Folklore in a Box

LANCE MORROW

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In this article, Morrow argues that each era has its own way of storytelling and that television "truths" sometimes seep into the pool of cultural "truth." He explains how history is represented by media content through images, events, and stereotypes from the past—and why that may not be a good thing.

It is very strange, and metaphysically untidy: television has eaten a hole through the membrane separating America's right brain and left brain.

Fantasies seep into facts. Entertainment and journalism drift back and forth across the borders. The bicameral arrangement of culture and politics dissolves. The baby of the (nonexistent) Murphy Brown flies out of its cradle and hovers like an illicit pink cherub over the American presidential succession.

About these spectacles—the Sister Souljah nonsense a few months ago, the Vice President of the U.S. wagging his finger at hallucinations of the popular culture, denouncing Murphy Brown, or telling the MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour, "I will continue to speak out against Ice-T," as if he were preparing for the Lincoln-Douglas debates—there is something both confused and vaguely degrading. Something unworthy and a little stupid. Here is American history deteriorated to Roger Rabbit, to interactive slapstick, to 'toons. What will America do at the end of history? Francis Fukuyama asked. Well, maybe watch a little TV.

But the new electronic metaphysics is not always trivial. It harbors wild disproportions. A homemade videotape could burn down a large section of Los Angeles. The videotape told a story: Los Angeles cops hit Rodney King on the head and, doing so, split the social atom.

The movie director Spike Lee set off a small tabloid uproar not long ago when he suggested that young blacks should skip school if necessary to see his movie biography of Malcolm X when it opens this fall. A hideously wrong message, people said, undermining discipline and education. But

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Spike Lee understands a central truth: what is occurring today is a war of American myths, a struggle of contending stories. And pop culture, often television, is the arena in which it is being fought.

Stories are precious, indispensable. Everyone must have his history, her narrative. You do not know who you are until you possess the imaginative version of yourself. You almost do not exist without it. Blacks were mostly excluded or held in the margins of the national story. As Spike Lee knows, blacks more than other Americans need their stories now, the recovered histories of what they have been and fantasies of what they might be. The American family, as well, desperately needs a new folklore, a new driving myth. The old version, which in caricature is a 1950s suburban setting out of Ozzie and Harriet, does not entirely work anymore, except in nostalgia, in Kennebunkport, Maine, or in Ronald Reagan's afternoon naps.

America needs to restock its repertoire of folklore and self-images and archetypes. The 1992 presidential campaign has made its noisy way across a nation that has lost many of its defining ideas about itself. The cold war's end gave Americans only a kind of abstract triumph—and left a void. The collapse of communism and the Soviet empire suddenly removed the dark moral counterweight by which Americans measured their own virtue. Chronic recession, the rise of Japanese and European economic competitors, the vast inflow of immigrants from non-European sources (strangers to the older American tradition), the shrinking of the buffering Atlantic and Pacific oceans (jet travel, satellites, global distribution of goods), all these have eaten away at the long American smugness, the postwar sense of superiority, of grace.

The oldest version of the narrative glowed with a confidence of divine sponsorship: America was lit from within. Later, Americans adopted the more aggressive myth of Manifest Destiny. Curiously, the members of the baby-boom generation came to believe that the ideas of divine sponsorship and Manifest Destiny were intended to apply to them. Now the boomers, who transform every moment that they encounter and every twig that they step upon into unprecedented trauma or revelation, have arrived at midlife crisis. Noises of the generation's falling hair and its disillusionments—is that all there is?—are muzzling in the American background. A certain unease with grownups maybe: in JFK, Oliver Stone took apart a representative American myth with a chain saw and reassembled it in strange shapes. During the '60s, the boomers watched in some wonder as American authority (the university system, for example, and the presidency of Lyndon Johnson) seemed to fall before them. But they have been slow to install their own authority in its place.

America is littered with the unorganized and unassimilated marvels and griefs of recent years. Enormous questions about the relations between men
and women, for example. The country is changed. It has taken a lot of curves very fast, on two wheels. Many old habits are useless and even destructive now.

Much of folklore and myth is embedded in oddments of visual memory (stereotypes, propagandas, stray entertainments) and in a few national epics like the story of the Kennedys, with its bright, shining moments and its darker subplots and disgraces. The narratives that Americans need may be somewhat more advertent, and morally organized. People invent stories to explore their own behavior and to imagine their own possibilities. Few moments in America’s moral life have surpassed the soliloquy, product of Mark Twain’s imagination, in which Huck Finn agonizes over what to do about turning over the runaway slave Jim to the white authorities. Huck ends by accepting the consequences of his decision not to do so: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell.”

Especially when venturing into new territory where mere habit will no longer suffice, people require the stabilizing, consoling, instructing influence of other human tales. People without a surrounding atmosphere of myth and example are prone to the stupidity that arises from being isolated and incurious about the nuances of others’ experience.

It misses the point to say that Murphy Brown is not a real character. Fiction is real enough in its powers. When Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, he said, “So this is the little lady who made this big war.” That, at least, is the legend. Little Eva perhaps belongs to a higher order of symbolism than Murphy Brown’s baby, but the simple principle, the power of stories, remains the same.

Poets and playwrights and novelists have always processed political events into entertainments and legends. Television now hastens reality into art with a sort of Irish efficiency: when an Irish Republican Army terrorist-hero blows up a British army truck in midafternoon, the deed will probably be a song in the pubs that night. Such ready glorification is one reason that no peaceful settlement has been found. Sitcom writers have developed similar reflexes. Topicality, however, ages a script rapidly. It strands an episode in time, and makes reruns seem alienated, quaint.

Fictions that get mixed up in politics—or religion—can become dangerous. Salman Rushdie has reason to know this: sitting alone with his imagination, he conjured up a story, The Satanic Verses, that has had him in hiding, under an ayatollah’s fatwa, a sentence of death, for the past 3½ years. But as Rushdie has said, “The idea that writers should not argue about the world and simply write their little stories is a defeat.”

Television is almost always unsettling and amazing when one thinks about it. It imposes upon America a strange simultaneity, if not a unity. It
makes for a coast-to-coast viewers' version of what Kurt Vonnegut Jr. called a granfalloon, a wholly artificial brotherhood. TV characters themselves, whatever good lines their writers give them, almost inevitably have the flat soulless quality of people dropped on earth and hatched from a pod. Maybe it's the electron dust on the screen.

Still, surely it is preferable to have television dramas and sitcoms addressing important dilemmas now and then—single motherhood, for example, or drug addiction or wife battering. Better than to revert entirely to Gomer Pyle and Gilligan's Island and My Little Margie.

On certain levels, the U.S. is a dangerously splintered and tribal country. America's historically indiscriminate embrace has depended on economic opportunity to make the whole enterprise (The Dream) function. Obviously, angers and abrasions deepen when many are competing for fewer jobs. In such an atmosphere, television acts often as a universalizing, mediating influence. It becomes a kind of third eye, however myopic on occasion, or however silly. By telling stories as it does (however skewed its critics, like Quayle, may think the stories are), television may mitigate against fanaticism and fantasies of revenge. The medium's demographic gyroscopes almost inevitably discourage bigotry. It is sometimes a shaming agent: a drama about the dilemmas of homosexuals, for example, may shame many Americans into being more tolerant on that score. The medium has a ceremonial and sacramental role when it covers tragedies, Challenger explosions, state funerals and the like. It even performs some of the functions of an American conscience. Its priestly influences reach into areas of everyday attitude and morals.

Ross Perot proposed an instantaneous participatory television democracy—a national electronic town meeting in which Americans could directly register their opinions on issues. Television has already swallowed the political parties, and Perot's hookup would override the Constitution's framework of representative democracy and deliberation.

But in a bizarre way, television's storytelling has become a form of representational democracy—or symbolic democracy, anyway. Perhaps, as Quayle says, the mythmaking roles are in the hands of a cultural élite that is alien to much of America. Still, being sensitive to the market economy of ideas and entertainment preferences, television naturally represents various American points of view and dilemmas. It churns out a visual rhetoric, an electronic folklore. It is the griot of American transience.

In the struggle of the stories, whose is the authentic American voice? Murphy Brown (played by the daughter of the long-ago-famous puppeteer-ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, and manipulated by activist fortysomething Hillary Democrats) represents a certain constituency. Dan Quayle, having no television surrogate to manipulate, has passed through the looking glass,
playing himself, representing another America. He has become a moral symbol and performer himself: statesman and 'toon.

American storytelling is too important to be left so much to television. In American TV, a spirit only modestly gifted—and sometimes flat stupid—sits at the wheel of a trillion-dollar vehicle. The machine, being commercial, has that tendency to veer toward the ditch, seeking the least common denominator. The medium’s technological prowess—and its relentless, pervasive presence in the society—imposes a responsibility that its writers and producers and directors probably should not have to bear. National Bard . . . and banality. Television does its work. But there are better ways to tell a story.

Questions for Critical Thinking and Discussion:

1. In your opinion, what is it to be an American? What accompany the idea of being an American? What negative stereotypes or prejudices do you think the social stories about Americanism are in fact these stems?

2. Television may be the largest and most significant part of our culture, the image of the nation played on television. Why does television tell specific area-specific demographic groups? How does this affect are him?