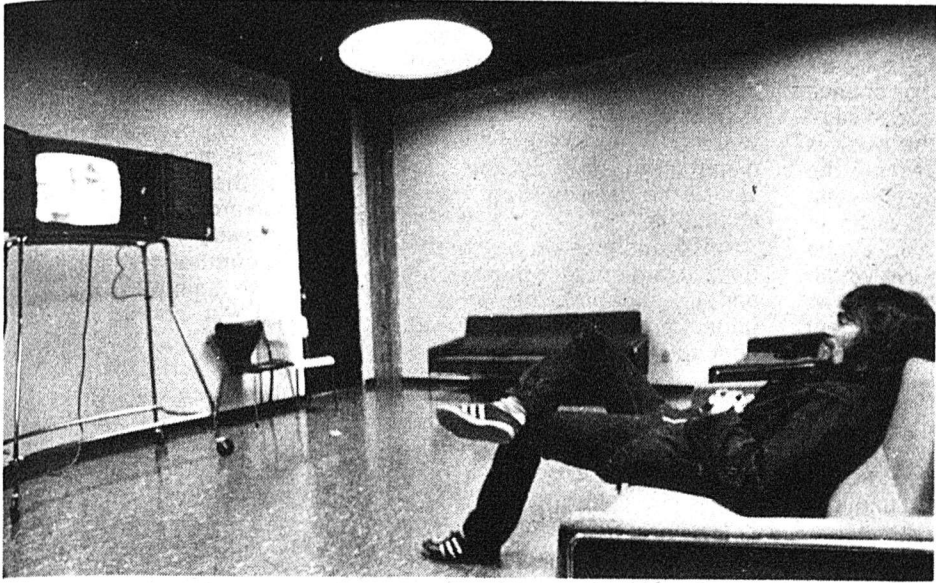


Where is the wit?



Traversing national boundaries in search of a good laugh

Wit is in short supply on TV. There is much comedy, but little that can aspire to the name of "wit".

Archie Bunker - "atmosphere of projected hysteria"

Archie Bunker has become a self-parody, the inevitable fate of any entertainer who becomes a star: the jokes don't improve, but the dreadful studio laughter, seems to get longer and longer, the camera forced to linger on Archie's face until it subsides. Increasingly, one's memories of the show are crowded out by that image, the frozen expression of triumph (now just a little weary too) on the face of a comedian accepting the homage of his audience. We laugh at the excess of Archie's insolence, at his shamelessness in expressing attitudes or opinions which our liberal society frowns upon; and we laugh because the studio laughter projects an atmosphere of hysteria into our homes. There was once a comedian who believed that *any* line would get a laugh once such an atmosphere had been created, and he tested the theory by rounding off a series of jokes with the remark: "By the way, Harry Smith eats spinach" - whereupon the audience dissolved into helpless mirth. *All in the Family* works on this principle: there are some fine moments of earnest scattiness on the part of Edith, Archie's wife, but on the whole the series gets by on Harry Smith and spinach.

Bob Newhart - "an intrinsically brilliant situation"

The *Bob Newhart Show*, on the other hand, is one of TV's classics. Bob Newhart himself has been with us for a long time now; I remember the long-playing records from the early 60s, especially *The Driving Instructor*. The style has not changed. Bob Newhart is still the quiet, dead-pan, hesitant, well-meaning

man who reluctantly deals with disaster every minute of his life, disaster that those around him create. And the staple device from the old recordings - we hear only half of a conversation, Newhart's half, and are left to infer the outrageous other half, so that we the audience are actually half-involved in the joke-making - this device still appears wherever possible in the framework of the new situation comedy. The idea of making Newhart a psychiatrist not only gives the writers a rich complex of situations to exploit - home, office, patients, etc. - but it is intrinsically brilliant, given Bob Newhart's known and established character traits. For much of the comedy derives from his dubious suitability to that professional role - or so it must seem to us, who expect psychiatrists to be in control of situations rather than apologizing for them. In the group therapy sessions, which enable the writers to develop a good team of secondary comic characters, Newhart handles his patients with rather too much tact to be effective, we feel; he searches for the painless euphemism, blinks beseechingly, and watches the antics of his patients - who are all robust, philosophical extroverts - with a certain wariness.

The cliché of the psychiatrist supine on his own couch sounds perilously close, but the show avoids it. That is, it avoids making an obvious primary issue of it, it never becomes, in itself, "the joke"; but the situations invite us gently to question the validity of psychiatry when practised by a man who is obviously the epitome of quiet middle-class respectability and inhibition. And that kind of suggestiveness is the business of great comedy. Newhart's friend and neighbour Howard, an airline navigator, is wholly ingenuous, a loveable but quite unpredictable mind which can open up whole worlds of tortuous logic undreamt of in our philosophy; again, the marriage of such a mind with the serious business of navigating an airliner is wonderfully conceived, and the theme of the misfit, ever so subtly suggested in Newhart's professional activity, is played upon here in more caricatured form. Most of Howard's laughs derive from the unintentionally funny remark, and it is precisely this lack of intention, this gentle vagueness, which is so incongruous in a navigator, whose professional activity is the very symbol of purposiveness.

The tragedy of television comedy

British comedy at its worst - "facile, silly"

British humour is strangely unstable, and the solid excellence of America's best - Bob Newhart or Mary Tyler Moore - is on the whole alien to the British comedy shows. It seems a macabre but fitting comment that Tony Hancock, one of Britain's supreme comics, should have committed suicide because of cumulative depression. At the start of the TV year a comedy show with Ronnie Corbett was available - I forget the name, so forgettable was the show - and it was British humour at its worst, terribly jolly, terribly class-conscious, and terribly silly. There has been a lot of it in British TV and film, facile schoolboy stuff, probably public schoolboy stuff, and quite possibly performed by ex-public schoolboys. Most of the humour is lavatorial or sexual innuendo, and only an inexhaustible fund of fatuous goodwill on the part of a tame audience (Harry Smith and his spinach again) can render such shows tolerable. To a moderately intelligent viewer such rubbish is beyond endurance.

Monty Python - Undoubtedly, "something else!"

Monty Python's Flying Circus is something else, as the phrase goes. It is at the other end of the English spectrum, the most recent flowering of the satire that grew up in the early 60s. One of our cultural clichés has it that humour does not travel, that each nation has its unique sense of humour (or else none at all, as is harshly claimed of the Germans; admittedly, an evening of West German TV supports that claim, and if British comedy is not without its lead balloons, then the television skies of Germany are positively packed with fleets of lead zeppelins - to coin a phrase). Yet *Monty Python* is a regular cult in the USA and

Canada, while America's *Firesign Theatre* moves in related and similarly erratic paths which encompass the brilliant, the absurd, the satirical, and the plain silly. For *Monty Python* is uneven in quality, I suppose by its very nature. It is a shrill, frenetic, spontaneous kind of creation, the sort of thing one imagines being fuelled by nicotine and adrenalin: like an exam paper. Bob Newhart and Mary Tyler Moore have more the even solidity of term papers, organized and efficient, supply cannily geared to demand. Occasionally *Monty Python* tries to last the whole half hour on one joke thinly spread, and then it mistakes the breathing-rhythms of its own kind of humour, which does not last over long distances. The rapid sequence of unrelated sketches is its real forte, and some of these are memorable classics, like the watch-smuggler with a suitcase bulging with time-pieces, whose final breakdown and confession after interrogation is not accepted by the customs officer; the attempts of a pet-shop owner to justify to a dissatisfied customer the sale of a dead parrot ("This parrot is no more, it is deceased, demised - it is a late parrot" - and this spoken, mind you, by the Rector of Scotland's prestigious St Andrew's University, John Cleese); and the BBC newscaster who is wheeled from the studio, newsdesk and all, loaded on to a truck while he continues to read the news, and finally dumped off the end of a pier, newsreading to the last in his elegant tuxedo. This last one stands in the memory like a symbol - of what? King Canute? Britannia herself? Or maybe just the BBC's impeccable loyalty to the Establishment, like a captain who goes down with his ship. At all events, it stands as a quintessential image of what British humour, at its best, seems to do better than the humour of other nations, namely the mocking of its own heritage, and the dissolution of its own difficulties into self-irony. It is a sobering thought that humour in the *Monty Python* vein can only grow upon the ruins of an empire.

Allan Blunden is a visiting lecturer in the German Department who has taught at Cambridge and the U of Virginia. Blunden has done and will do, a lot of academic writing, but despises the concept of "scholarly" writing as such, because he is worried about the exclusiveness of esoteric academic writing. He believes that too much academic writing sets an appalling example to students.