Tony Hancock (left) and *Steptoe And Son* (centre): Dissecting the social subtleties of dominance and subservience

those Golden Years

Television is *the* medium of the second half of the 20th century. The 60s was its cultural heyday. It is now on the verge of its biggest transformation since the war. In his *South Bank Show* lecture, reprinted below, **Colin MacCabe** looks at the past and future of television

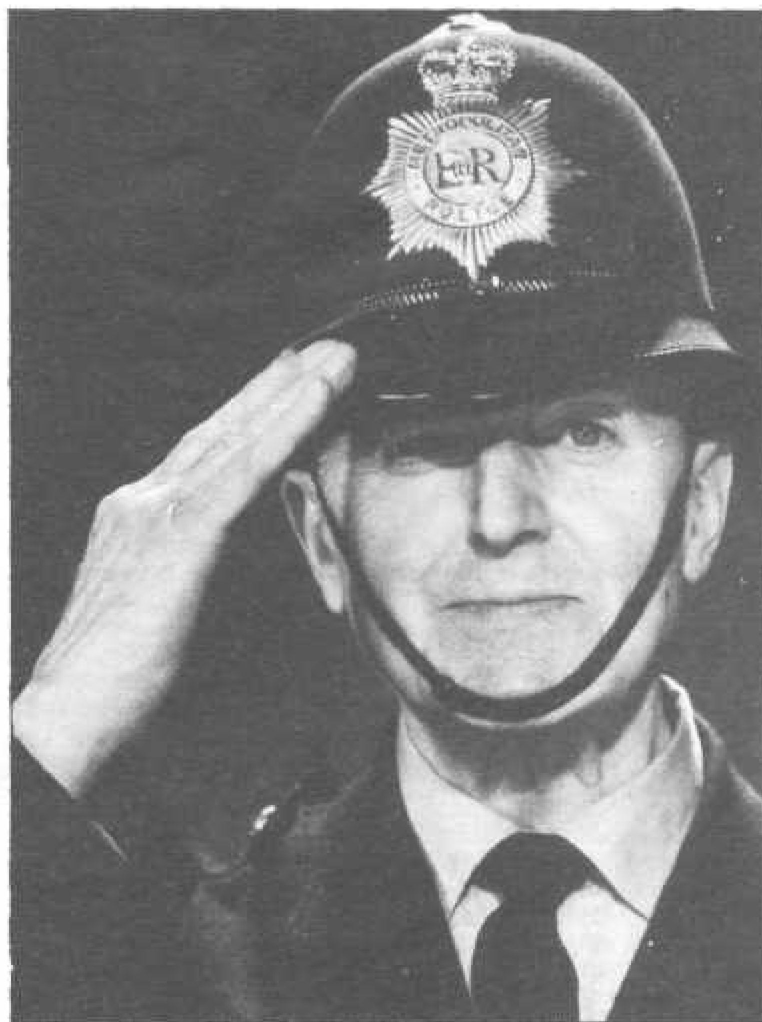
Television came into my home in 1957 -I was eight years old, ITV was a baby, albeit one that I couldn't receive on my first set. For the next decade, until I went up to university, television was to offer me education and entertainment on a scale that I still find difficult to credit. It would be silly to discount the value and importance that I found in both traditional schooling and traditional culture. Equally, the new technology of recorded music and the older technology of the cinema offered pleasures and insights unknown to television but it was television, more than any other institution or medium, which opened up the world for me.

The suburban London of the 50s into which I was born was a very limited world: limited in class, in history, in behaviour, in politics, in information. If I were to pick a television programme which seemed to epitomise the limited pleasures of that world, it would be *Dixon of Dock Green.* Each week George Dixon would stride forward to address us in our comfortable suburban homes and to offer us a cautionary tale from Life at Dock Green. The character of Dixon had been stolen from the film *The Blue Lamp* which had attempted to articulate a postwar British consensus and, for George, the values of family, authority and tradition were as evident as they were simple.

When Z *Cars* spilled onto our screens in the early 60s, we were suddenly transported from the traditional certainties of Dock Green to the more complex and complicated world of Newtown. Love, work and crime were no longer evident categories which could be allocated to pre-ordained moral pigeonholes. When, in a moment etched in my memory, Jeremy Kemp's wife hurled his supper at him in anger and frustration at the demands of his job, we were not being invited to sit in moral judgement but to witness the conflicts between work and family which the new modern home of consumer society made all the more acute. It was small wonder that the chief constable of Lancashire took the next train to London to complain.

Television was suddenly discussing the most pressing and disturbing of moral and social problems and discussing them in the living room. Ibsen's dramas or Hollywood films still shocked the private sensibilities of the bourgeoisie in public spaces. Television brought the public sphere right into the breeding ground of that private sensibility - the home. In doing so it immediately became the focal point for all serious questions of censorship.

It is my own personal belief that if one wishes to estimate the importance of any art form you should immediately



Dixon Of Dock Green: **Epitomised the pleasures of a limited suburban world**

consult the censors. Censors are unhampered by aesthetic theories or the critical responses of previous eras, they know what they don't like and they don't like it because it's important. When Ben Jonson published his collected plays in 1616 he was mocked by a literary establishment who ignored the theatre as too popularly based to be anything but aesthetically insignificant. Elizabeth's and James' Lord Chamberlains, on the other hand, had no doubt that what happened on the stage was so crucial to culture and politics that it had to be rigorously policed and monitored.

When Matthew Arnold bemoaned the state of poetry in the mid-19th century without seriously considering the novels of Dickens which he so much enjoyed, he was refusing to accept that the evidence, from across the Channel, where Flaubert was being tried for the publication of *Madame Bovary,* showed that the novel had become the central literary form. The intellectuals at the beginning of this century who despised the cinema and its immense popularity understood less about its potential than the asinine Hays who elaborated the moral code which ruled Hollywood for 30 years.

My teachers at school might affect not to watch television and to regard it as insufferably vulgar but looking at Z *Cars* I knew that those who wished to

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censor it were absolutely right - this was the most important drama of my time and I was determined not to miss it. I did not, at that stage, make any fundamental distinction between a popular series like Z *Cars* and the more culturally respectable single plays. It was, however, the single plays which produced greater pleasure and genuine awe. The play which stands for all the socially conscious drama of that time, although socially conscious is far too limiting and lame a phrase, is *Cathy Come Home.* Brilliantly acted and directed, it showed how fragile was the affluence of the postwar years and how easily one could fall into a grim urban underclass which did not know that poverty had been abolished. The end is still powerful and upsetting.

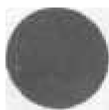
To dwell on the drama of the period is, whatever its riches, misleading. Drama is the oldest of the literary genres and it is all too easy to regard television simply as a medium of transmission uninvolved with the forjns it records. If we turn to situation comedy then we are dealing with a genre whose very form and structure depends on the rhythms and repetitions of television. And there is another advantage. Although the drama of the time was superb and still repays viewing, as the recent Denis Potter retrospective on the BBC demonstrated, I cannot be certain that its value will endure beyond the period when its contemporary references and allusions are easily understood. I have no such doubts about the great situation comedies. *Hancock, Steptoe and Son* and *Till Death Us Do Part* will still provoke laughter as long as there are television sets and viewers.

What I want to emphasise here is their coruscating analysis of the dominance of class in Britain. Again and again these comedies mercilessly and hilariously dissect the social subtleties of dominance and subservience that cripple so much of our daily life. While today's sitcoms seem content to reproduce the class stereotypes which become ever more dominant, a Hancock or a Steptoe rendered the stereotypes more and more ineffective by exposing the shame and humiliation that underpinned them. In the painful laughter of recognition that they provoked lay hope if liberation.

And that liberation drew on some of the most profound historical changes of the 20th century. The situation comedies grew out of the sketches and routines of music halls. This development was intimately connected with the second world war and the fabled entertainment arm of the services: ENSA. As the situation comedy developed its radio form, which television

was to borrow, its comedy was heavily dependent, in personnel and tone, on that great social upheaval we call the second world war. The carnivalesque atmosphere which the threat of death and extinction can evoke combined with the intense social mobilisation of the people's war to produce an immense guffaw at the paralysing poison of class. If the drama I have already evoked came largely from the pens of a grammar school generation produced by the Butler education act, the situation comedies depended for their deepest energies on the radicalising social mobilisation of the second world war.

'Saturday night after Saturday night the sacred cows were led to the slaughter, the shibboleths were mocked'



I want to consider some cynical objections that might be raised by somebody who saw this glorification of the past as simply yet another distressing sign of middle age at one with receding hair and an expanding waist. These objections will lead, I hope, to an understanding of why that period can rightly be considered as a golden age.

The most powerful objection would argue that to treat television as a unified cultural form is already to misunderstand the nature of the technology. Television as a medium has so many different relations to so many different aspects of our experience that it is ridiculous to try to understand television as any kind of unity.

This important and cautionary argument has much to recommend it but it ignores the fact that television was, and to a certain extent is, unified in two ways. Unified at its point of reception in the home and unified at its point of production in the huge broadcasting institutions. For the teenage viewer that I have tried to evoke at the beginning of this lecture, it was crucial to the impact of television that all these diverse programmes were available in the same mode, often on the same night and, for almost all the examples I have taken, on the same channel - the BBC.

This does not mean that ITV was not crucial to the developments of the early 60s. Almost all the programmes I have talked about were developed and produced in direct response to the challenge mounted by ITV. Indeed this interdependence of BBC and ITV is a continuing feature of television. The complex interlocking nature of the system is such that the excellences of one channel cannot be understood independently of the other channels with which it is competing.

For the moment, however, all I want to stress is the importance of the unity conferred on television by the very fact that a multitude of diverse forms are juxtaposed in a very concrete way by the set that receives them. The single most important result of this juxtaposition is that television in Britain refused to separate the traditional forms of high culture from the traditional forms of popular entertainment. That division, endemic and crippling to Western culture since the Renaissance, was challenged by a technology which could provide both and the ethos of public service broadcasting which ensured that both were provided.

The BBC's historical attitude to popular forms of entertainment on radio was deeply paternalistic. If the population had to be provided with circuses, then the circuses would be carefully managed by mandarins. But the carnival atmosphere of the circus is seriously contagious and even mandarins have been deeply affected. The inevitable result of producing a wide variety of programmes within the same organisation was that there was a great deal of cross-fertilisation and the major comedies like *Hancock* or *Steptoe* are genuine hybrids, products of a wide variety of cultural traditions. This was the second real unity of television, the unity of production and broadcasting functions in large organisations, particularly the BBC, and the real possibility of creative interaction between very different departments.

So television has a real unity, but perhaps its history is very simple to understand and has nothing to do with television as such. What has happened to television in the 30 years since the opening of ITV is simply what happens to any new institution. When television started it was the province of the young and enjoyed a technology which militated against tight editorial control. As youth has aged and the technology has allowed much more effective editorial intervention, television has simply submitted to the iron laws of Weber - bureaucracy rules.

In my more pessimistic moments this account seems all too true. But it ignores the place of television within its wider social context and it is that wider context which enables us to understand fully why we can indeed talk of a golden age of television. The official culture of England was, for over 300 years, identified with a printed language which inevitably ignored specific differences of class, region and gender. It would be the wildest of McLuhanite fantasies to confuse medium and message, and suggest that somehow print was intrinsically the property of a male ruling class, but it is a medium in which any differences relating to speech - be they of class, gender or region - do not register in the evident way they do when people talk. The notion of unified culture is thus peculiarly plausible in a print-based culture and when the BBC started broadcasting they attempted to reproduce the terms and assumptions of such cultural unity.

The Reithian news announcer, clothed in his dinner jacket and articulating the precise tones of received pronunciation, can serve as an image of that unified national culture and the terms of that unification. Many might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that with the advent of broadcasting we would finally see regional speech forms disappear and Professor Higgins rule all our tongues. The reality of the development of broadcasting in Britain is that it has led to an ever greater diversity of accents and speech patterns and an ever more fragmented national culture. The potential of radio to introduce differences of class and region into an institutional structure deliberately set up to reproduce a national culture was realised by the medium of television.

Historically, the regional structure of ITV was an important factor in this, but more important than the role of speech in the medium or the structure of its institutions was television's place in the radical social transformation produced by the advent of the consumer society. The energies released by the new forms of marketing-led production have still to be evaluated fully. They cannot begin to be understood without analysing television, which both as advertising medium and consumer durable is an integral part of these new patterns of consumption. The paradox of television in this period and the reason that it generated such excitement was that it used a cultural form which presupposed (and indeed to some extent guaranteed) the traditional conception of the nation to both reflect and produce a very different kind of national culture: more pluralist, less dominated by the forms of writing and traditional high culture, more open to both international and local variations.

What happened in the late 50s and early 60s was that a nation gathered to witness its own transformation. Television, while no means the only or most important cause of this transformation, became its focus. There are, in the history of the West, three particularly important moments of dramatic innovation: 5th century Athens, the Elizabethan stage and Hollywood in its early silent heyday. In each of these cases there are some important and striking parallels. All three witnessed an extraordinary combination of both official and popular culture. All three, while intensely concerned with art, found their justification elsewhere - in Athens in terms of religion, in Elizabethan England and Hollywood in terms of commerce.

Perhaps most extraordinary of all, all three combined an extraordinary intensity of commitment to particular productions with a complete carelessness about the preservation of the artefacts thus produced. The details of Athenian stage productions are gleaned from a few lines in Aristotle, we lack even one manuscript of a Shakespeare play, and many silent films decomposed before latter-day archivists could preserve them.

It is a curious fact that ail these comments apply equally to British television of the 60s and none more than the final one. To talk to anyone who worked in

television at that time is to become aware that the excitement was not simply felt by viewers like myself. People worked and argued with a fierce passion and yet curiously much was not preserved - the archive for this period is extraordinarily bare. But one should not be surprised as nobody then took television as a serious art form.

I do not want to suggest that television of the 60s should be ranked in some all time artistic hit parade with *The Bacchae, Hamlet* and *Intolerance.* But I do want to suggest that the importance of these historical moments is related to very deep and momentous political changes and the way in which a new medium for artistic expression can articulate those changes. Both the Athenian drama and the Elizabethan stage provided the aesthetic and symbolic space in which the emotional and personal possibilities of the new political forms of the Greek *polis* and the European nation-state were examined.

'Broadcasting has led to an even greater diversity of accents and speech patterns and an ever more fragmented national culture'

Hollywood, and the television of which I have been talking, seem to me to relate to political changes as momentous but which, as the processes are by no means completed, are more difficult to grasp. Furthermore, cinema and television seem to be linked as aesthetic forms, with both their possibilities and their failures, to a new political order which may well prove stillborn. If we think back to the beginning of the century and to the valley of the angels in southern California, where middle European Jews organised actors from every ethnic background into narratives written in English, it is no surprise that many thought that this was the artistic medium which would reflect a new international order. Of course, from the Hays code through the McCarthyite witchhunts the history was written differently and the medium and possibilities of film were tied to the last, greatest and most paradoxical of European nations - the United States of America.

The history of television in the early 60s prompts some analogous political reflections. Night by night the set brought forth fresh images which fresh images begat in a cycle that denied any possibility of simply identifying any one of them, or any combination of them, with Britain. One might have anticipated that the political analogue of this would have been an ever-increasing decentralisation of national power, not simply in relation to regional definitions but in relation to a whole number of differing and competing collectivities.

Certainly developments in television itself have followed that logic. The multiplication of channels, the advent of the video-recorder, the pluralisation of special forms of entertainment, means that the unified set of the 60s is now itself a multitude of different possibilities. At the same time the founding of Channel 4, with an explicit remit to break the link between transmission and production and to foster much smaller groups of producers, has seen the institution of television subject itself to a process of fragmentation and splitting.

The period of the paradoxical golden age, when the two channels of BBC and ITV could use their cultural dominance to bring the message that such a dominance was at an end, is over. What, however, can we expect to replace it, and can we anticipate that the age to come will be silver, bronze, or some even baser metal?

As we enter the most important era of television reform since the 60s, I hope that my brief account of the past has demonstrated that the choices made now will have the most serious social and cultural consequences. The current government's desire to ease the monopolistic control of television is, in itself, no bad thing. Indeed it could be seen as the development of the cultural logic I have sketched, in which ever more differences find articulation in more pluralised forms of entertainment. But beneath this aim one can possibly discern two more sinister agendas.

The first is a hatred of the power of television and a hatred that identifies that power with the existing structures. Why not dismantle the existing structures, break up the big existing organisations, and the host of small independents will never wield that power again? More bluntly, and this thought must have passed through the mind of many a harassed politician, do away with BBC and ITV and no politician will have to fear television again. These thoughts are the merest folly. Television will wield its power over politicians more or less whatever structures are used other than direct state control. It is therefore crucial that this power is wielded with the responsibility of a regulated institution and not with the irresponsibility of an unregulated tabloid press. Concretely that means that while access for independents must be encouraged, the existing institutions must command enough resources to allow them genuine autonomy.

Secondly, and working at a much deeper level, is a desire to reproduce the nation that has died and the moral and social certainties which have vanished with it. One can see this desire surface in the attempts to arraign television for the tragedy at Hungerford. Even the sparsest details of Michael Ryan's life speak volumes on the fragmentation of any shared national culture.

However, our, contemporary politicians are unwilling to address seriously the particular mix of economic, social and psychic reality revealed by the sub-culture of the gun club and its associated macho magazines and networks. There must be one simple explanation for Hungerford, and television is the visible example of the new semiotic world in which we live. Little matter then that there was no evidence that Michael Ryan watched television and less consideration of the fact that if it was images of sex and violence that fuelled his fantasies, they were almost certainly culled from the magazines and videos provided by his local newsagents and not from national television channels subject to rigorous policies of self-censorship.

The attempt to blame television as a cause rather than analysing it as a part of much wider social and economic processes is most evident in the activities and role of Mrs Whitehouse, for more than any other individual she symbolises the failed potential of television in the 60s and the society which flashed across its screens.

What Mrs Whitehouse relentlessly reiterated was the necessity for a society to agree a set of shared values. That she assumed definitions of society and values which were hopelessly inadequate is, in this context, less important than the fact that the questions she raised were unanswered except in her own rather limited terms. Beyond her media transformation into a rent-a-quote figure and beyond her peculiarly Anglo-Saxon obsession with sex, she represented and articulated the claim of the ethical. Both makers and viewers in the 60s participated in the pleasures of the wake, a rowdy and raucous farewell to the dead. What was less clear, what is less clear, is what was being born.

The most serious danger facing television is that there will be an attempt, under cover of an appeal to market forces, to fudge and forge a false unity based on faded images of the nation. Let a free market reign. Let every broadcaster find the widest possible audiences under straightforward commercial pressures and we will once again recapture a nation untroubled by difference and diversity.

The reality of this policy would be a television dominated by game shows and banal sitcoms, punctuated by the national anthem playing over the portrait of the Queen. This would not involve the elaboration of values for our increasingly differentiated society but the assumption that they exist for a falsely unified one. Independently of the moral and cultural vacuity of such a policy, it will fail in its own terms because the economies and technologies of television are no longer national. The satellite footprints across the globe and the increasing importance of co-productions and foreign sales in the funding of television production would mean that this unified nation of viewers would be watching American sitcoms and game shows made under licence from Hollywood. Television would cease to have any active relation with the society it serves.

If we wish to think of an alternative, it is impossible to do so without some concept of public service. It is, of course, currently unfashionable to talk

of a public sphere with its assumption that social policy can be formulated in terms of shared goals. The coincidence of private economic interest and public social good is widely held to be a self-evident truth. It is not the purpose of this lecture to demonstrate that, at every level of society, from the family to large private corporations, the making of decisions is constantly informed by notions of a common good irreducible to notions of profit and loss. What is clear is that, given the existing technology, free-market television would deliver a range of undifferentiated programmes which would leave us, as citizens, considerably impoverished.

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If, however, we are appealing to the concept of public service, it is itself a concept much transformed by the history of the past 40 years. It is not inaccurate to say that Reithian notions of public service depended on a clear understanding of the existing values of the national culture and a determination to transmit those values. It has been the paradoxical thesis of this lecture that the television service informed by these values became the focal point for their fragmentation.

If we are to take seriously the advances of the 60s, we cannot attempt to turn the clock back and produce a unified culture from on high. Public service must be defined and defended in contemporary terms. Are we to understand it as television entirely devoted to difference? This would be all television as Channel 4 with all broadcasters constantly seeking out new audiences. Such a strategy is still not technologically feasible, for if it were to cover the entirety of television production and broadcasting, it would inevitably require pay-per-view systems which have not yet been developed.

More importantly, this vision of the future ignores the cultural reality of television. Much of television's appeal springs from the fact that viewers know they are watching what others are watching. The tabloids' fascination with the soaps is not an aberrant eccentricity but the reality of a society for which the common currency of much national life is provided by these continuous dramatic narratives and, in particular, the contradictions between the fictional characters and the real life of the actors who portray them. It is across these figures, both real and fictional, that many of the debates about private and public morality are conducted. In our current forms of social organisation, television will inevitably produce mass audiences: the problem is to provide a television system which will allow those mass audiences to divide and reconstitute in ways which allow of both unity and difference.

It is this tension between mass and minority audiences, between innovation and repetition, that provides the real basis of the contemporary appeal to public service. It is also the conception of television embodied in the differing remits of our existing four channels. But if this is the case, why is there any need for reform? Have we not already got the television of the silver age? Those who urge reform claim that technological advance will transform television as we know it and that these changes should be used to allow more independent access to the airwaves. Technology and independence are brave new words and both have genuine meaning but they carry with them profound and dangerous confusions.

Anybody who thinks that television is going to be transformed by the introduction of satellite broadcasting should consider the disastrous fate of cable in this country and its very partial success elsewhere. It is difficult to draw any very positive conclusions from the global evidence to date, but broadcast network television is showing remarkable resilience in the face of competition from both cable and satellite and even from recorded cassettes.

If it is important to encourage the new technological developments so that the viewer has greater choice, it is well to remember that choice depends as much on variety of production as on alternative channels of distribution. If we have 80 channels which spread existing resources between them then we will have 80 channels providing a diet of / *Love Lucy* re-runs and the golden hits of the BBC liberally interspersed with soft porn. Any appeals to new technology should not fudge the question of where the funds for production are going to come from and it would be a criminal folly if our industry was dismantled in the name of a quite illusory notion of consumer choice.

The arguments in favour of independent access are both more important and potentially more dangerous than the appeals to technology. Legislating for non-existent technological futures is a harmless pastime of 20th century governments. The demand that independents be allowed on to the airwaves is both more of a reality and more of a fiction. BBC and ITV have, by and large, always functioned as monopoly producers for their own systems of distribution. The current government has been increasingly convinced that this monopoly position has allowed production costs to balloon and that all we need to drive them down is genuine competition.

The problem with this argument is that with such a limited number of distribution outlets, it is not clear that you can ever achieve real competition between producers. Nonetheless, the government has decreed that 25% of both BBC and ITV's output must be opened out to independents. The immediate effect is that, day by day, producers within both BBC and ITV are leaving to set up production companies that qualify as independents. It may be that the net effect of these developments will simply be the loss of huge economies of scale and an enormous increase in reduplicated overheads.

If, however, the economic arguments are double-edged, the cultural argument for independent production is overwhelming. The broadcasting organisations are enormous bastions of power and privilege which find much of their tone from the elite educational establishments. They inevitably confer their style and attitude on those who work for them and, at their worst, they manifest a complacent arrogance which refuses to see alternative points of view.

It is essential that other perspectives, other working practices, other social groupings have the possibility of projecting their sounds and images on the national screens. If one is to develop fruitfully the process of social pluralisation that began in the 60s, then it is essential that ever greater numbers of people should have access to production facilities. The ability to produce and broadcast images should, at a Utopian vanishing point, become as easy and obvious as the ability to write and publish. This, of course, is substantially the philosophy that underlay the campaign for Channel 4.

Unfortunately this cultural argument is getting increasingly confused with the economic one. At its most unpleasant the campaign for independent access risks degenerating into the crudest union bashing, a rather distasteful attempt by those outside the big institutions to grab the jobs of those inside. It is crucial that independent access really does broaden the base of those who make television, and that it does not mean that exactly the same individuals go on making increasingly commercial programmes while more and more production monies are diverted into profits.

The worse scenario would see the power of the broadcasting institutions pass to the City without any change in the programme-making personnel. The best would see the existing broadcasting institutions allowing access to a much wider variety of programme-makers while using the rigours of competition to strengthen their own institutional autonomy.

For the reasons I have sketched we cannot go back to the golden age of the 60s with its wealth of entertainment and education. If, however, the next stage of television reform is got right we will continue to have a television system which is part and parcel of a pluralistic and democratic society. If it is got wrong then we will enter a dark age of broadcasting in which television will never educate and barely entertain.

The full version of this lecture will appear in the next issue of *Critical Quarterly*, available from the Department of English, The University, Manchester M13 9PL.