# The Words Count

(Opening address to the IBA Consultation on Entertainment Programmes, Cheltenham, February, 1986)

Facing so many highly qualified administrators, controllers, department heads and deep thinkers, I must begin by saying that I admire your strategy. By asking someone as unqualified as I am to deliver an opening address, you give yourselves something to agree on. You all know a lot about the organisation that lies behind television, and in the next few days of discussion your knowledge will inevitably lead to disagreements, the facts being intractable, the interpretation of them personal, and personalities divergent. But for now you can unite for an hour in showing expansive tolerance for someone who does not know what he is talking about. I am fairly certain that that is why I was chosen. What little I know about television I have learned from watching the set or else appearing within its framework. I have looked at it and I have been on it, but I have never run it.

I will not flatter myself by saying that I lack the appetite for power. Nobody who actually says that should ever be believed. But I do lack the qualifications for it. For an Australian to exercise power in the media today, he must have military qualities. He must have the ability to fortify a large building in the East End of London and to defend it against even the most ferocious woman trade union leader. He must know how to string barbed-wire and booby-trap a doorway so that even the most inquisitive journalist is unable to get out. He must have the organisational talent of Eisenhower, the tactical audacity of Rommel, the self-justifying eloquence of Montgomery and the operational flexibility of Roland Rat. I do not pretend to possess these gifts. The internal politics of the business has never been my bailiwick. In my ten years as a television critic I never met anybody except in the form of an image about eight inches high. I think I only ever went to one preview. It was in Golden Square, and when Sir Denis Forman offered me a sandwich I asked him how long he had been with the catering company.

In my later capacity as a performer, mainly for LWT, I have learned to tell John Birt from Brian Tesler, and recently at Kent House I have quite often met either or both of them in the lift, but when I get off at the fourteenth floor I have no idea where they go next. Maybe they go all the way up to see Melvyn Bragg. Maybe they keep going straight on up out of the top of the building. Perhaps they go back down to the basement and go home. All I know about what they do is that I could not do it. They are welcome to their end of the business, which depends on a broad understanding of the big picture. That the big picture is on such a small screen only makes the comprehension of it a more taxing challenge. It is a challenge which I am temperamentally incapable of meeting. I am not just poor-mouthing myself on this point. As a critic, I think I was capable of spotting specific things which my more generalising colleagues missed. Regarding the Barbara Woodhouse programmes about dog-training, for example, I was the first critic to notice that those dog-owners who did not follow her instructions disappeared from the next episode. And I solved the mystery of where they had gone by noting how the dogs had got fatter.

But these and similar perceptions I arrived at without developing a capacity to theorise. One tries not to be too ashamed of this. It could be said that some minds are so clear in their imaginative workings that the faculty of ratiocination is precluded. T. S. Eliot — during the short time that he was working as a Channel 4 commissioning editor — said of Henry James that he had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. Nobody ever said that about the mind of Clive James except the deputy headmaster of Sydney Technical High School in 1956. But I prefer to think that the evidence all points that way. Nevertheless, the glaring fact that in a decade of television criticism I never contributed even one theory to the flourishing field of abstract media studies still nags me. It was one of the most embarrassing hours of my life — even more embarrassing than this one could well turn out to be — when Lord Annan, while gathering learned opinions for his famed report, received me at University College, London in private session for a working lunch: just him and me and a small roll-mop salad each. He asked me what I thought of television in general. I just could not come up with even one general observation. He looked at his sagging roll-mop as a peer of the realm will who realises that he has just blown his lunch-hour. We have remained friends ever since but only on the understanding that we discuss Lytton Strachey or Virginia Woolf. The subject of television never comes up, because we both remember too well that, apart from a few specific objections, I had nothing to say except that I was on the whole grateful for how the medium was managed in Britain and hoped that it would go on roughly as it was. I can just remember recommending that the fourth channel should go to ITV so that the BBC and the IBA could share power equally. I believed in the duopoly. He did, too, and I think most people did. And I think probably they still do, although the exceptions have grown more vociferous. Perhaps they have forgotten how lucky we are; lucky in that British television offers only cause for concern instead of cause for despair. Nobody except a few die-hard academics assumes our television to be a write-off. Even its most inquisitorial would-be reformers — in fact, especially them — acknowledge its importance as a shaping force. Everyone knows that television transmits values, whether real, false or confused. It is just that no-one except the over-confident Comstockian witch-finder knows exactly how this transmission of values occurs. For what my own guess is worth, I think television imposes, or at any rate reinforces, cultural values most powerfully when they are least explicitly stated. To put it more specifically, less theoretically, it does not matter so much if a playwright is narrowly left wing, it matters more if a political commentator is narrowly right wing, and it matters a great deal if the host of a game show is a racist. It is through entertainment that television reaches most people and reaches them most deeply. A performer on Weekend Worldcan say with a clear conscience whatever Brian Walden will let him get away with, but a performer on a prime-time entertainment show should watch his words. The words count.

Game shows are for me the least congenial area of entertainment, but even about those I find it hard to get worked up into the belief that civilisation as we know it is on its way down the tubes through the tube. If this were America, I might have some spleen to vent on the subject and might even write my version of Amusing Ourselves to Death,a book which in the US gets published every five years or so, with a different author and title but the same argument and predictable press reaction. Here, I doubt if we are amusing ourselves to death even with our mentally least nutritious programming, and I suppose game shows come under that heading. Even in America, it is an open question whether the worst game show is more culturally damaging than, say, gladiatorial game shows were for Augustan Rome or bear-baiting for Elizabethan England. I will leave aside the question of game shows in Japan, except to repeat the rhetorical question I have already asked when summing them up on screen: if a Japanese producer's idea of a good show is to stuff the contestants' plastic knickers full of live cockroaches while they hang upside down over a slow fire, what would you rather he was doing instead? Would you rather he was in the army? In the air force, perhaps? Japanese game shows are the most obvious instance of television catering for impulses which might be lethal if not expressed in playful form. The possibility that The Price Is Rightis doing the same thing should not be dismissed lightly.

As for our worst game shows, they are usually imported versions of America's second-worst game shows. My younger daughter loves them, and I cannot see how that passion is destroying her character, her reading skills or her reason. I will not bend over backwards any further than that lest I be suspected of trying to soothe one of my current employers, LWT's Alan Boyd, a game-show scientist who will be telling you all about what lies ahead in that field of achievement. The simple fact is that I hardly ever watch any programme involving questions and answers unless Joanna Lumley is on the panel. But the simple fact arises less from moral disapproval than from irrational aversion, probably traumatic. When New Facesstarted up, I was cast as the heavy critic on the panel, the man who told the pitiless truth about the talent on display. After the first, locally transmitted pilot, I was generally held to be a success at this, one of the contestants having burst into tears on screen. After the second, nationally transmitted pilot, I was offered a glittering contract. But I had come to the moment of truth during that second programme, when a singing weightlifter, preparatory to giving us his rendition of *My Way*, put an empty hot-water bottle to his pursed lips and blew it up until it burst. Before that obscene salmon-pink membrane had even finished swelling — he disappeared behind it like a pup behind a television pouffe — I already knew that I would have to make a decision about what kind of television I wanted to do. I made that decision and walked away from it for ever: the chauffeured limo, the Havana cigars, the swimming-pool, everything that Michael Parkinson holds dear.

But I do not believe that Parkinson or Michael Aspel or Robert Robinson or Bruce Forsyth or Leslie Crowther or anyone who conducts a game or a panel show in a considerate, responsible way is wasting his time. There is a line to be drawn and on the whole British television has drawn it and stays on the right side of it. The American game shows are greedy not just in money terms but in how they rob their own air-time of precious reality. By coaching the public to become performers they commit a small but real crime against humanity. We still allow the contestants to be unreconstructed human beings, and our hosts, if not as unreconstructed as they might be, are at least not androids on the American model. Some of our chaps wear wigs, but the wigs are not made of Teflon: they crackle when touched but do not glow in the dark.

A game show is light entertainment and nothing else, so it might seem a minor point to keep it human. But that is what makes it a major point. Millions of people are watching, at their least critical, their most defenceless. The host should be an identifiable member of Homo sapiens,capable of treating people in a civil manner and of saying a few things of his own, not just cranking out special material. Even in game shows, the words count. We want to hear the human voice, not just patter. Otherwise, Max Headroom might as well take over. He could, of course: if the computer controls the controller, and the bottom line becomes the only line, you could program the whole programme.

In situation comedy, that would be more difficult, because in situation comedy the public loves the actor. When the audience thinks of Porridge,it thinks of Fletch, and of Ronnie Barker as Fletch. When the public thinks of Auf Wiedersehen, Pet,it thinks not just of the characters but of those actors being those characters. Hence the sadness that tinged the delight of seeing the first episode of the new series of Auf Wiedersehen, Pet,knowing that one of the actors had died an untimely death.

Many commentators about television bewail the audience's supposed inability to tell the actor from the character, and indeed there is something worrying about how the Fleet Street tabloids encourage readers to get Joan Collins mixed up with Alexis. But I think the confusion probably lies more in Fleet Street's motives than in the public's responses. People know that their favourite sitcom characters are not reallyreal. They enjoy appreciating them as ifthey were real. What the public does not know and cannot know, however — what even some of the younger actors concerned do not yet know but will find out when they move on to a less rewarding show — is how important the writing is, how much the words count.

Good scripts sound effortless, as if they grew on trees. But as I do not need to tell you, of all people, they are made, and only with great effort, and are a lot rarer than gold. Several years ago Russell Harty took me to a secret meeting with a BBC controller at Broadcasting House. LWT never knew I was at that meeting, and I would not want them to think I was leaking the information now just because contract time is coming up, but the story is too illustrative to leave out. The BBC controller, who must now be nameless — come to think of it, he was pretty nameless then — complained that he was ready to pay anything for another series of Fawlty Towersbut John Cleese and Connie Booth could not be persuaded. In other words, there was a force in these things which was more powerful than money. It was, of course, creativity. A good sitcom, we agreed, grew from inspiration and therefore must have its natural term. We all agreed about this while washing down the game pie with an excellent claret. The lunch was taking place in one of those BBC chambre séparéeexecutive dining-roomettes furnished with left-over fittings from a pre-war Atlantic liner. We were discussing the importance of transcending materialist values while eating the equivalent of two licence fees.

But the principle remains true. The sitcoms that reach the nation's heart are written from that same organ. They are matters of calculation only in the second instance. In the first instance they are done from love. It is a point worth remembering when you wonder how to get Clement and La Frenais to come up with the same goods as before. There they are in Los Angeles, sitting around their swimming-pool, or in their twin jacuzzis, listlessly making another million by rewriting their own script for a movie whose profitability depends on its never actually being made. How can you raise enough scratch to tempt them back home to write Porridgeagain? You can't. There isn't enough money. But they willwrite Auf Wiedersehen, Pet,because to them it is an adventure, something new they want to do. And when they do, the results are so much better than they need to be that it makes you wonder. In the theatre, a radical playwright can build a giant reputation for political relevance while having scarcely half the verbal talent of either Clement or La Frenais taken separately, let alone together. But the important thing to remember is that he has not got half the political relevance, either. Alan Bleasdale is an obvious case of a writer who manages to impose a sophisticated political view through apparently naive means. Jay and Lynn in Yes, Ministerare a less obvious example, since their view is more like what most of us believe and so does not strike us as a peculiar vision. But in every case the television writer who becomes a name is giving us a personal view. Even Eddie Braben, when he wrote for Morecambe and Wise, gave us a view uniquely his. It was one of the things that made them them.

What makes the personal view strike home to the viewer, however, is the sense of reality that comes with it. The unique writers have that in common. It is not a paradox, or not meant to sound like one, to say that that is what makes them unique: what they have in common. They make us feel: yes, our life is like that, at least in part. And itis the sense of community which results from that kind of entertainment which makes British television valuable above the level of mere commerce. A sure sign of how deep this community spirit runs is that the television companies have so far persevered in the uneconomically painstaking task of seeking out the kind of writing talent which makes it possible. I hope the search goes on, even if it means publicly acknowledging what Hollywood has never had the courage to admit: the crucial importance of the writer. The words count.

Somebody once said that talent is rare but the talent to handle talent is rarer still. I am sure that is true. First you have to get Verity Lambert, and then she has to get Linda Agran, and only then do you get Minder.The writer might possibly have got the project off the ground on his own, but it would crash at the end of the runway. It takes a common effort to make good on even the best ideas. A company that looks after its sitcom writers, giving them a home to go to, letting their new projects mature at the proper rate, is a company that is doing more than it needs to do for itself in the short term. It is looking to the long term on behalf of the whole country, and one sincerely trusts that such efforts are noticed when the time comes to award or re-award or take away franchises.

I might also say that the fourth channel seems to me to be the ideal place for an initially audacious sitcom idea to find its feet before moving to the third channel and the mass audience. The BBC, in however slapdash a manner, has already used its two channels to some advantage in this regard, and, if a certain BBC controller with contact lenses and sharp socks ever gets his hands on both outlets, he is likely to use BBC 2 for out-of-town try-outs, BBC 1 for a West End run, pick up a profit both ways and appear on an LWT talk show to tell us how he did it.\*

But here again I have no publishable theories about how things could be better. I continue to be startled by how good things are. The best British television sitcoms are a blessing we have no right to expect. They are thought of as a blessing in Australia too, incidentally, where they run mainly on ABC Television and remind the delighted viewers of their loyalty: loyalty not so much to the Crown — some of the viewers might be republicans — but loyalty to the language. The words count.

When it comes to pure comedy shows, my stress on the importance of writing would have seemed, until very recent times, supererogatory. Everyone who has ever suffered through a wedding reception while the best man tries to save a bad speech with funny faces knows that the script is vital; everyone except journalists, who would rather tell a simple story about one person than a complex one about a collaboration. Hence once again we get a Radio Timescover story calling Tony Hancock the greatest British comedian since the war, because that is an easier story to write than the one about the confused man with questionable judgment who was the greatest British comedian since the war, but only when he was temporarily smart enough to realise that Galton and Simpson were donating his life's blood.

The well-founded tradition that good comedy must first be created on the page before the comedian can body it forth on stage or screen still remains strong, even if not well understood by cultural commentators. Victoria Wood is a heartening example of a writer and performer all rolled into one person whose sense of structure would be saluted by Muir and Norden as something either would have to think for a bit before matching on his own. In her material she mentions what would once have been unmentionable, yet she does so in a disciplined way, working that difficult trick — which is the writer's trick — of establishing a climate of tolerance just ahead of the advancing outrage.

But while the written comic tradition continues in the best British manner, there has been one significant break in it, and the break breaks both ways. The break is alternative comedy. Let me personalise this issue immediately by declaring that I was practically the last person in Britain to hear about alternative comedy, after the Archbishop of Canterbury and only just ahead of the Queen. I was a guest one night on the BBC'sFriday Night and Saturday Morning.It was a show on which they changed the host more often than the guests, so it never really settled in, but I went on it for the usual high-minded reason: i.e. I wanted to sit back on a deep sofa with Lesley-Anne Down. In between some only fitfully scintillating stretches of conversation there were interludes purporting to offer comic relief. These numbers were direly unfunny except for an act called Twentieth Century Coyote, which turned out to be two young men, one of whom was Rik Mayall. I laughed until a valve burst and quizzed them afterwards on their background. What a relief to find that they had nothing to do with Cambridge Footlights. I do not want to sound disloyal to the dear old club, because I owe to it my own beginnings in the British media, a hard field for an Australian to crack unless he has Joan Sutherland's voice, Barry Humphries' high heels, Olivia Newton-John's pink gums or Germaine Greer's shy charm. But the Oxbridge connection had dominated theatrical revue and its television offshoots far too thoroughly and for far too long, and, although I did not want to see this influence entirely replaced, I could not repress a yell of glee at seeing it supplemented. Alternative comedy told us more about the state of the nation. The communal sense of life as it is actually lived came through with renewed strength. That was a clear gain. What struck me at the time as a potential loss, however, and now begins to strike me as an actual loss, was the use of language. And by that I mean bad language: badly written bad language.

They did swear a lot, and later on, when the demand for fresh ideas started to outrun the supply, they swore even more. One of my very few theories about anything concerns swearing. Actually, the theory is just a restatement of the law of diminishing returns. By using bad language habitually, you may or may not lose your audience, but you must eventually lose your capacity to swear. You cannot say 'shit' all the time and still hope to say 'shit' for effect. You cannot shock if you are shocking all the time. All you can do is bore. For a sharp weapon to keep its edge, it must spend most of its life in the scabbard.

It is with circumspection, trepidation and what humility I can muster that I take this line. It might just be that I have been outdistanced by events. Perhaps the best way to cope with the allegedly irredeemable squalor of life in modern Britain is not just to comment on its ugliness but to mimic its accent; to fill the screen with the litter in the streets, the graffiti in the stairwell. If the young men on the football terraces mangle the English language, let the young presenters on the screen mangle the English language too. The case for realism is always stronger, or anyway more easily stated, than the case for stylisation. The young want to be involved, and when the old say that the only way to stay involved is to sound detached the young are right to distrust them, because it smacks of sophistry, and often is. Also, this is perhaps a bad time to suggest limits, when you consider who else is not only suggesting limits but demanding their imposition.

It was written in the stars that Mary Whitehouse and Winston Churchill should one day get together. One only hopes that their union will be blessed with offspring. They could start a whole new human race with none of the failings of the present one. Having met Mrs Whitehouse at an occasion a bit like this it was a conference of the Royal Television Society held at King's College, Cambridge — like all men present I was ravished by the metallic sheen of her hair arrangement and the vitreous portcullis of her smile, but I wondered what on earth she was doing there among all those BBC bigwigs. Why had they invited her, if she was challenging their authority? And why had she accepted the invitation, if she thought they were incompetent?

The prominence of young Winston is rather more easily explained. He first sprang to my attention when he tried to stop a couple of geriatric ex-SS officers visiting Britain. Obviously he had heard that it was traditional for someone called Winston Churchill to stop German officers visiting England. His moral position with regard to these doddering old killers was impeccable, but it was noticeable that his way of dealing with something unpalatable was not to look at it, and to stop anyone else looking at it, too. No surprise, then, that he and Mrs Whitehouse would be pushing less for a prescriptive list of what should be shown than for a proscriptive list of what should not — an index expurgatorium.

It would be generous to this initiative to call it half-witted. The whole communications establishment has justifiably snorted in derisive unison at the very prospect. But such a clumsy grab for power would not have got this close if it was not heading towards a vacuum. The power vacuum is exemplified by the most fluent defending counsel against censorship, John Mortimer. His piece on the subject in The Timesput the permissive case, as he always puts it, with bewitching clarity. Our duty, he argues — and I am paraphrasing here, but I hope not falsifying — is to reflect life as it is and to stave off those who would put restrictions on our freedom to do so.

John Mortimer is a great champion of the liberal spirit, and I want to be on his side if I can, but there is a point he has missed. Somebody has to limit us in our urge to reflect life, and, if we do not want someone else to do it, we had better make sure that we do it. We can call it censorship, or we can call it just good taste, or a sense of fitness, but one way and another we have to ensure that not just anything is said. You cannot believe in the power of words, you cannot believe that the words count, and simultaneously hold that anything can be said, at any time, by anyone.

If I can reminisce again — lurching back along what already seems to be the dark corridor of a long career — there was a time about ten years ago when I went up to Manchester to do a spot on a doomed little pop music show for Granada. My first television programmes had been done for Granada: 39 editions of Cinema,written and presented for £6o a show plus train fare each way and dinner and breakfast at the Midland Hotel, with a chance to catch a fleeting glimpse of Bamber Gascoigne. I had never got over the heady romance of all that, and when I was asked to do the pop show spot I went back to the North to catch a taste of that old Granadaland thrill again: the long journey and the short contract, the sheer impossibility of getting a drink within the building. Some of you will remember the route to the nearest pub that twisted circuitously behind walls and obstacles so you could not be observed from executive windows. It was called the Ho Chi Minh trail. Here was responsible, sober British television at its most venerable: more decorous than the BBC, less frivolous than the Church of England, as ethically unimpeachable as the Marks & Spencer's staff superannuation scheme.

Into this hallowed context fell a poisonous new pop group called the Sex Pistols. They were the number that I had to follow on the show. It was the first television programme this or any other punk band had ever done. In the Green Room between rehearsal and taping, the Sex Pistols physically attacked everyone in sight, and finally they started attacking each other. As Johnny Rotten fell to the carpet with his yellow teeth sunk in his own shoulder, I congratulated them on the authenticity of their acting. It never occurred to me they were in earnest until they threatened not to go on. Not to go on, in a show which was doing you a favour by booking you at all, was a gesture so insane as to be worth investigating. Why, I asked, were they threatening not to go on? It was because the girl in the group had been asked by the producer to remove her swastika armband.

Perhaps this requirement had come down from Lord Bernstein himself. Perhaps it did not need to come down from him and had been imposed by an executive who was either interpreting his proprietor's wishes or who simply felt that way himself. It is immaterial. The fact remains that here was a plain case of someone who needed to be stopped from doing something.

The day will inevitably come when the Nazi era passes into history. On the day when nobody who suffered from it is left alive, the twelve-year nightmare will begin assuming the same status as the Thirty Years War, about which we can make what jokes we like. But I doubt that that day has come yet, and it certainly had not come then. The Sex Pistols had a case which, if they could not articulate it themselves, could have been advanced for them by anyone not suffering from their speech impediments. Theirs was a band of protest, rejecting the contemporary world. Nazi insignia was either a sign of rebellion in itself, or else could be regarded as a trinket in comparison with the more recent terrors of a society which condemned young people to the dole queue for no better reason than that they had contrived to emerge from school illiterate, innumerate, sociopathic and terminally addicted to glue fumes. But on this particular day this argument was not allowed to cut any ice. Authority was exercised. The appeal to the Zeitgeist was disallowed. Daddy knew best.

And daddy didknow best. The young lady with the swastika armband was very disappointed, even though it was finally conceded that she would not have to take it off, merely cover it up. This concession was more or less enforced by the discovery, made after close inspection, that the armband was in fact a tattoo. As she sullenly wrapped her swastika in flesh-coloured Elastoplast, she told me she could not see what all the bleeding fuss was about. And upon enquiry it rapidly became clear that she did not know what all the bleeding fuss was about. She could not tell Hitler from a hit single. She knew nothing about him. She thought a concentration camp was where all them Germans went to think. I wonder where she is now? I expect she has got three kids and she is running a launderette in the Mile End Road.

It would not be hard to imagine similar instances, less absurd and therefore more sinister, of things that cannot be done or said on screen. There is a lot that we do not and cannot allow to happen on screen while all those people are watching. But controllers ought to come clean about who does the controlling. It should be clearly, unequivocally, them. A vague attempt to let the spirit of the times carry the can must only result in unwanted offers of assistance from Mrs Whitehouse and Mr Churchill, separately or together. I have heard it said that the authority started to drain out of the BBC when Harold Wilson appointed Lord Hill. However it started, the haemorrhage went on until it reached that depressing point very recently where the man who was supposed to speak for the whole organisation could not summon up the energy to open his mouth. Projects became finished programmes before being turned down. Sometimes they were transmitted and then repudiated. Those in authority, because they had not exercised their authority in good time, had no alternative left except to be authoritarian, which is a different thing.

The independent companies have suffered less from this malaise, but the possibility is always there as long as someone who has been appointed to exercise judgment forfeits his right and neglects his duty to judge what is being said. And since what gets said in the area of entertainment is what most closely corresponds to, and very probably helps form, the actual ethical assumptions of the whole country, what gets said is of real importance, even in the apparently marginal field of comedy. Nobody has ever convinced me that the Monty Python people suffered much damage from being rationed in each episode to a certain number of swear words. The obstacle is often the departure point for inspiration.

None of this means that I did not enjoy last night's rerun of The Bullshitterson Channel 4. But one of the things that made it funny was that they were not using just bad language. Some of it was good language, in the sense of being well thought out, well written. If all the writing in shows built around ‘Comic Strip'-type teams of alternative comedians was of that standard, one would be a little less weary of the trend, but I do not think it is. Recently the BBC had a new prime-time alternative comedy series, a parody sitcom, which was so dirty my children would not let me watch it, but I snuck upstairs, turned on another set and checked it out. It had no chance of being funny. They had no subject matter except television itself, everyone in the show fancied himself as a writer and they were all saying the first thing that came into their heads. Half the team were ex-Footlights pretending to be alternative comedians. They were catching up with the revolution at the very time it was turning into a new orthodoxy.

For their own sakes, the young comedy teams need to be encouraged — which I suppose is a nice way of saying forced — to think harder about the words. The words count. Every young comedy team wants the Woody Allen contract, the agreement Woody Allen had with United Artists which meant that the studio could not interfere as long as he delivered the goods. But that was the point: he delivered the goods. And I am not sure that all the young ones — I use the term sweepingly to include anyone younger than I am who has had it easier — are delivering the goods. I hasten to add that the young ones who were actually called The Young Oneswere very creative.

But it is quite possible to be very creative and be a disastrous influence. Monty Python ruined comedy for years to come. Just as abstract art increased the opportunity to paint badly, unstructured comedy increased the opportunity to be unfunny. Any breakthrough achieved by the very talented will be run into the ground by the less talented. It is a law of nature. In fact, it is the second law of thermodynamics.

If they were obliged to work harder at the typewriter, some of the young comedians might have a career after the inevitable day when the team breaks up. The casualty rate must already be fearful, even though, I suspect, the current economics of television temporarily favour a group of young, relatively low paid semi-unknowns against, say, a Stanley Baxter show in which the cost of the white staircase and diamante-studded fountain is not wholly offset by the savings effected through his playing both Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The young comedians are themselves likely to be undercut in their turn by an ever-increasing number of impersonators, each of whom is a whole cast in himself. And when Max Headroom gets access to the appropriate software he will be able to impersonate everybody, including me. In fact, I am not even here this evening, this is a hologram.

Even the puppets must have something to say for themselves, and not even the Spitting Imagepuppets can be allowed to say just anything. I thought the standard of writing on Spitting Imagewent up after the first series and went down again in the latest series and that by no coincidence it was always dirtier when most obviously desperate. Did they economise on the writing? If I can hazard just one more theoretical formulation, this time concerning televised satirical puppet shows: if, when the roller comes up, the names of the puppeteers outnumber the names of the writers by a factor of two to one or more, watch out.

A more practical observation about television satire, and satire in general, is this: a satirical intention, however sincerely felt, does not supersede the requirements of elementary decency. The Spitting Imagesketch about Gielgud and Olivier reminiscing was one of the funniest things I have ever seen, partly because the tacit pact of shared humanity linking the satirist with the victim had not been rescinded. But I do wonder about the Princess Margaret puppet sloshing down gin. Is she really like that? If she were, would it not be understandable? What is easy about her position? How could she possibly escape it? Is something being said about the shortcomings of constitutional monarchy? If it is, who is saying it? Come out from behind that puppet, whosoever you are. I suspect you are a second-rate journalist from Private Eye,which means you are a third-rate journalist from anywhere else. Even in the most passionately committed satirical programme there is a limit to what can be said, and a producer who does not have to fight for his script all the way to the top — just to the top of the company, I do not mean he should have to fight the IBA as well — should be worried about having that much freedom. He should remember Kant's fable about the dove: the dove who, on being told about air resistance, thought it could fly faster if the air were abolished.

One does not ask for authoritarianism. We do not want to go back to that. I doubt if even Winston Churchill wants to go back to the days of the Lord Chamberlain, unless the post were offered to him. One does not even ask for more authority, just a clear, confident expression of the authority that is there already, and necessarily there. Because nothing except resignation will get you people off the hook. Forty channels or four hundred channels will only mean that the television audience will watch the big four more closely, precisely because they are organisations, making a planned attempt, however fallible, to give a responsible picture of life, so as to promote a reasonable living of life.

It all goes forward gradually. It takes a long time for the Black and White Minstrel Showto go away and then another long time before Lenny Henry emerges and starts to do some of the work that has made Bill Cosby so important in the United States — more important than Malcolm X, at least as important as James Baldwin, not dwarfed in importance even by Martin Luther King. Life changes entertainment, and entertainment changes life.

It goes forward gradually and sometimes it goes backwards. I just hate canned or boosted laughter. It steals from the audience. There is more of it all the time, and there ought to be less. But our hope of correcting abuses and making advances lies within the responsible organisation. The idea that a fully deregulated, umpteen-channel television entirely determined by market forces will somehow embody democratic choice is not just a boondoggle, it is a con. It is the sales philosophy of Saatchi and Saatchi masquerading as a political vision. For the advertisers to run television would be for the tail to wag the dog. But I will not venture any further into the realm of macro-economics, where all of you are much more at home than I. It is you that understand why the ratings must come down so that the revenue may go up. I am but a humble, bemused toiler in your vineyard.

This has been a long claim on your attention and possibly on your patience, but, at the risk of making things worse, I want to end by saying something about the sort of programmes which I write and appear in myself. The programmes are documentaries; they are specials about television and films, employing the old GranadaCinemaformula in which short clips are occasionally allowed to interrupt me talking; and then there are talk shows, pure and apparently simple, although I try to put a bit of writing into those, too. None of these programmes quite fits into the category of entertainment. And that is what I like best about them. They have no category.

In the next few days you will be talking about entertainment as if it were a separate thing. This procedure makes a lot of administrative sense. But it only makes administrativesense. For the public, all television is entertainment, even the news. And equally, although this aspect is harder to I analyse, all television is news, even the entertainment. With due acknowledgement to John Birt and Alan Boyd of LWT and to Michael Grade and David Bell before them, all of whom have given house-room to the extraordinary Special Programmes Unit of my executive producer, Richard Drewett, it was he who taught me to ask, and has made sure I have gone on asking, two basic questions of any project I cook up. The first question is, "Will anyone be interested in this?", meaning that if it does not entertain it is a dead duck. And the second question is, "What are we trying to say?", meaning, the words count. If only television were just pictures. But if it were, you would not be here. It would be all so easy, there would be nothing to discuss.

\*At this time Michael Grade was controller of BBC