

E unibus pluram: television and u.s. fiction.

[Media](#), [Television](#)



Fiction writers as a species tend to be oglers. They tend to lurk and to stare. The minute fiction writers stop moving, they start lurking, and stare. They are born watchers. They are viewers. They are the ones on the subway about whose nonchalant stare there is something creepy, somehow. Almost predatory. This is because human situations are writers' food. Fiction writers watch other humans sort of the way gapers slow down for car wrecks: they covet a vision of themselves as witnesses. But fiction writers as a species also tend to be terribly self-conscious. Even by U. S. standards. Devoting lots of productive time to studying closely how people come across to them, fiction writers also spend lots of less productive time wondering nervously how they come across to other people. How they appear, how they seem, whether their shirttail might be hanging out their fly, whether there's maybe lipstick on their teeth, whether the people they're ogling can maybe size them up as somehow creepy, lurkers and starers. The result is that a surprising majority of fiction writers, born watchers, tend to dislike being objects of people's attention. Being watched. The exceptions to this rule - Mailer, McInerney, Janowitz - create the misleading impression that lots of belles-lettres types like people's attention. Most don't. The few who like attention just naturally get more attention. The rest of us get less, and ogle. Most of the fiction writers I know are Americans under forty. I don't know whether fiction writers under forty watch more television than other American species. Statisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household. I don't know any fiction writers who live in average American households. I suspect Louise Erdrich might. Actually I have never seen an average American household. Except

on TV. So right away you can see a couple of things that look potentially great, for U. S. fiction writers, about U. S. television. First, television does a lot of our predatory human research for us. American human beings are a slippery and protean bunch, in real life, as hard to get any kind of univocal handle on as a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years. But television comes equipped with just such a syncretic handle. If we want to know what American normality is - what Americans want to regard as normal - we can trust television. For television's whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror. Not the Stendhalian mirror reflecting the blue sky and mud puddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile. This kind of window on nervous American self-perception is just invaluable, fictionwise. And writers can have faith in television. There is a lot of money at stake, after all; and television retains the best demographers applied social science has to offer, and these researchers can determine precisely what Americans in 1990 are, want, see: what we as Audience want to see ourselves as. Television, from the surface on down, is about desire. Fictionally speaking, desire is the sugar in human food. The second great thing is that television looks to be an absolute godsend for a human subspecies that loves to watch people but hates to be watched itself. For the television screen affords access only one way. A psychic ball-check valve. We can see Them; They can't see Us. We can relax, unobserved, as we ogle. I happen to believe this is why television also appeals so much to lonely people. To voluntary shut-ins. Every lonely human I know watches way more than the average U. S. six hours a day. The

lonely, like the fictional, love one-way watching. For lonely people are usually lonely not because of hideous deformity or odor or obnoxiousness - in fact there exist today social and support groups for persons with precisely these features. Lonely people tend rather to be lonely because they decline to bear the emotional costs associated with being around other humans. They are allergic to people. People affect them too strongly. Let's call the average U. S. lonely person Joe Briefcase. Joe Briefcase just loathes the strain of the self-consciousness which so oddly seems to appear only when other real human beings are around, staring, their human sense-antennae abristle. Joe B. fears how he might appear to watchers. He sits out the stressful U. S. game of appearance poker. But lonely people, home, alone, still crave sights and scenes. Hence television. Joe can stare at Them, on the screen; They remain blind to Joe. It's almost like voyeurism. I happen to know lonely people who regard television as a veritable deus ex machina for voyeurs. And a lot of the criticism, the really rabid criticism less leveled than sprayed at networks, advertisers, and audiences alike, has to do with the charge that television has turned us into a nation of sweaty, slack-jawed voyeurs. This charge turns out to be untrue, but for weird reasons. What classic voyeurism is is espial: watching people who don't know you're there as they go about the mundane but erotically charged little businesses of private life. It's interesting that so much classic voyeurism involves media of framed glass-windows, telescopes, etc. Maybe the framed glass is why the analogy to television is so tempting. But TV-watching is a different animal from Peeping Tourism. Because the people we're watching through TV's framed-glass screen are not really ignorant of the fact that somebody is watching them. In fact a whole lot of

somebodies. In fact the people on television know that it is in virtue of this truly huge crowd of ogling somebodies that they are on the screen, engaging in broad non-mundane gestures, at all. Television does not afford true espial because television is performance, spectacle, which by definition requires watchers. We're not voyeurs here at all. We're just viewers. We are the Audience, megametrically many, though most often we watch alone. E unibus pluram.(1) One reason fiction writers seem creepy in person is that by vocation they really are voyeurs. They need that straightforward visual theft of watching somebody without his getting to prepare a speciable watchable self. The only real illusion in espial is suffered by the voyee, who doesn't know he's giving off images and impressions. A problem with so many of us fiction writers under forty using television as a substitute for true espial, however, is that TV "voyeurism" involves a whole gorgeous orgy of illusions for the pseudo-spy, when we watch. Illusion (1) is that we're voyeurs here at all: the voyees behind the screen's glass are only pretending ignorance. They know perfectly well we're out there. And that we're there is also very much on the minds of those behind the second layer of glass, the lenses and monitors via which technicians and arrangers apply no small ingenuity to hurl the visible images at us. What we see is far from stolen; it's proffered - illusion (2). And, illusion (3), what we're seeing through the framed pane isn't people in real situations that do or even could go on without consciousness of Audience. What young writers are scanning for data on some reality to fictionalize is already composed of fictional characters in highly ritualized narratives. Plus, (4), we're not really even seeing "characters" at all: it's not Major Frank Burns, pathetic self-important putz from Fort Wayne, Indiana; it's

Larry Linville of Ojai, California, actor stoic enough to endure thousands of letters (still coming in, even in syndication) from pseudo-voyeurs mistakenly berating him for being a putz. And, if (5) isn't too out-there for you, it's ultimately of course not even actors we're spying, not even people: it's EM-propelled analog waves and ionized streams and rear-screen chemical reactions throwing off phosphenes in grids of dots not much more lifelike than Seurat's own impressionistic "statements" on perceptual illusion. Good lord and (6) the dots are coming out of our furniture, all we're spying on is our own furniture; and our very own chairs and lamps and bookspines sit visible but unseen at our gaze's frame as we contemplate "Korea" or are "taken live to Amman, Jordan," or regard the plusher chairs and classier spines of the Huxtable "home" as illusory cues that this is some domestic interior whose membrane we have, slyly, unnoticed, violated. (7) and (8) and illusions ad inf. Not that realities about actors and phosphenes and furniture are unknown to us. We simply choose to ignore them. For six hours a day. They are part of the belief we suspend. But we're asked to hoist such a heavy load aloft. Illusions of voyeurism and privileged access require real complicity from viewers. How can we be made so willingly to acquiesce for hours daily to the illusion that the people on the TV don't know they're being looked at, to the fantasy that we're transcending privacy and feeding on unself-conscious human activity? There might be lots of reasons why these unrealities are so swallowable, but a big one is that the performers behind the two layers of glass are - varying degrees of Thespian talent aside - absolute geniuses at seeming unwatched. Now, seeming unwatched in front of a TV camera is a genuine art. Take a look at how civilians act when a TV

camera is pointed at them: they simply spaz out, or else go all rigor mortis. Even PR people and politicians are, camera-wise, civilians. And we love to laugh at how stiff and false non-professionals appear, on television. How unnatural. But if you've ever once been the object of that terrible blank round glass stare, you know all too well how self-conscious it makes you. A harried guy with earphones and a clipboard tells you to "act natural" as your face begins to leap around on your skull, struggling for a seemingly unwatched expression that feels impossible because "seeming unwatched" is, like the "act natural" which fathered it, oxymoronic. Try driving a golf ball as someone asks you whether you in- or exhale on your backswing, or getting promised lavish rewards if you can avoid thinking of a rhinoceros for ten seconds, and you'll get some idea of the truly heroic contortions of body and mind that must be required for Don Johnson to act unwatched as he's watched by a lens that's an overwhelming emblem of what Emerson, years before TV, called "the gaze of millions." Only a certain very rare species of person, for Emerson, is "fit to stand the gaze of millions." It is not your normal, hard-working, quietly desperate species of American. The man who can stand the megagaze is a walking imago, a certain type of transcendent freak who, for Emerson, "carries the holiday in his eye."⁽²⁾ The Emersonian holiday television actors' eyes carry is the potent illusion of a vacation from self-consciousness. Not worrying about how you come across. A total unallergy to gazes. It is contemporarily heroic. It is frightening and strong. It is also, of course, an act, a counterfeit impression - for you have to be just abnormally self-conscious and self-controlling to appear unwatched before lenses. The self-conscious appearance of unself-consciousness is the grand illusion

behind TV's mirror-hall of illusions; and for us, the Audience, it is both medicine and poison. For we gaze at these rare, highly trained, seemingly unwatched people for six hours daily. And we love these people. In terms of attributing to them true supernatural assets and desiring to emulate them, we sort of worship them. In a real Joe Briefcase-type world that shifts ever more starkly from some community of relationships to networks of strangers connected by self-interest and contest and image, the people we espy on TV offer us familiarity, community. Intimate friendship. But we split what we see. The characters are our "close friends"; but the performers are beyond strangers, they're images, demigods, and they move in a different sphere, hang out with and marry only each other, seem even as actors accessible to Audience only via the mediation of tabloids, talk show, EM signal. And yet both actors and characters, so terribly removed and filtered, seem so natural, when we watch. Given how much we watch and what watching means, it's inevitable - but toxic - for those of us fictionists or Joe Briefcases who wish to be voyeurs to get the idea that these persons behind the glass, persons who are often the most colorful, attractive, animated, alive people in our daily experience, are also people who are oblivious to the fact that they are watched. It's toxic for allergic people because it sets up an alienating cycle, and also for writers because it replaces fiction research with a weird kind of fiction consumption. We self-conscious Americans' oversensitivity to real humans fixes us before the television and its ball-check valve in an attitude of rapt, relaxed reception. We watch various actors play various characters, etc. For 360 minutes per diem, we receive unconscious reinforcement of the deep thesis that the most significant feature of truly

alive persons is watchableness, and that genuine human worth is not just identical with but rooted in the phenomenon of watching. And that the single biggest part of real watchableness is seeming to be unaware that there's any watching going on. Acting natural. The persons we young fiction writers and assorted shut-ins most study, feel for, feel through are, by virtue of a genius for feigned unself-consciousness, fit to stand gazes. And we, trying desperately to be nonchalant, perspire creepily, on the subway. The Finger Weighty existential predicaments aside, there's no denying that people in the U. S. A. watch so much television because it's fun. I know I watch for fun, most of the time, and that at least 51 percent of the time I do have fun when I watch. This doesn't mean I do not take television seriously. One claim of this essay is that the most dangerous thing about television for U. S. fiction writers is that we yield to the temptation not to take television seriously as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process, that many of us are so blinded by constant exposure that we regard TV the way Reagan's lame FCC chairman Mark Fowler professed to in 1981, as " just another appliance, a toaster with pictures." (3) Television nevertheless is just plain pleasurable, though it may seem odd that so much of the pleasure my generation gets from television lies in making fun of it. But you have to remember that younger Americans grew up as much with people's disdain for TV as we did with TV itself I knew it was a " vast wasteland" way before I knew who Newton Minow or Mark Fowler were. And it's just fun to laugh cynically at television - at the way the laughter from sitcoms' " live studio audience" is always suspiciously constant in pitch and duration, or at the way travel is depicted on The Flintstones by having the

exact same cut-rate cartoon tree, rock, and house go by four times. It's fun, when a withered June Allyson comes on-screen for Depend Adult Undergarments and says " If you have a bladder-control problem, you're not alone," to hoot and shout back " Well, chances are you're alone quite a bit, June!" Most scholars and critics who write about U. S. popular culture, though, seem both to take TV seriously and to suffer real pain over what they see. There's this well-known critical litany about television's vapidness, shallowness, and irrationalism. The litany is often far cruder and triter than what the critics complain about, which I think is why most younger viewers find pro criticism of television far less interesting than pro television itself. I found solid examples of what I'm talking about on the first day I even looked. The New York Times Arts & Leisure section for Sunday, 8/05/90, simply bulged with bitter critical derision for TV, and some of the most unhappy articles weren't about just low-quality programming so much as about how TV's become this despicable instrument of cultural decay. In a summary review of all 1990's " crash and burn" summer box-office hits in which " realism ... seems to have gone almost entirely out of fashion," Janet Maslin locates her true anti-reality culprit: " We may be hearing about | real life' on television shows made up of 15-second sound bites (in which | real people' not only speak in brief, neat truisms but actually seem to think that way, perhaps as a result of having watched too much reality-molding television themselves)."(4) And one Stephen Holden, in what starts out as a mean pop music article, knows perfectly well what's behind what he hates: " Pop music is no longer a world unto itself but an adjunct of television, whose stream of commercial images projects a culture in which everything is for sale and the

only things that count are fame, power, and the body beautiful."(5) This stuff just goes on and on, in the Times. The only Arts & Leisure piece I could find with anything upbeat to say about TV that morning was a breathless article on how lots of Ivy League graduates are now flying straight from school to New York and Los Angeles to become television writers and are clearing well over \$200, 000 to start and enjoying rapid advancement to harried clip-boarded production status. In this regard, 8/05's Times is a good example of a strange mix that's been around for a few years now: weary contempt for television as a creative product and cultural force, combined with beady-eyed fascination about the actual behind-the-glass mechanics of making that product and projecting that force. Surely we all have friends we just hate to hear talk about TV because they so clearly loathe it - they sneer relentlessly at the hackneyed plots, the unlikely dialogue, the Cheez-Whiz resolutions, the bland condescension of the news anchors, the shrill wheedling of commercials - and yet are just as clearly obsessed with it, somehow need to hate their six hours a day, day in and out. Junior advertising executives, aspiring filmmakers, and graduate-school poets are in my experience especially prone to this condition where they simultaneously hate, fear, and need television, and try to disinfect themselves of whatever so much viewing might do to them by watching TV with weary irony instead of the rapt credulity most of us grew up with. (Note that most fiction writers still tend to go for the rapt credulity.) But, since the wearily disgusted Times has its own demographic thumb on the pulse of news-readerly taste, it's safe to conclude that most educated, Times-buying Americans are wearily disgusted by television, have this weird hate-need-fear-6-hrs.-daily gestalt about it.

Published TV scholarship sure reflects this mood. And the numbingly dull quality to most "literary" television analyses is due less to the turgid abstraction scholars employ to make television seem an OK object of "aesthetic" inquiry - cf. an '86 treatise: "The form of my Tuesday evening's prime-time pleasure is structured by a dialectic of elision and rift among various windows through which ... | flow' is more of a circumstance than a product. The real output is the quantum, the smallest maneuverable broadcast bit"(6) - than to the tired, jaded cynicism of television experts who mock and revile the very phenomenon they've chosen as scholarly vocation. It's like people who despise - I mean big-time, long-term despise - their spouses or jobs, but won't split up or quit. Critical complaint degenerates quickly into plain whining. The fecund question about U. S. television is no longer whether there are some truly nasty problems here but rather what on earth's to be done about them. On this question pop critics are mute. In fact it's in the U. S. arts, particularly in certain strands of contemporary American fiction, that the really interesting questions about end-of-the-century TV - What is it about televisual culture that we so hate? Why are we so immersed in it if we hate it so? What implications are there in our sustained voluntary immersion in stuff we hate? - are being addressed. But they are also, weirdly, being asked and answered by television itself. This is another reason why most TV criticism seems so empty. Television's managed to become its own most profitable critic. A. M., 8/05/90, as I was scanning and sneering at the sneering tone of the prenominate Times articles, a syndicated episode of St. Elsewhere was on the TV, cleaning up in a Sunday-morning Boston market otherwise occupied by televangelists, infomercials, and the steroid-

and polyurethane-ridden American Gladiators, itself not charmless but definitely a low-dose show. Syndication is another new area of public fascination, not only because huge cable stations like Chicago's WGN and Atlanta's WTBS have upped the stakes from local to national, but because syndication is changing the whole creative philosophy of network television. Since it is in syndication deals (where the distributor gets both an up-front fee for a program and a percentage of the ad-slots for his own commercials) that the creators of successful television series realize truly gross profits, many new programs are designed and pitched with both immediate prime-time and down-the-road syndication audiences in mind, and are now informed less by dreams of the ten-year-beloved-TV-institution-type run - Gunsmoke, M*A*S*H - than of a modest three-year run that yields the seventy-eight in-can episodes required for an attractive-syndication package. I, like millions of other Americans, know this stuff only because I saw a special three-part report about syndication on Entertainment Tonight, itself the first nationally syndicated "news" program and the first infomercial so popular that TV stations were willing to pay for it. Sunday syndication is also intriguing because it makes for juxtapositions as eerily apposite as anything French surrealists could contrive. Lovable warlocks on Bewitched and commercially Satanic heavy-metal videos on America's Top 40 run opposite airbrushed preachers decrying demonism in U. S. culture. Or, better, 8/05's St. Elsewhere episode 94, originally broadcast in 1988, aired on Boston's Channel 38 immediately following two back-to-back episodes of The Mary Tyler Moore Show, that icon of seventies pathos. The plots of the two Mary Tyler Moore Shows are unimportant here. But the St. Elsewhere episode that

followed them partly concerned a cameo-role mental patient afflicted with the delusional belief that he was Mary Richards from The Mary Tyler Moore Show. He further believed that a fellow cameo-role mental patient was Rhoda, that Dr. Westphal was Mr. Grant, and that Dr. Auschlander was Murray. This psychiatric subplot was a one-shot; it was resolved by episode's end. The pseudo-Mary (a sad lumpy-looking guy who used to play one of Dr. Hartley's neurotic clients on the old Bob Newhart Show) rescues the other cameo-role mental patient, whom he believes to be Rhoda and who has been furious in his denials that he is female, much less fictional (and who is himself played by the guy who used to play Mr. Carlin, Dr. Hartley's most intractable client) from assault by a bit-part hebephrene. In gratitude, Rhoda/Mr. Carlin/mental patient declares that he'll consent to be Rhoda if that's what Mary/neurotic client/mental patient wants. At this too-real generosity, the pseudo-Mary's psychotic break breaks. The sad guy admits to Dr. Auschlander that he's not Mary Richards. He's actually just a plain old amnesiac, minus a self, existentially adrift. He has no idea who he is. He's lonely. He watches a lot of television. He figured it was "better to believe I was a TV character than not to believe I was anybody." Dr. Auschlander takes the penitent patient for a walk in the wintery Boston air and promises that he, the identityless guy, can someday find out who he really is, provided he can dispense with "the distraction of television." At this cheery prognosis, the patient removes his own fuzzy winter beret and throws it into the air. The episode ends with a freeze of the aloft hat, leaving at least one viewer credulously rapt. This would have been just another clever low-concept eighties TV story, where the final cap-tossing and closing credits coyly

undercut Dr. Auschlander's put-down of television, were it not for the countless layers of ironic, involuted TV imagery and data that whirl around this high-concept installment. Because another of this episode's cameo stars, drifting through a different subplot, is one Betty White, Sue Ann Nivens of the old Mary Tyler Moore Show, here playing a tortured NASA surgeon (don't ask). It is with almost tragic inevitability, then, that Ms. White, at thirty-two minutes into the episode, meets up with the TV-deluded pseudo-Mary in their respective tortured wanderings through the hospital's corridors, and that she considers the mental patient's inevitable joyful cries of " Sue Ann!" with a too-straight face and says he must have her confused with someone else. Of the convolved levels of fantasy and reality and identity here - e. g., patient simultaneously does, does not, and does have Betty White " confused" with Sue Ann Nivens - we needn't speak in detail: doubtless a Yale Contemporary Culture dissertation is underway on R. D. Laing and just this episode. But the most interesting levels of meaning here lie, and point, behind the lens. For NBC's St. Elsewhere, like The Mary Tyler Moore Show and The Bob Newhart Show before it, was created, produced, and guided into syndication by MTM Studios, owned by Mary Tyler Moore and overseen by her husband, later NBC Chair Grant Tinker; and St. Elsewhere's scripts and subplots are story-edited by Mark Tinker, Mary's step-, Grant's heir. The deluded mental patient, an exiled, drifting veteran of one MTM program, reaches piteously out to the exiled, drifting (literally - NASA, for God's sake) veteran of another MTM production, and her ironic rebuff is scripted by KM personnel, who accomplish the parodic undercut of MTM's Dr. Auschlander with the copyrighted MTM hat-gesture of one MTM veteran who's " deluded" he's

another. Dr. A.'s Fowleresque dismissal of TV as just a "distraction" is less absurd than incoherent. There is nothing but television on this episode; every joke and dramatic surge depends on involution, metatelevision. It is in-joke within in-joke. So then why do I get it? Because I, the viewer, outside the glass with the rest of the Audience, am nevertheless in on the in-joke. I've seen Mary Tyler Moore's "real" toss of that fuzzy beret so often it's moved past cliché into nostalgia. I know the mental patient from Bob Newhart, Betty White from everywhere, and I know all sorts of intriguing irrelevant stuff about MTM Studios and syndication from Entertainment Tonight. I, the pseudovoyeur, am indeed "behind the scenes," for in-joke purposes. But it is not I the spy who have crept inside television's boundaries. It is vice versa. Television, even the mundane little businesses of its production, have become Our interior. And we seem a jaded, jeering, but willing and knowledgeable Audience. This St. Elsewhere episode was nominated for an Emmy. For best original teleplay. The best TV of the last five years has been about ironic self-reference like no previous species of postmodern art could have dreamed of. The colors of MTV videos, blue-black and lambently flickered, are the colors of television. Moonlighting's Bruce and Bueller's Ferris throw asides to the viewer every bit as bald as the old melodrama villain's monologued gloat. Segments of the new late-night glitz-news After Hours end with a tease that features harried headphoned guys in the production booth ordering the tease. MTV's television-trivia game show, the dry-titled Remote Control, got so popular it busted its own MTV-membrane and is in 1990 now syndicated band-wide. The hippest commercials, with stark computerized settings and blank beauties in mirrored shades and

plastic slacks genuflecting before various forms of velocity, force, and adrenaline, seem like little more than TV's vision of how TV offers rescue to those lonely Joe Briefcases passively trapped into watching too much TV. What explains the pointlessness of most published TV criticism is that television has become immune to charges that it lacks any meaningful connection to the world outside it. It's not that charges of nonconnection have become untrue. It's that any such connection has become otiose. Television used to point beyond itself. Those of us born in like the sixties were trained to look where it pointed, usually at versions of "real life" made prettier, sweeter, better by succumbing to a product or temptation. Today's Audience is way better trained, and TV has discarded what's not needed. A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger. Metawatching It's not like self-reference is new to mass entertainment. How many old radio shows - Jack Benny, Martin and Lewis, Abbott and Costello - were mostly about themselves as shows? "So, Jerry, and you said I couldn't get a big star like Miss Lucille Ball to be a guest on our show, you little twerp." Etc. But once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never did, the referential stakes go way up. Six hours a day is more time than most people (consciously) do any one thing. How people who absorb such doses understand themselves changes, becomes spectatorial, self-conscious. Because the practice of watching is expansive. Exponential. We spend enough time watching, pretty soon we start watching ourselves watching. We start to "feel" ourselves feeling, yearn to experience "experiences." And that American subspecies into writing starts writing more and more about.... The emergence of something

called metafiction in the American sixties was and is hailed by academic critics as a radical aesthetic, a whole new literary form unshackled from the canonical cinctures of narrative and mimesis and free to plunge into reflexivity and self-conscious meditations on aboutness. Radical it may have been, but thinking that postmodern metafiction evolved unconscious of prior changes in readerly taste is about as innocent as thinking that all those students we saw on television protesting the war in southeast Asia were protesting only because they hated the war. They may have hated the war, but they also wanted to be seen protesting on television. TV was where they'd seen this war, after all. Why wouldn't they go about hating it on the very medium that made their hate possible? Metafictionists may have had aesthetic theories out the bazoo, but they were also sentient citizens of a community that was exchanging an old idea of itself as a nation of do-ers and be-ers for a new vision of the U. S. A. as an atomized mass of self-conscious watchers and appearers. Metafiction, for its time, was nothing more than a poignant hybrid of its theoretical foe, realism: if realism called it like it saw it, metafiction simply called it as it saw itself seeing itself see it. This high-cultural postmodern genre, in other words, was deeply informed by the emergence of television. And American fiction remains informed by TV ... especially those strains of fiction with roots in postmodernism, which even at its rebellious zenith was less a " response to" televisual culture than a kind of abiding-in-TV. Even back then, the borders were starting to come down. It's strange that it took television itself so long to wake up to watching's potent reflexivity. Television shows about television shows were rare for a long time. The Dick Van Dyke Show was prescient, and Mary Moore carried its

insight into her own decade-long study in local-market angst. Now, of course, there's been everything from Murphy Brown to Max Headroom to Entertainment Tonight. And with Letterman, Arsenio, and Leno's battery of hip, sardonic, this-is-just-TV shticks, the circle back to the days of "So glad to get Miss Ball on our show" has closed and come spiral, television's power to jettison connection and castrate protest fueled by the same ironic postmodern self-consciousness it first helped fashion. It's going to take a while, but I'm going to prove to you that the nexus where television and fiction converse and consort is self-conscious irony. Irony is, of course, a turf fictionists have long worked with zeal. And irony is important for understanding TV because "T. V.," now that it's gotten powerful enough to move from acronym to way of life, revolves off just the sorts of absurd contradictions irony's all about exposing. It is ironic that television is a syncretism that celebrates diversity. That an extremely unattractive self-consciousness is necessary to create TV performers' illusion of unconscious appeal. That products presented as helping you express individuality can afford to be advertised on television only because they sell to huge hordes. And so on. Television regards irony the way the educated lonely regard television. Television both fears irony's capacity to expose, and needs it. It needs irony because television was practically made for irony. For TV is a bisensuous medium. Its displacement of radio wasn't picture displacing sound; it was picture added. Since the tension between what's said and what's seen is irony's whole sales territory, classic televisual irony works not via the juxtaposition of conflicting pictures or conflicting sounds, but with sights that undercut what's said. A scholarly article on network news

describes a famous interview with a corporate guy from United Fruit on a CBS special about Guatemala: " I sure don't know of anybody being so-called | oppressed," the guy in a seventies leisure suit with a tie that looks like an omelette tells Ed Rabel. " I think this is just something that some reporters have thought up." (7) The whole interview is intercut with commentless pictures of big-bellied kids in Guatemalan slums and union organizers lying there with cut throats. Television's classic irony-function came into its own in the summer of 1974, as remorseless lenses opened to view the fertile " credibility gap" between the image of official disclaimer and the reality of high-level shenanigans. A nation was changed, as Audience. If even the president lies to you, whom are you supposed to trust to deliver the real? Television, that summer, presented itself as the earnest, worried eye on the reality behind all images. The irony that television is itself a river of image, however, was apparent even to a twelve-year-old, sitting there, rapt. There seemed to be no way out. Images and ironies all over the place. It's not a coincidence that Saturday Night Live, that Athens of irreverent cynicism, specializing in parodies of (1) politics and (2) television, premiered the next fall. On television. I'm worried when I say things like " television fears" and " television presents itself" because, even though it's an abstraction necessary to discourse, talking about television as if it were an entity can easily slip into the worst sort of anti-TV paranoia, treating of TV as some autonomous diabolical corrupter of personal agency and community gumption. I am anxious to avoid anti-TV paranoia here. Though I'm convinced that television lies, with a potency somewhere between symptom and synecdoche, behind a genuine crisis for U. S. culture and lit today, I don't share reactionary

adults' vision of TV as some malignancy visited on an innocent populace, sapping IQs and compromising SAT scores while we all sit there on ever fatter bottoms with little mesmerized spirals revolving in our eyes. Because conservative critics like Samuel Huntington and Barbara Tuchman who try to claim that TV's lowering of our aesthetic standards is responsible for a "contemporary culture taken over by commercialism directed to the mass market and necessarily to mass taste"(8) can be refuted by observing that their propter hoc isn't even post hoc: by 1830 de Tocqueville had already diagnosed American culture as peculiarly devoted to easy sensation and mass-marketed entertainment, "spectacles vehement and untutored and rude" that aimed "to stir the passions more than to gratify the taste."(9) It's undeniable that television is an example of "low" art, the sort of art that tries too hard to please. Because of the economics of nationally broadcast, advertiser-subsidized entertainment, television's one goal - never denied by anybody in or around TV since RCA first authorized field tests in 1936 - is to ensure as much watching as possible. TV is the epitome of low art in its desire to appeal to and enjoy the attention of unprecedented numbers of people. But TV is not low because it is vulgar or prurient or stupid. It is often all these things, but this is a logical function of its need to please Audience. And I'm not saying that television is vulgar and dumb because the people who compose Audience are vulgar and dumb. Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be really similar in their vulgar and prurient and stupid interests and wildly different in their refined and moral and intelligent interests. It's all about syncretic diversity: neither medium nor viewers are responsible for quality. Still, for the fact that American humans

consume vulgar, prurient, stupid stuff at the sobering clip of six hours a day, for this both TV and we need to answer. We are responsible basically because nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep doing something that is, when you come right down to it, not good for us. Sorry to sound judgmental, but there it is: six hours a day is not good. Television's biggest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding. One can rest while undergoing stimulation. Receive without giving. In this respect, television resembles other things mothers call "special treats" - e. g., candy, or liquor - treats that are basically fine and fun in small amounts but bad for us in large amounts and really bad for us if consumed as any kind of nutritive staple. One can only guess what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone six hours of special treat a day would convert to. On the surface of the problem, television is responsible for our rate of its consumption only in that it's become so terribly successful at its acknowledged job of ensuring prodigious amounts of watching. Its social accountability seems sort of like that of designers of military weapons: unculpable right up until they get a little too good at their job. But the analogy between television and liquor is best, I think. Because I'm afraid Joe Briefcase is a teleholic. Watching TV can become malignantly addictive. TV may become malignantly addictive only once a certain threshold of quantity is habitually passed, but then the same is true of whiskey. And by "malignant" and "addictive" I again do not mean evil or coercive. An activity is addictive if one's relationship to it lies on that downward-sloping continuum between liking it a little too much and downright needing it. Many addictions, from exercise to letter-writing, are

pretty benign. But something is malignantly addictive if (1) it causes real problems for the addict, and (2) it offers itself as relief from the very problems it causes. A malignant addiction is also distinguished for spreading the problems of the addiction out and in in interference patterns, creating difficulties for relationships, communities, and the addict's very sense of self and soul. The hyperbole might strain the analogy for you, but concrete illustrations of malignant TV-watching cycles aren't hard to come by. If it's true that many Americans are lonely, and if it's true that many lonely people are prodigious TV-watchers, and if it's true that lonely people find in television's 2D images relief from the pain of their reluctance to be around real humans, then it's also obvious that the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely. It's also true that to the extent one begins to view pseudo-relationships with Bud Bundy or Jane Pauley as acceptable alternatives to relationships with real humans, one has commensurately less conscious incentive even to try to connect with real 3D persons, connections that are pretty important to mental health. For Joe Briefcase, as for many addicts, the "special treat" of TV, begins to substitute for something nourishing and needed, and the original hunger subsides to a strange objectless unease. TV-watching as a malignant cycle doesn't even require special preconditions like writerly self-consciousness or loneliness. Let's for a second imagine Joe Briefcase as now just average, relatively unlonely, adjusted, married, blessed with 2.5 apple-cheeked issue, normal, home from hard work at 5:30, starting his average six-hour stint. Since Joe B. is

average, he'll shrug at pollsters' questions and say he most often watches television to "unwind" from those elements of his day and life he finds stressful. It's tempting to suppose that TV enables this "unwinding" simply because it offers an Auschlanderian distraction, something to divert the mind from quotidian troubles. But would mere distraction ensure continual massive watching? Television offers more than distraction. In lots of ways, television purveys and enables dreams, and most of these dreams involve some sort of transcendence of average daily life. The modes of presentation that work best for TV - stuff like "action," with shoot-outs and car wrecks, or the rapid-fire "collage" of commercials, news, and music videos, or the "hysteria" of prime-time soap and sitcom with broad gestures, high voices, too much laughter - are unsubtle in their whispers that, somewhere, life is quicker, denser, more interesting, more ... well, lively than contemporary life as Joe Briefcase knows and moves through it. This might seem benign until we consider that what average Joe Briefcase does more than almost anything else in contemporary life is watch television, an activity which anyone with an average brain can see does not make for a very dense and lively life. Since television must seek to compel attention by offering a dreamy promise of escape from daily life, and since stats confirm that so grossly much of ordinary U. S. life is watching TV, TV's whispered promises must somehow undercut television-watching in theory ("Joe, Joe, there's a world where life is lively, where nobody spends six hours a day unwinding before a piece of furniture") while reinforcing television-watching in practice ("Joe, Joe, your best and only access to this world is TV"). Well, Joe Briefcase has an average, workable brain, and deep inside he knows, as we do, that

there's some kind of psychic three-card monte going on in this system of conflicting whispers. But if it's so bald a delusion, why do we keep watching such doses? Part of the answer - a part which requires discretion lest it slip into anti-TV paranoia - is that the phenomenon of television somehow trains or conditions our viewership. Television has become able not only to ensure that we watch, but to inform our deepest responses to what's watched. Take jaded TV critics, or our acquaintances who sneer at the numbing sameness of all the television they sit still for. I always want to grab these unhappy guys by the lapels and shake them until their teeth rattle and point to the absence of guns to their heads and ask why the heck they keep watching, then. But the truth is that there's some complex high-dose psychic transaction between TV and Audience whereby Audience gets trained to respond to and then like and then expect trite, hackneyed, numbing television shows, and to expect them to such an extent that when networks do occasionally abandon time-tested formulas we usually punish them for it by not watching novel forms in sufficient numbers to let them get off the ground. Hence the networks' bland response to its critics that in the majority of cases - and until the rise of hip metatelevision you could count the exceptions on one hand - "different" or "high-concept" programming simply didn't get ratings. Quality television cannot stand the gaze of millions, somehow. Now, it is true that certain PR techniques - e. g., shock, grotesquerie, or irreverence - can ease novel sorts of shows' rise to demographic viability. Examples here might be the shocking *A Current Affair*, the grotesque *Real People*, the irreverent *Married, with Children*. But these programs, like most of those touted by the industry as "fresh" or "

outrageous," turn out to be just tiny transparent variations on old formulas. But it's still not fair to blame television's shortage of originality on any lack of creativity among network talent. The truth is that we seldom get a chance to know whether anybody behind any TV show is creative, or more accurately that they seldom get a chance to show us. Despite the unquestioned assumption on the part of pop-culture critics that television's poor Audience, deep down, craves novelty, all available evidence suggests rather that the Audience really craves sameness but thinks, deep down, that it ought to crave novelty. Hence the mixture of devotion and sneer on viewerly faces. Hence also the weird viewer-complicity behind TV's sham "breakthrough programs": Joe Briefcase needs that PR-patina of "freshness" and "outrageousness" to quiet his conscience while he goes about getting from television what we've all been trained to want from it: some strangely American, profoundly shallow reassurance. Particularly in the last decade, this tension in the Audience between what we do want and what we think we ought to want has been television's breath and bread. TV's self-mocking invitation to itself as indulgence, transgression, a glorious "giving in" (again not foreign to addictive cycles) is one of two ingenious ways it's consolidated its six-hour hold on my generation's cajones. The other is postmodern irony. The commercials for Alf's Boston debut in syndicated package feature the fat, cynical, gloriously decadent puppet (so much like Snoopy, like Garfield, like Bart) advising me to "Eat a whole lot of food and stare at the TV!" His pitch is an ironic permission slip to do what I do best whenever I feel confused and guilty: assume, inside, a sort of fetal position; a pose of passive reception to escape, comfort, reassurance. The cycle is self-

nourishing. Guilty Fictions Not, again, that this cycle's root conflict is new. You can, trace the opposition between what persons do and ought to desire at least as far back as Plato's chariot or the Prodigal's return. But the way entertainments appeal to and work within this conflict has been transformed in a televisual culture. This culture-of-watching's relation to the cycle of indulgence, guilt, and reassurance has important consequences for U. S. art, and though the parallels are easiest to see w/r/t Warhol's pop or Elvis's rock, the most interesting intercourse is between television and American lit. One of the most recognizable things about this century's postmodern fiction was the movement's strategic deployment of pop-cultural references - brand names, celebrities, television programs - in even its loftiest high-art projects. Think of just about any example of avant-garde U. S. fiction in the last twenty-five years, from Slothrop's passion for Slippery Elm throat lozenges and his weird encounter with Mickey Rooney in Gravity's Rainbow to " You"'s fetish for the New York Post's COMA BABY feature in Bright Lights, to Don DeLillo's pop-hip characters saying stuff to each other like " Elvis fulfilled the terms of the contract. Excess, deterioration, self-destructiveness, grotesque behavior, a physical bloating and a series of insults to the brain, self-delivered." [10] The apotheosis of the pop in postwar art marked a whole new marriage between high and low culture. For the artistic viability of postmodernism is a direct consequence, again, not of any new facts about art, but of facts about the new importance of mass commercial culture. Americans seemed no longer united so much by common feelings as by common images: what binds us became what we stood witness to. No one did or does see this as a good change. In fact, pop-cultural references have

become such potent metaphors in U. S. fiction not only because of how united Americans are in our exposure to mass images but also because of our guilty indulgent psychology with respect to that exposure. Put simply, the pop reference works so well in contemporary fiction because (1) we all recognize such a reference, and (2) we're all a little uneasy about how we all recognize such a reference. The status of low-cultural images in postmodern and contemporary fiction is very different from their place in postmodernism's artistic ancestors, the "dirty realism" of a Joyce or the Ur-Dadaism of a Duchamp toilet sculpture. Duchamp's display of that vulgarest of appliances served an exclusively theoretical end: it was making statements like "The Museum is the Mausoleum is the Men's Room," etc. It was an example of what Octavio Paz calls "meta-irony,"^[11] an attempt to reveal that categories we divide into superior/arty and inferior/vulgar are in fact so interdependent as to be coextensive. The use of "low" references in today's literary fiction, on the other hand, serves a less abstract agenda. It is meant (1) to help create a mood of irony and irreverence, (2) to make us uneasy and so "comment" on the vapidness of U. S. culture, and (3) most important, these days, to be just plain realistic. Pynchon and DeLillo were ahead of their time. Today, the belief that pop images are basically just mimetic devices is one of the attitudes that separates most U. S. fiction writers under forty from the writerly generation that precedes us, reviews us, and designs our grad-school curricula. This generation-gap in conceptions of realism is, again, TV-dependent. The U. S. generation born after 1950 is the first for whom television was something to be lived with instead of just looked at. Our elders regard the set rather as the Flapper did the automobile:

a curiosity turned treat turned seduction. For younger writers, TV's as much a part of reality as Toyotas and gridlock. We literally cannot imagine life without it. We're not different from our fathers insofar as television presents and defines the contemporary world. But we are different in that we have no memory of a world without such electric definition. This is why the derision so many older fictionists heap on a "Brat Pack" generation they see as insufficiently critical of mass culture is simultaneously apt and misguided. It's true that there's something sad about the fact that young lion David Levitt's sole descriptions of certain story characters is that their T-shirts have certain brand names on them. But the fact is that, for most of the educated young readership for whom Levitt writes, members of a generation raised and nourished on messages equating what one consumes with who one is, Levitt's descriptions do the job. In our post-'50, inseparable-from-TV association pool, brand loyalty is synecdochic of identity, character. For those U. S. writers whose ganglia were formed pre-TV, who are big on neither Duchamp nor Paz and lack the oracular foresight of a Pynchon, the mimetic deployment of pop-culture icons seems at best an annoying tic and at worst a dangerous vapidness that compromises fiction's seriousness by dating it out of the Platonic Always where it ought to reside. In one of the graduate workshops I suffered through, an earnest gray eminence kept trying to convince our class that a literary story or novel always eschews "any feature which serves to date it," because "serious fiction must be timeless." When we finally protested that, in his own well-known work, characters moved about in electrically lit rooms, drove cars, spoke not Anglo-Saxon but postwar English, inhabited a North America already separated

from Africa by continental drift, he impatiently amended his proscription to those explicit references that would date a story in the frivolous " Now." When pressed for just what stuff evoked this f. N., he said of course he meant the " trendy mass-popular-media" reference. And here, at just this point, transgenerational discourse broke down. We looked at him blankly. We scratched our little heads. We didn't get it. This guy and his students just didn't imagine the " serious" world the same way. His automobilized timeless and our FCC'd own were different. If you read the big literary supplements, you've doubtless seen the intergenerational squabble the prenominate scene explains. The plain fact is that certain key things having to do with fiction production are different for young U. S. writers now. And television is at the vortex of much of the flux. Because younger writers are not only Artists probing for the nobler interstices in what Stanley Cavell calls the reader's " willingness to be pleased"; we are also, now, self-defined parts of the great U. S. Audience, and have our own aesthetic pleasure-centers; and television has formed and trained us. It won't do, then, for the literary establishment simply to complain that, for instance, young-written characters don't have very interesting dialogues with each other, that young writers' ears seem tinny. Tinny they may be, but the truth is that in younger Americans' experience, people in the same room don't do all that much direct conversing with each other. What most of the people I know do is they all sit and face the same direction and stare at the same thing and then structure commercial-length conversations around the sorts of questions myopic car-crash witnesses might ask each other - " Did you just see what I just saw?" And, realism-wise, the paucity of profound conversation in Brat-esque fiction

seems to be mimetic of more than just our own generation. Six hours a day, in average households young and old, just how much interfacing can really be going on? So now whose literary aesthetic seems "dated"? In terms of lit history, it's important to recognize the distinction between pop and televisual references, on the one hand, and the mere use of TV-like techniques, on the other. The latter have been around in fiction forever. The Voltaire of *Candide*, for instance, uses a bisensuous irony that would do Ed Rabel proud, having *Candide* and *Pangloss* run around smiling and saying "All for the best, the best of all worlds" amid war-dead, pogroms, rampant nastiness. Even the stream-of-consciousness guys who fathered modernism were, on a very high level, constructing the same sorts of illusions about privacy-puncturing and espial on the forbidden that television has found so fecund. And let's not even talk about Balzac. It was in post-atomic America that pop influences on lit became something more than technical. About the time television first gasped and sucked air, mass popular U. S. culture became high-art viable as a collection of symbols and myth. The episcopate of this pop-reference movement were the post-Nabokovian black humorists, the metafictionists and assorted franc- and latinophiles only later comprised by "postmodern." The erudite, sardonic fictions of the black humorists introduced a generation of new fiction writers who saw themselves as avant-avant-garde, not only cosmopolitan and polyglot but also technologically literate, products of more than just one region, heritage, and theory, and citizens of a culture that said its most important stuff about itself via mass media. In this regard I think particularly of the Barth of *The End of the Road* and *The Sot-Weed Factor*, the Gaddis of *The Recognitions*, and the Pynchon of *The Crying of Lot 49*; but

the movement toward treating of the pop as its own reservoir of mythopeia fast metastasized and has transcended both school and genre. Plucking from my bookshelves almost at random, I find poet James Cummin's 1986 *The Whole Truth*, a cycle of sestinas deconstructing Perry Mason. Here's Robert Coover's 1977 *A Public Burning*, in which Eisenhower buggers Nixon on-air, and his 1980 *A Political Fable*, in which the Cat in the Hat runs for president. I find Max Apple's 1986 *The Propheteers*, a novel-length imagining of Walt Disney's travails. Or part of poet Bill Knott's 1974 "And Other Travels": . . . in my hand a cat o'nine tails on every tip of which was Clearasil I was worried because Dick Clark had told the cameraman not to put the camera on me during the dance parts of the show because my skirts were too tight[12] which serves as a lovely example because, even though this stanza appears in the poem without anything we'd normally call context or support, it is in fact self-supported by a reference we all, each of us, immediately get, conjuring as it does with Bandstand ritualized vanity, teenage insecurity, the management of spontaneous moments. It is the perfect pop image: at once slight and universal, soothing and discomfiting. Recall that the phenomena of watching and consciousness of watching are by nature expansive. What distinguishes another, later wave of postmodern lit is a further shift, from television images as valid objects of literary allusion, to TV and metawatching as themselves valid subjects. By this I mean certain lit beginning to locate its raison in its commentary on, response to, a U. S. culture more and more of and for watching, illusion, and the video image. This involution of attention was first observable in academic poetry. See for instance Stephen Dobyns's 1980 "Arrested Saturday Night": This is how it

happened: Peg and Bob had invited Jack and Roxanne over to their house to watch the TV, and on the big screen they saw Peg and Bob, Jack and Roxanne watching themselves watch themselves on progressively smaller TVs....[13] or Knott's 1983 "Crash Course": I strap a TV monitor on my chest so that all who approach can see themselves and respond appropriately." The true prophet of this shift in U. S. fiction, though, was the prenominate Don DeLillo, a long-neglected conceptual novelist who has made signal and image his unifying topoi the way Barth and Pynchon had sculpted in paralysis and paranoia a decade earlier. DeLillo's 1985 *White Noise* sounded to fledgling fictionists a kind of televisual clarion-call. Scenelets like the following seemed especially important: Several days later Murray asked me about a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America. We drove twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington. There were meadows and apple orchards. White fences trailed through the rolling fields. Soon the signs started appearing. THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA. We counted five signs before we reached the site. . . . We walked along a cow-path to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides - pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot. We stood near a grove of trees and watched the photographers. Murray maintained a prolonged silence, occasionally scrawling some notes in a little book. "No one sees the barn," he said finally. A long silence followed. "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others. "

We're not here to capture an image. We're here to maintain one. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies." There was an extended silence. The man in the booth sold postcards and slides. " Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism." Another silence ensued. " They are taking pictures of taking pictures," he said. (12-13) I quote this at such length not only because it's too darn good to ablate, but to draw your attention to two relevant features. The less interesting is the Dobyns-esque message here about the metastasis of watching. For not only are people watching a barn whose only claim to fame is as an object of watching, but the pop-culture scholar Murray is watching people watch a barn, and his friend Jack is watching Murray watch the watching, and we readers are pretty obviously watching Jack the narrator watch Murray watching, etc. If you leave out the reader, there's a similar regress of recordings of barn and barn-watching. But more important are the complicated ironies at work in the scene. The scene itself is obviously absurd and absurdist. But most of the writing's parodic force is directed at Murray, the would-be transcender of spectatorship. Murray, by watching and analyzing, would try to figure out the how and whys of giving in to collective visions of mass images that have themselves become mass images only because they've been made the objects of collective vision. The narrator's " extended silence" in response to Murray's blather speaks volumes. But it's not to be mistaken for a silence of sympathy with the sheeplike photograph-hungry crowd. These poor Joe

Briefcases are no less objects of ridicule for their "scientific" critic himself being ridiculed. The authorial tone throughout is a kind of deadpan sneer. Jack himself is utterly mute - since to speak out loud in the scene would render the narrator part of the farce (instead of a detached, transcendent "observer and recorder") and so vulnerable to ridicule himself. With his silence, DeLillo's alter ego Jack eloquently diagnoses the very disease from which he, Murray, barn-watchers, and readers all suffer. I Do Have a Thesis I want to convince you that irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive of those features of contemporary U. S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat. I'm going to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of a great despair and stasis in U. S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems. My two big premises are that, on the one hand, a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young Americans, has lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television; and that, on the other hand, televisual culture has somehow evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault. TV, in other words, has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes of passive unease and cynicism TV requires of Audience in order to be commercially and psychologically viable at doses of several hours per day. Image-Fiction The particular fictional subgenre I have in mind has been called by some editors "post-postmodernism" and by some critics "hyperrealism." Most of

the younger readers and writers I know call it the "fiction of image." Image-fiction is basically a further involution of the relations between lit and pop that blossomed with the sixties postmodernists. If the postmodern church fathers found pop images valid referents and symbols in fiction, and if in the seventies and early eighties this appeal to the features of mass culture shifted from use to mention, certain avant-gardists starting to treat of pop and TV and watching as themselves fertile subjects, the new fiction of image uses the transient received myths of popular culture as a world in which to imagine fictions about "real," albeit pop-mediated, public characters. Early uses of imagist tactics can be seen in the DeLillo of *Great Jones Street*, the Coover of *Burning*, and in Max Apple, whose seventies short story "The Oranging of America" projected an interior life onto the figure of Howard Johnson. But in the late eighties, despite publisher unease over the legalities of imagining private lives for public figures, a real bumper crop of this behind-the-glass stuff started appearing, authored largely by writers who didn't know or cross-fertilize one another. Apple's *Propheteers*, Jay Cantor's *Krazy Kat*, Coover's *A Night at the Movies*, or *You Must Remember This*, William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels*, Stephen Dixon's *Movies: Seventeen Stories*, and DeLillo's own fictional hologram of Oswald in *Libra* are all notable post-'85 instances. (Observe too that, in another eighties medium, the arty *Zelig*, *Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Sex, Lies, and Video-tape*, plus the low-budget *Scanners* and *Videodrome* and *Shockers*, all began to treat screens as permeable.) It's in the last couple of years that the image-fiction scene has really taken off. A. M. Homes's 1990 *The Safety of Objects*

features a stormy love affair between a boy and a Barbie doll. Vollmann's
1989 T