate and discrete parts of the construction of the program. As *Kovacs used to say in an often quoted sign-off*, “*It’s been real.*” Of course, it wasn’t, and that was just his point.

Percy Dovetonsils is another Kovacs persona—a poet laureate who dresses in a leopard-skin lounging jacket and is usually partially drunk. He was an obvious send-up of the conservative host of the program *Omnibus*, Alistair Cooke, by virtue of the set.⁵ In one sketch, Percy introduces his cameraman Norman and talks about how Norman had mentioned Percy’s weight problem before they came on the air. This serves to emphasize the cameraman’s role and his individual identity, as well as the (historical) time that existed before the production we are seeing. All of these sightings, and there are many more, work against the tendency (which is really an ideology) to see the camera point of view as “natural,” as a transparent window onto a scene, which is a characteristic of the then-prominent anthology dramas. They were seen from an “audience point of view” camera that relied on the theatrical tradition of the “suspension of disbelief.” To be against the automatic disposition encouraged by any symbolic system of constructing meanings, whether it be language or television, understandably emphasizes the role of the spectator in creating meanings by encouraging participation in the determination of meanings’ destinations and densities.

An extreme case of the showing of sound is the “Submergo” program, where, between other short bits and visual puns, a second camera concentrates on an oscilloscope of a real-time recording of “Mack the Knife” being sung in its original German, as a transitional *leitmotif* from sketch to sketch. The pro-

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arts are constructed and maintained. As most versions of the avant-garde are deliberately pitted against mass media as its romantic enemy, certain convergences are scrupulously avoided. By rescuing their similarities here, the protective devices necessary to preserve sterility in either discourse can be disturbed and openings for aesthetic work, which today deliberately blurs such distinctions, can be maintained. But too close a linkage may impair the pleasure of looking at the Kovacs productions, which, while similar, seem to inherently mimic the seriousness of such institutionalized avant-garde hermetic practices and the attendant seriousness of critical texts (like this one). And they are all the sweeter for knowing that they mimic them *before* they were produced.⁷

Privileging the visual took another form that is less dependent on sound as an independent factor and that simply revolves around conventional visual expectations ("perceptualism"), which are confronted with unexpected reversals. Or it might be said that the appropriate encoding of a message is subsequently inappropriately decoded—the essence of humor à la Jerry Lewis, surrealism à la André Breton, and deconstructionism à la Jacques Derrida. For instance, a typical seascape painting on a wall is shown leaking from the illusory ocean down the wall and onto the floor. Or, in one of the many "defying gravity" sketches, Kovacs, as a lumberjack, administers the final axe stroke to a tree. As he looks up to watch the tree fall, the stump underneath falls away leaving the tree suspended in the air, with its top out of the frame. In his most famous "trick," performed in many variations, the Kovacs crew built complete studio sets at a radical angle. Reconstructed via a prism on the camera to appear to obey usual vertical and horizontal axis alignment, performers could appear to defy gravity as liquid would pour out at angles and everything put on a flat table would roll off the "horizontal" surface at tremendous speed. As the camera appeared to be recording a naturalistic set, these defiances have all the illusion of stage magic but are simply a camera/set disjunction, which Kovacs "rights" at the end, for the benefit of any baffled viewers.

The Kovacs productions present the technology and its complementary techniques revealed and adapted as new creative strategies for the production of signs and, significantly, the production of a critical audience. In using a comedic convention that is antic and prop-oriented, Kovacs might seem at first consideration to be merely returning vaudeville to television as the earlier shift from vaudeville to radio had had serious consequences for comedians. In a discussion of the limits of radio for comedians, one early practitioner said:

{H}e can't depend on any stage properties to bring out an absurd point. . . . The hardest thing for the comedian to bear in mind when talking over the radio . . . is that the audience is looking at him through ears and he must appeal to them through their mental eyes.⁸

But, *vaudeo*, as some TV comedians and journalists called it, returned this visual information system directly to the performer in the arrival on TV, producing both a new generation of comedians and significant adaptations from those who had been radio stars—some of whose visual style had already been handicapped on radio. A list of these stars would include Milton Berle, Ed Wynn, Dave Garroway, Red Buttons, George Gobel, Red Skelton, and Ernie Kovacs. But a careful look at Kovacs's gravity trick or the "miniature" girl on his shoulder during one of his introductions or the slow-motion bullet that "drills" a cowboy and creates a "hole" in his body through which an audience can see the victorious protagonist's celebration, shows what is at stake with Kovacs, what is available to audiences beyond a vaudeo type comedy, and what distinguishes his productions from theirs.

Michael Nash has inventoried some of these televisual techniques, such as "keying, matting, miniaturization, split screens, double exposures, negative images"—techniques that were being discussed in terms of magic by the journalists at the time of production.⁹ These techniques, being both the possibilities and the limitations of the electronic medium of editing, low-light-level cameras, three- and four-camera studios, live performance, and so on, break with the ontology of film and its dependent postproduction constructions to develop a visuality hardly explored by network television of the day and later mostly regenerated by video artists productively concerned with developing a "language" (although occasionally and significantly also explored in film, i.e., the director/acting expertise of Jerry Lewis or Buster Keaton). Kovacs as Eugene makes a door by affixing a tape to an invisible (to us) sheet of plate glass and then subsequently opens a prepared set's door from another camera; or slits a wall and appears to disappear, predating the kind of consciously experimental, structural poetics of an early pioneer video artist: Peter Campus in *Three Transitions*, for example. And, as Nash, among others, has pointed out, this is a relation particularly important to the notion of producing a critical audience:

... often encouraging interactive anticipation. His "snap shot" campaign invited viewers to take stills of the program, which were sent Kovacs and then displayed on the show, closing the feedback loop. Another "quasi-ontological routine," as J. Hoberman described them, anticipated Douglas Davis' one-to-one "hands against the glass" appeals for direct contact with viewer: Kovacs placed a pane of glass between himself and the camera so that he would appear to splatter the viewer's TV screen with eggs.¹⁰

And we could add to the list of predates, the "interactive" video installations of Nauman or Acconci (as well as the candid simplicity of their videotapes) or even, later, Jerry Falwell's brilliant adaptation of the "hands against the screen" technique for religious *media* redemption (itself a precursor of the Howard Beale prophet in Paddy Chayefsky's *Network*) as similar intensities in

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Kovacs's production of *Swan Lake* danced by gorilla-outfitted ballerinas, his doctor's operation on a turkey perfectly camera-edited to the opening rhythms of Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*, and his wind-up mechanical monkey toys, which beat the percussion in time to the grand finale of the *1812 Overture* (and provide an iconic doubling of his own *Nairobi Trio*), all acts as satire—of *Ben Casey* or *Doctor Kildare* or of *Omnibus*—and often achieve a cartoonlike distortion. The cartoon quality is especially evident in a work entitled "Jealousy" in which an entire office is thoroughly animated by the visual and technical possibilities of television crews to the music of *Sentimental Journey* or in another episode in which whirling wheels and bows and arrows are animated by a quick, rhythmic, musical underscoring. Like Disney's *Fantasia*, but with an incredible economy of narrative means, these productions draw attention to a virtual enumeration of the medium's meaning production capabilities.

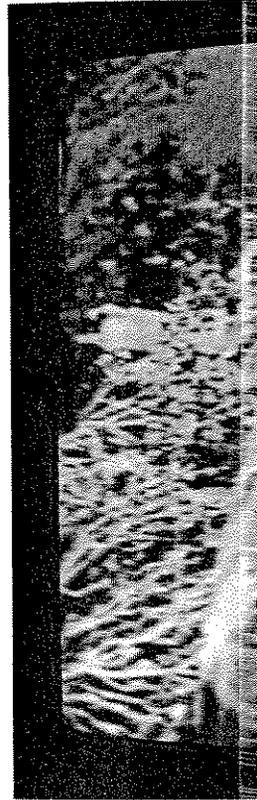
His "opera," staged by an Italian cable station's amateur team—their first broadcast—has no matching costumes and has a chorus that resembles a *herd* of operatic and television types, including a basketball player. It is played out within a tradition of comedy genre that is willfully destructive of commodities and purposefully anarchical toward cultural traditions (ideologies). But, even here, the Kovacs ensemble draws on the understanding of *television* to develop the reckless humor of the piece. The lead singer, Edie Adams, and the camera play hide-and-seek with a fountain, with her trying to position herself in the camera's gaze and the camera cumbersomely being out of synch with her movements. The cameraman moves in front of the camera's vision (twice), and the swinging microphone on a boom is more dangerous to anyone than any evil character might be. The early camera and, by extension, the camera operator become obvious and individual characters within this generally undignified movement. Another production shows a cowboy's bullet moving from within the field of the narrative fiction to outside of it, breaking the glass in the cameraman's lens (and our physical field of vision), further destroying yet another convention of transparency (ouch!)—that of the presumed relation between fiction and fact.

Beyond Genre

Another reason for identifying these productions so singularly, in tandem with the structural disclosures they perform, is that Kovacs took on television; that is, he interrogated its content, its genres, its mundanity, and its reductive entertainment narratives. On one program, Kovacs, in the technical control booth, explains conspiratorially to an audience the secret of the television industry's polemic of success. He says that if a program has shown itself to be



PBS, Chicago, *The Best of Ernie Kovacs*, 1984.



PBS, Chicago, *The Best of*

successful the industry will respond with the production motto "Beat it to death," pointing to TV's endless formulaic repeatability. Referring to the three American networks' competitive procedures and the redundancy of formats (genres), he proceeds to offer an alternative to us—excerpts from next year's Westerns.

First and most important, he gives a *history* of the Western form to date by showing a series of fictional excerpts. His theory is that a TV director's only way of combating the industry's admonition to redundancy is innovative style. The director must develop camera points of view that are progressively less boring (Kovacs's illustration of this hypothetical development is a synopsis of the Western from Griffiths to Ford to [somehow predictively] Leone). Kovacs narrates a series of different camera placements that are more and more inventive, all using the obvious vignette of the *High Noon* gun duel. He shows the reactions of the fictional Western's street audience including, eventually, a horse's reaction, to each camera shot; then he takes us, via the camera, through a hole in the hero's hat coincidentally brought to us by a hat manufacturer, to a miniature cowboy, to a colossal cowboy who destroys a whole

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PBS, Chicago, *The Best of Ernie Kovacs*, 1984.

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town with his boots, to the props surrounding the battle, and so on. After each of these worlds is explored, the camera returns in live time to a deadpan Kovacs who explains the camera choice and the genre's reference to itself or to its newly explored extensions in 'adult' Westerns. He carefully introduces the foreign Long Ranger called *Das Einsam Aufseher* who has silver "kugels" and is addressed by his sidekick with "*Gutentag, Kemo Sabey,*" followed by the *Twilight Zone* Western as though written by Rod Serling (with flowers coming out of a gun and landscape enveloped in smoke clouds like today's music videos); followed by his psychiatric cowboy version in which *what* the villain does isn't as important as *why he does it*. They all refer to the conventionalized meanings of commercial television through a sustained reflection of the Western genre as history. When Kovacs walks from the back of the studio over the sound stage littered with male bodies, to introduce another program, he says, "Sometimes they don't clean up after *The Untouchables* so good," cross-referencing his program to another program that is known to the viewer and that is on another channel at the same time. The announcer at the beginning of another Kovacs production mentions that the girl you saw on Ernie's shoulder last week wasn't

there and that it must have been your TV set. These internal textual references set up a history of production within the production of another production, cross-referencing the interconnectedness of this program with its antecedents. Such self-consciousness underlines its and their existence in the history of productions, creating an internal historical sense that is paramount to any understanding necessary for critical relations.

But, the Kovacs productions do not stop there. Not only do they offer alternatives by example, but one segment is a deliberately constructed intervention into the primary discourse that has surrounded the subject of TV since its beginnings and that continues to provide fodder for endlessly repetitious and inconclusive research—the twin axes of sex and violence. Again, setting up from the technical booth and acting as narrator to the segments, Kovacs says that he thinks that the criticism of “too much sex and violence on television is wrong.” He proposes the opposite: that there isn’t enough and that if there were more, it wouldn’t be such a contentious issue. A series of bits then shows an Archie-like kid reading *Little Women* with a “sexy” cover and *Peter Rabbit* as a pimp similarly illustrated, and a woman reading an “unexpurgated” version of the dictionary. Or the weathergirl *Cloudy Faire*, lying on a divan, is shot from high above by a gradually descending single-boom shot right to her mouth while she gives the weather conditions using a kind of come-on beatnik speech: “Like there’s this *low* pressure area and there’s this *high* pressure area.” And violence is represented in an exaggerated cop killing by a ruthless mobster who then advertises Fluffy Slicebread.

The further linking of violence to the commercials is a subtle one, but it is a sporadic thematic of the Kovacs productions’ send-ups. In another program, a new product called Jiffo, used and introduced to us by a typically stereotypical fifties housewife, is in reality a gun used to kill Junior so that he won’t dirty the floors. Similarly, a shot-through cowboy, who had been smoking one of the sponsor’s cigars, “smokes” through his many holes like an Al Capp’s Fearless Fosdick cartoon character, Capp’s satire of the Dick Tracy cartoon character.

Even the “straight” commercials are not spared this internal interrogation of clichés and are equally interventionist and integral to the larger aesthetic. In one, Kovacs plays John Smith with a cigar, whose head is about to be decapitated by a “noble savage.” We wait patiently with Ernie through “accelerated time” as Pocohontas tries to light the cigar in his mouth—presumably his last wish. Finally she succeeds and the threatening male villain Indian likes the smell, steals the cigar, and walks away. Smith and Pocohontas are united in an embrace looking at the “moon,” which is then revealed to be a theater spotlight that pans down and shows us his hidden reservoir of cigars.¹¹

It would be possible simply to list the techniques utilized in a further series of descriptions as indicative of the dialectical structures that reflect on the

nature of production versions. Favorites include Kovacs over half of tonsil’s poem on displacement to vacation by fege theme to calypso reflections on the 1950s and early 19

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nature of production and content of television as seen in these reconstructed versions. Favorites like the Nash Rambler going through the floor (which cost Kovacs over half of his week's budget for this 15-second gag), Percy Dove-tensil's poem on dieting, which includes the memorable line "Hawaii's a nice place to vacation but Alaska's meant to be baked"; or the Nairobi Trio's sol-fège theme to calypso music, all of which form a whole set of potential critical reflections on the cultural domain of the United States of America during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Or one could theorize more blatantly Kovacs's productions in terms of semiotic deconstructions—both cognitive and affective responses by identifica-tion of discursive symbols in relation to those of a poetic, phatic, and emotive nature. However, a thorough investigation of the works at the level of signs would soon discover that they are also as deeply embedded in the negative as-pects of their culture as any other productions of the time. If the disclosing features discussed above and related to modernist ideology are "radical," then the sign level also contains and reveals "conservative" elements. Sexism, rac-ism, ethnicism, and other characteristics of cold war United States are all en-forced by character stereotypes, for instance. Women are often scantily dressed for no other reason than male voyeurism or they are denigrated outright as in the musically animated "eating" sketch where the only woman present is dressed in baby clothes and shown repeatedly and rhythmically sucking on a baby bottle. The character dressed in a Chinese Hollywood "Fu Man Chu" outfit complete with Mandarin pigtail sits at a separate table, while Native Americans are always shown as the noble savage clichés of Hollywood film's iconic representations of empire building. Children are always stupid pests, and so on.

There is a way in which these conservative elements, which strongly miti-gate against a fully "progressive" interpretation, are simply endemic to the tra-ditions of comedy itself. As Stuart Hood pointed out:

*Comedy—whether in the form of a verbal joke or in the form of a situation comedy—is of great importance. To criticize the use made of it is not to deny its place in human communication or to overlook the fact that comedy is probably always unfair.*¹²

Or in the words of Henri Bergson, a much earlier theorist of comedy, we are reminded that comedy is always involved in an indiscriminate morality.

*Laughter punishes certain failings somewhat as a disease punishes certain forms of excess, striking down some who are innocent and sparing some who are guilty, aiming at a general result and incapable of dealing separately with each individual case.*¹³

The very injustice of comedy does not, however, cover over the specific kinds of injustices that it performs. Another factor for consideration would be audi-ence. I have tried to show here how at least one audience can be constructed

by the historical responses to Kovacs in both practices and theories. Further investigation would have to try to account for the elusive intentionality in concert with readings that I have alluded to here as empathetic to audiences. Kovacs's own consideration of audiences seems to have strayed from the dominant preoccupations with audiences of industry procedures (where they are thought of as demographics only) and theoreticians (where they are thought of as dupes of determination) alike. At the time of the so-called crisis in comedy on TV, Kovacs was quoted as saying:

Say that you have four neighbors on this floor. Three of them come over to talk at the same time on Friday night after dinner. The fourth guy happens to be a great wit and comes in the door with his pants rolled up and a lamp shade on his head. With the others you don't have to get involved. You sit here and talk or play cards. But with the man who thinks he is funny you have to laugh. And the fact is that sometimes you just don't feel like laughing.¹⁴

There is, however, justification for a consideration of Kovacs's work at the levels of representation of the surface in that his works seem to be consensually regarded as representational anomalies to many registers within television practices and criticism. And this difference is noted from within *both* the video art and the network television discourses at the levels *both* of engaging production practices (to produce nonstandardized commodities) and of theoretical options. The oxymoronic term *radical conservatism* is meant to suggest a tension or polyvalence that could be called a Kovacs aesthetic, or discursive practice, which was noticed at the time of production and which has been continually reinterpreted as radical or transgressive of conventional ideas of the codes of network TV. As early as 1957, *Life* magazine was describing him as an "inventive, uneven but frequently inspired entertainer" and pointed to his unusual "use of tools of television." As late as 1985, in *High Performance*, his work is described as "visionary performances" and "subversive satire," and it is added that "Kovacs delighted in toying with the medium's technology of illusion."¹⁵ In other words, then and now, almost three decades apart, both to writers in a broadly based mass-circulation magazine and those of a marginal subcultural group, Kovacs's productions seemed and continue to seem exemplary and anomalous to the assumptions of insufficient standard fare that have permeated most intellectual responses associated with television codes.

Yet, despite this homologous acceptance of attributes of disjunction, *this unfamiliar conformity toward defamiliarization*, which is uniformly cited, the Kovacs works were produced *within* an industry that is widely considered to be conservative, at best, and that is always deeply implicated in "unprogressive" values in the cultural domain (the litany of racism, sexism, ethnicism, national protectionist chauvinism, etc., are today not significantly different from what they were in the 1950s). At worst, this industry is held to be hegemonic, par-

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ticularly by academics in the spirals of critical theory and especially today by individual video producers or independents who emerged in the late 1960s as part of an avant-garde art practice or community services industry. The industrial production of TV with its gatekeeping and agenda-setting functions of maintaining social hierarchy is even more particularly considered to have *become* eminently conservative, or even reified, by the joint interests of regulatory bodies and the network/advertising industries in the United States at the end of the 1950s. And this reification is seen to be put into place at *precisely* the time that most of Kovacs's works under consideration here were produced.

The term *radical conservative* is meant to invoke this forceful tension between Kovacs's productions of meanings; between the signifying systems understood as subversive and the networks' processes of production and distribution in general, which have been seen as a conservative aesthetic discourse of American imperialism by even its most optimistic and allied commentators. The right wing and the left wing have often agreed as to what TV does; they just have disagreed as to who has the right to do it.

My interest in this friction stems from a professional and personal interest in the emergent practices of television production, variously called video art, alternative television, television by artists, or independent television. These terms are often conflated into the single term *video*, currently enjoying inflated currency because of the salesmanship associated with, ironically, home markets for videocassettes of *films* and the recent popularity (in home and broadcast markets) of rock music video clips as a tertiary level of consumption of musical signs. It would appear from the writings and practices of many people in the art/video discourse (but not all, for it is an elitist social group) that Kovacs's works and a consequent understanding or misunderstanding of his legacy of "independence" act as a kind of talisman or privileged moment within the history of North American TV. This moment is often taken as an affirmative, positive, or even emancipatory event suggesting the real possibility of a nonautonomous discourse for other video practices (i.e., nonmuseum). The body of Kovacs's work is the single most visible *historical* precedent for independent television work within the broadcast structure—an earlier moment of hope or breakthrough or cross-over—a transgression of the art/entertainment dichotomy—a counter-TV which precedes postmodern concerns for the construction of a larger audience.

Because Kovacs occupies this seemingly privileged position for practitioners, theoreticians, historians, and journalists of video, it is tempting simply to perpetuate an *auteur* status for him, but two cautions should be remembered. The first is that such video producers as Zbigniew Rybczynski, whose Polish cultural experience could not have included Kovacs references until very recently, if at all, also points to sources as diverse as Nicolai Gogol, Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, and Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, the Polish painter,

writer, and dramatist of the Absurd. Kovacs is only one of a myriad of cross-cultural influences whose list could easily be expanded in reference to any of these artists. It also, not incidentally, shows these video practitioners' disregard for the ontological differentiations—like Kovacs's productions, for example—of film from TV from literature, differentiations that are passionately protected in only academic discourse.

Second, such *auteurship* privileges the one person within a collaborative effort to the exclusion or reduction of other persons, as well as considerations such as administrative, advertising, labor, or technical determinants, among others. But, in avoiding a pure *auteur* theory, while nevertheless, admittedly, contributing to its mythology simultaneously by using Kovacs's name to cover an extensive and complex set of productions, I do not wish to undermine or underestimate Kovacs's own contributions in his various roles as performer, writer, producer, director, and executive producer, often occupying many of these positions simultaneously within one production. There is a methodological and theoretical tension here, then, not unlike the tension in the aesthetics discussed.

Besides playing a seminal role for some contemporary artistic video production, the productions of Kovacs also occupy a clear and central place within the larger surveys of early television. An example is the academic and museological interest that Robert Rosen, television archivist at the University of California, Los Angeles, pays to the productions. Another and perhaps more surprising example is the PBS production *The Best of Ernie Kovacs*, which forms one material base for this inquiry; this production is an indication of his unusually high position and acceptance in the industry. This PBS program is singular in its recontextualizing of his productions as a mini-history of television within the broadcast format, within, that is, an industry notorious for effacing history and traditions. From such diverse points as the academy, the museum, the art world, and the industry of commercial TV and film, there is this consensus about the placing of the Kovacs material.

A further reflection on this singular status is the relation that Kovacs's productions have to a trend to either sentimentalize or historicize the period of American television usually referred to as the "Golden Age." This period is one in which certain values, usually literary-theatrical and liberal-reformist in kind, are often inscribed with a collective regret, a loss, and a despair. These values are separated out to stand in contradistinction to the later values perceived to be overwhelming on the three major networks since the early 1960s, the period that begins network bashing of the "wasteland" variety.

Although Kovacs continued to produce, making the transition to Los Angeles beyond the Golden Age parameters, it is still fair to assume that Kovacs's work is associated with this period and thus with some of the nostalgia toward it, although close inspection and viewing has revealed distinct differ-

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of artistic video production central place within the academic and museological University of California—perhaps more surprising, *Kovacs*, which forms the focal point of his unpublished PBS program is significant in the history of television notorious for effacing the legacy, the museum, and, there is this con-

dition that Kovacs's work historicize the period of the 1950s. This period is characterized by liberal-reformist in a sense of despair. These are the later values perceived since the early 1960s, a time of variety. The transition to Los Angeles to assume that Kovacs is one of the nostalgias led distinct differ-

ences from the predominant notions of the the narrower and strictly genre-oriented classifications of it as live and oriented toward drama.

To give a slightly more skewed, or theoretical-formal, history to this universally regretted Golden Age, it is also possible to point to an idea put forward by communications theorist Marshall McLuhan. The early period up to 1957 seems to fulfill one of his insightful identifications empirically. This period is represented by television writers, writers on television, as well as journalists of the day; that is, it is represented by *writers* who culturally privileged genres of theatrical-literary performance or ("vaudeo") comedy—in other words, they privileged the *previous* art forms televised. In retrospect, we can see that they constantly rehearse the stages of a medical chronology that McLuhan applied to the conditions of acceptance when a new communications technology is introduced.¹⁶ McLuhan was pointing to the misunderstanding and to the cultural lag that occurs through resistance when a new communications mode is insinuated into a society, and his analysis provides a structural fit for the associations of the literary "shock" toward the new medium. This is particularly true regarding a period that ended, by all descriptions, in exhaustion, fear of diminishing audiences, fear of saturated markets, and fears of audience mistrust of "live" programming prompted largely by the quiz-show scandals. But the Kovacs team survived all of this, in part because they did understand the fundamental changes wrought by the medium.

Looking (and listening) closely to the Kovacs productions, with their solid reputation for problemizing notions of passive reception, might lend some modest insights without necessarily generating a new totalizing theory or a generalized formula for methodology. Kovacs's critical and popular status over three decades, and his particular "mutant" adaptation of radical conservatism, might lend entry into a practice for *this* time of transition. Today is another period when a shift in communications is taking place—from the imminent death of TV as the privileged form and the birth of digital information processing systems with "virtual images" and hidden relations of power. The Kovacs productions represent a moment of multivalent and dialectical practices that predated and continue to outdate many assumptions concerning the limits of aesthetic inquiry into the communications and art discourse surrounding the television medium. They are a legitimate legacy that video artists have already taken as important to interventionist production.