

## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

---

### What's Wrong with a Major in "My Mother, the Car"?

*Sanford Pinsker*

I don't normally think of myself as a skeptical fellow, but whenever I hear about academic programs so broadly pitched that no proposed course could, by definition, be turned down, the needle on my suspicion meter begins to twitch. The same thing is roughly true for academic papers delivered at scholarly conferences or for articles published in certain professional journals. For a very long time I would devote whole afternoons trying to figure out what topic the Popular Culture Association might reject for a session at one of its annual meetings. Tupperware parties? *No problem*. Polyester leisure suits? *You betcha*. Bubble gum, and bubble gum trading cards? *Sure one session will be enough*? After an imaginary symposium on TV test patterns passed muster, I threw in the towel.

What my failure made painfully clear is this: either I am not the quick-witted person I imagine smiling back at me each morning from the bathroom mirror, or there are whole areas of academic study that no longer separate what deserves "study" from what does not. Anything—and I mean *anything*—is now grist for the academic mill, and further proof (as if more were needed) that heavy-water theories can be applied to lightweight subjects. Pile on enough jawbreakers and the trivial becomes portentous. More important, those ambitious enough can declare themselves rulers of the academic kingdom they have invented. Nice work if you can get it—and in the past four decades many have.

Granted, opening up space for highly dubious ventures often meant crowding other, more traditional enterprises out. For example, my friends in history tell me that one can now write a history of Illinois with nary a mention of Abraham Lincoln, but with lots of earnest talk about the women and minorities who shaped Illinois from the bottom up. And when I learned about a cultural studies anthology-in-the-making devoted to basketballer Dennis Rodman (among the possibilities are earnest disquisitions on his multi-hued coifs, the symbolic value of his latest tattoos, or the spectrum of his sexual preferences), I was hardly surprised. Inquiring academic minds on theory's cutting

---

Sanford Pinsker is editor of *Academic Questions* and Shadek Professor of Humanities at Franklin and Marshall College. Please address correspondence to *Academic Questions*/NAS, 575 Ewing Street, Princeton, NJ 08540-2741; <editor@aq.nas.org>.

edge want to know about cultural phenomena of this ilk. Moreover, they think that undergraduates should know about them too.

Enter Professor Robert J. Thompson and Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television. According to the *New York Times*' account of the recently inaugurated center, "even television that appeals to the lowest common denominator can still be great art." After all, wasn't Shakespeare a popular Elizabethan dramatist, somebody who pitched his plays to aristocrats as well as to groundlings, and who competed (quite successfully) with bear-baiting and other forms of street theater? Television, so the argument goes, is simply the latest example of an old story—namely, the academy's snobbish [read: elitist] resistance to jazz, to film, indeed, to anything that masses of people genuinely enjoy and that shapes the very culture under our collective noses.

Media study of the sort that Thompson champions is hardly new, and if what he offers were simply one more elective course among a multitude of others, I would not be writing this paragraph. But what the powers at Syracuse University have in mind is much grander, and much more pretentiously trumpeted. As David Rubin, dean of Newhouse School, puts it, their new center "will study television entertainment programs with the same care and passion as musicologists study Mozart or Ellington, or professors of English study Melville and Pynchon." Presumably, this means that sitcoms such as "Gilligan's Island" will find themselves under one postmodern microscope or another, and that undergraduates who missed out on "My Mother, the Car" will have a chance to make up lost ground via VCR, and even to major in the hapless adventures of two Brooklyn detectives—that is, if they can come up with a suitably rigorous angle. All this for a cool \$430,000 price tag.

As for those who worry that nothing in the hoopla about the new center sounds either "rigorous" or, for that matter, "academic," have no fears. Thompson's program will turn undergraduates who enter the university knowing more about television than they do about books into first-class couch potatoes. Better yet, Thompson argues that studying, really *studying* the likes of "The Beverly Hillbillies" or "The Andy Griffith Show" will lead undergraduates to the world of nature transcendently extolled in Emerson and Thoreau. As Hemingway—a novelist rather than TV star—once put it in another country, "It would be pretty to think so." The bald truth, however, is that if an undergraduate curriculum takes its initial bearings on the basement level there is little hope it will eventually rise to the penthouse. Thompson is not only kidding himself, but also those students who will discover that the Center for the Study of Popular Television has lots of sub-basements, and that they will be parking below ground with a major in "My Mother, the Car" rather than scraping the sky with Melville.

If I could be persuaded that the core of liberal learning remained solid, courses that study soap operas and sitcoms "in depth" would strike me as no

different from many another elective offering currently competing for an undergraduate's attention. Some are reasonably serious, some are merely silly. What matters is how solid the "required" courses remain, and that's why I cannot regard the newly launched Center for the Study of Popular Television as the academy's finest hour. In far too many institutions of higher learning, electives have effectively replaced what used to travel as requirements of the basic, no-frills sort. Now, nearly any course imaginable can slip under the wide tent of what counts as fulfilling a "requirement," and I have every confidence that this will also be true for investigations of identity politics in "The Cosby Show," "The Waltons," and "I Love Lucy."

Not surprisingly, Thompson characterizes his critics as elitists, people essentially clueless about the power that television's images pack. What else can you expect, he argues, from defenders of the literary faith, especially when they still feel threatened by the Tube? Among the various charges occasionally hurled my way, the accusation of being an "elitist" is probably the one that stings least. As Thompson uses the term, it means that I think that some works of art are better than others. To that crime I plead guilty. Thompson, on the other hand, would insist that one work is simply "different" from another, and that any value judgment is, well, judgmental. At this point my reasons for feeling skeptical about his program should be clear enough. Without an intellectual framework in which criticism can take place, we are left with special pleading, and often with angry name-calling. What we will not have, however, is anything that remotely resembles "academic study," however much people like Thompson blather on about the critical thinking skills required to deconstruct the "identical cousins" who once shared space on "The Patty Duke Show."

Does all this mean that I am dead-set against television? Hardly. I not only own a television set, but take a measure of satisfaction in the grandeur of its size and the vividness of its color. Rather than the stereotypical English professor Thompson conjures up so easily, I watch channels other than PBS and have even been known to knock out an occasional piece about some television program I found particularly intriguing. My quarrel with elevating the study of popular television to the high status—and expense—of a "center" has at least as many reasons as David Letterman's Top-Ten List. Some have already been aired, but let me add just two more. First, Thompson's populism merely confirms the old adage that nobody ever went broke *underestimating* American taste. Worthier projects, ones with more substance than whistles, are not likely to be moving into quarters at Syracuse's communications complex any time soon. Second (and more important), I don't think that undergraduates, even those hankering for careers as TV critics-reviewers, are well served by an education that narrows rather than broadens. Granted, they are likely to learn more than is necessary about semiotics, but precious little about

*Sense and Sensibility* or any piece of literature worth pondering. They will be poorer as human beings, and poorer still as media analysts.

George Orwell once quipped that there are some things you can only learn at university. He did not intend the remark to be taken as a compliment. I invoke his spirit now when observing that, so far as I know, one can major in "My Mother, the Car" only at Syracuse; but if the Center for the Study of Popular Television has its way, those sporting a university sweatshirt and a willingness to spend long afternoons in front of the tube will be able to write about an endless series of hospital dramas, cop shows, and sitcoms. Just the thought of a starry-eyed undergraduate stumbling across old copies of *TV Guide* in the library's research stacks must make certain hearts beat faster. For others, however, it is an image so chilling, so downright depressing, that it outdoes television itself.

**From James Hynes's novel *Publish and Perish* (Picador, 1997), page 51:**

Paul found himself energized..., eager to begin work finally on his book—now called *My (M)other the Car: Difference and Memory in the Matriarchal Narrative*—hammering out the outlines of a new chapter linking the Surfaris and Eric Hobsbawm, arguing for surf guitar as an invented tradition, the constructed ethnic heritage of Anglo-Californian immigrants, the folk music of the newly mobile white suburban middle class. That went so well that ideas began to pour out of him, and he popped one of Kym's tapes into his stereo and listened to thunderous guitar instrumentals as he concocted a whole new outline for his book, chapter after chapter: "The Sitcom at the End of the New Frontier: *The Brady Bunch* and *The Wild Bunch* in Contrapuntal Perspective." "Slouching Toward Minneapolis: William Butler Yeats, Mary Tyler Moore, and the Millennium." And, in honor of his beach-party weekend, "A French Bikini on a Wild Island Girl: *The Tempest*, *Gilligan's Island*, and the Social Construction of the Narrative of Abandonment."