INTRODUCTION

By Horace Newcomb

Bernard Timberg's book, *Television Talk*, appears at a particularly significant moment in the history of talk shows and, equally importantly, in the history of television. It also appears as part of a significant development in the field of television studies, a development marking and marked by changes in the medium and the social relations it fosters and to which it responds.

As this work makes clear, however, even as those changes occur, the talk show remains a fundamental feature within any economic, social, and cultural formation of television. This long reliance on the form results in part, as Timberg points out, from its status as an efficient and effective commodity. It is relatively cheap to produce. It is often extremely profitable when successful. And those successes need not, in most cases, rely on securing a "mass" audience. Almost always presented to a specific portion of the total viewing public—families shuttling through morning routines, "housewives" during the day, "hip" younger viewers in late-night fringe hours—the talk show, like the game or quiz show, can become a profitable staple of televisual entertainment and interaction within its specific niche.

Moreover, this is true throughout the world. Certainly, if there were time, resources, and research staff sufficient to the task, a version of this book focused on the worldwide implementation of television talk formats would extend to several volumes.

But these economic and simple sociological factors hardly explain the massive amount of attention, both popular and scholarly, paid to talk shows in recent years. And any "formal" notice in print or medi-

ated commentary is merely a portion of a far more widely disseminated general discussion involving parents and teachers, members of Congress and clergy, television executives and television critics. In some ways, talk “about” TV talk has been as prevalent as the talk-oriented programs themselves. Business negotiations surrounding talk shows have been chronicled in the general press, and in the process some of the more significant inner workings of the television industry have been exposed. So, too, have the egos and foibles of familiar television personalities, their guests, their agents, writers, and producers. And in the center of all these accounts have been heated exchanges making clear that the shows are often used as lightening rods for a wider—and far deeper—array of themes.

Surely, argue the most vocal general critics, the topics and issues that began to appear on programs hosted by Geraldo Rivera, and later Oprah Winfrey, and even the more cautious and polite Phil Donahue, were somehow “inappropriate” for “public” exposure. And when “things went too far,” on some shows, these prominent personalities themselves, these familiar and successful guides to visible conversation, agreed to adjust their tone and approach. They would become, once again, “more serious,” more engaged in “education” and the “informative” aspects of television talk. Or they would quit the business altogether.

But such actions and responses pale before the excesses of a Jerry Springer. While the late-arriving Springer is not a major topic in this book, his program has been consistently cited in current public discussions and will be re-examined in light of the work presented here. This is so because the program has become emblematic of a decline in “proper” discourse, the devolution of all that is proper within publicly performed personal exchange. When some aspects of the Springer-esque displays of verbal and physical violence were exposed as “staged,” the arguments were merely confirmed—deception is an even more dangerous step on the slippery slope of social decline. Such charges focus on both the content of “discussions” and the behavior on display within the Springer show and others that approach it in style. Criticism links these factors to old conflicts between “popular” and “high” culture. Viewers as well as the hosts, the producers, the participants, and the medium itself are figured as “low-brow,” “anti-intellectual,” and “coarse.”

Clearly, however, the critique spills outside any academic or general social concern for such categorization. It floods onto those whose

lives and issues, troubles and deeds, appearance and attitude are performing “their” talk for the public at large. In other words, these later forms of talk shows and the responses to them expose issues of class, race, sexuality, age, physical appearance—the array of social markers deemed “within” and “outside” the proper boundaries for presence on television or consumption by audiences. These “violations of taste” even call into question the legitimate limits to which corporations may go in search of profit. For some critics such matters reflect a decline in “taste,” “propriety,” “manners,” and, in the most telling commentary, “civility.” Society itself is at stake. Sage explanations argue that the creation of such representations, and any delight in them, borders on degeneracy worthy of a failing Roman Empire.

But the defenders of TV talk shows—and there are defenders, even beyond those who profit from them—build their counterclaims around similar topics. They suggest that television has at last assumed a rightful place in the “public sphere.” These talk shows, even with—especially with—their rites of excess and displays of grammatical failure, sexual variation, and institutional collapse, have merely brought into the spotlight what those at the “bottom” or on the “fringes” of “civil society” have known all along. Ungrammatical speech can be effective. Sexual behavior can be endlessly reinvented. Institutions, from schools to factories, families to churches, are flawed, often repressive, generally tilted toward privilege.

Thus, the new talk shows are sometimes hailed as democratic and progressive, a welcome change from the prime-time fantasies of perfection and happy endings. They personalize the structural bog-down of society displayed in every evening’s news report. From this perspective, those who exhibit dismay at the mid-afternoon spectacle performed all across the land *should* be dismayed. It is their world that is coming apart, not the world of the latest occupant of fringe-town. *That* citizen is finally receiving far more than the pittance of cash paid for mere appearance on television. The real reward is in the TALK—the moment of self-expression, the following moment of being talked about, even the infuriating stage of being talked “down to” by those who never watch the shows in the first place, much less “walk the walk” that precedes the talk.

It is here that the significance of Bernard Timberg’s overview of television talk emerges. For this is not a book about sensationalism, except insofar as that category takes its place among many others. It is not a book about the social consequences of talk on TV, except as those

consequences are seen as part of a long process. It is not a book about TV talk-show “stars,” except as those stars are rightly placed within a galaxy and defined in terms of their function as well as their brightness.

First and foremost, this is a work framing television talk within a detailed historical perspective, an approach placing it within a strong development in the study of television. Perhaps as a result of the enormous technological, industrial, regulatory, and economic changes of recent decades, there is now a sense that it is possible to gain a much-needed clearer perspective on this medium. Indeed, there is a sense that at least one, perhaps more than one, phase of television has passed. Waiting for, living with, the new, we are plunged again into wondering what this thing means. This gives rise to some of the dilemmas and disagreements surrounding current talk shows (and other programming forms, it should be noted). But as usual, historical accounts demonstrate that though they may seem “new,” these experiences are certainly not unique. Timberg offers us a guide to what came before the current state of programming related to this genre. His decade-by-decade account of the television talk shows in the three-network era reminds us of the significance of the form in each of those periods. Moreover, the detailed analysis of some thirty-six personalities prominent in these decades is supplemented with Bob Eler’s wonderfully comprehensive “Guide to Television Talk.” These rich paragraph descriptions cover the work of over 200 talk personalities and shows from 1948 to 1998.

Directly related to this recognition of the ubiquity of television talk is the equal focus on the commodity status of the form. Distinct aspects of earlier talk shows are directly tied to the economic, social, and technological formation of television in different periods, the cycles of talk that Timberg discusses. From three networks we have moved to dozens of options. The consequent demand for more programming requires dipping ever more deeply into the pool of cost-efficient programming such as talk shows, making the search for success more complicated. Thus the talk show emerges as a product that relies on viewer knowledge of the similarities and differences, recombined in yet another attempt to offer the “perfect” specific mix that will draw and hold attention. A new seating arrangement, a different musical style, a wink toward the camera—a thousand other small elements can be altered in the quest for ratings.

One constant, however, clearly delineated by Timberg, is the formation of the talk show around the personality of the host. In this regard a Springer emerges from, combines, recombines, elements of all

those other hosts. Oprah, Ricki, Geraldo, Larry King, Roseanne, the tried and the triers, those who survive the competition for one week and those whose weeks extend to what passes for a lifetime are defined by their relation to one another and to all those who came before them. All our speculation about the present can now, with the context provided here, be informed by the details of these past “titans.” All our fears of declines in “taste” can be measured by what we meant by that term when Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal spat invective at one another in the presence of Dick Cavett’s serenity. All our concerns about the viewer as voyeur can be refined by recognizing the towering presence of Edward R. Murrow leaning in a little too close, almost fawning, in the presence of celebrity.

While the variations sound small, perhaps even simple, Timberg makes it very clear that such changes and experiments result from the collective efforts. His detailed descriptions and analyses of the “behind-the-scenes” aspects of television production point to the elaborate teamwork required to bring these shows to the screen on a regular basis. The commonplace that television is a collaborative medium is given specific meaning in his examples of “entrepreneurial teams” dedicated to shaping the meaning of a program, its place in the expanding “lineup” of other, similar-yet-different offerings. The efforts of these teams are specifically focused on shaping the all-important host persona, adjusting, framing, rewriting until all these efforts disappear in a mask of casual intimacy. That only a few of these programs succeed reminds us that this search for distinction is not an easy task. Indeed, the successes remind us more than anything that the talk show, like all television, must exceed its commodity status even as it confirms it.

These host personalities, these styles, these struggles for “talk” as “conversation” with “us” must finally rely on the meanings associated with the combined elements of the show. In its offer of cultural significance, television draws us to itself with—and draws from us—precisely the engagement that makes some so fearful, others so oblivious, and some so intrigued with its complexities. This means that the “three-network oligopoly” was known in our homes not simply as a technological or economic collusion, but as a link, a connecting device that provided a distinctive type of private-public experience. We watched what all others watched, but we watched within our own small, immediate group. Now, within the multi-channel universe, the same number may have watched a talk show, but not within the familiar, familial circle. Instead, the fans of Springer or Oprah or Dave or Jay

may communicate with one another in chat rooms or come together in the office to mention the last outrageous event. To understand these continuities and shifts, it is important to recognize this book as a work of cultural analysis as well as a historical account.

Timberg's explanations, based on specific examples, inform our relation to the shows we watch now by providing descriptive, comparative commentary on what we watched earlier. In "the old days" the role of an early Mike Wallace, Merv Griffin, or Mike Douglas was different from that of Springer—in degree. But it was also similar and in many ways familiar. Were not the personal revelations of movie stars as astonishing in their own way to post-World War II audiences only recently connected to mass culture as the outrageous sexual tales of the working class are today? Were not the wry asides, the nudges and winks of Johnny Carson preparatory to Drew Barrymore's leap onto David Letterman's desk, where she exposed her breasts? And does not the fact that she turned only to Dave, not to the camera, indicate the resilience of some boundaries? Timberg's accounts of those earlier shows refresh the memory of those old enough to have seen them. They also provide valuable fundamental information for those who will never see those shows, even in an archived state.

It is hardly a matter of convenience, then, that Timberg ends the historical survey and the more detailed case studies with an examination of *The Larry Sanders Show*. That program, a comedy "about" television talk shows, is clearly a product of the "post-network era" of television. Aired on HBO, a premium cable channel, it was available only to subscribers. Its ironic perspective assumed a familiarity with the formula made familiar by *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. Indeed, some elements of the program—the strong producer reminiscent of Fred de Cordova, the sideman who seemed patterned on Ed McMahon, the lead character's multiple marriages—seemed to indicate that the Carson show and Carson persona were models for this comedic analysis of the genre. But it was the self-reflexive, behind-the-scenes exploration of talk on television that grounded the program in a different television era. Unlike earlier examples of similar techniques in *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, where George regularly observed and commented on the construction of his fictional world, this offering probed the significance of all the details Bernard Timberg identifies in his account: the melding of technology, industrial relations, and "written talk" within the central, explosively fragile personality of "Larry Sanders."

Television Talk, then, a book of details and cases, accounts and descriptions, names and places and times, could have been the bible for *The Larry Sanders Show*. It is the book we need now. No one has looked so closely at the history of talk shows, provided so much information regarding what those shows and the people who made them were like, as has Bernard Timberg. His work will replace neither outraged polemic nor interpretive speculation. But on the foundation established here both may become more precise. This, then, is a book to be talked about.

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