Television and (Trans-)National Consciousness: *Dinner for One* as Serious German Cult TV

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Abstract

Television is increasingly able to transcend national borders and thereby challenge or even erode national, cultural and medial differences. This essay will argue that at times, however, it can also be used to fortify these cultural borders, and even strengthen stereotypes. In order to make this case, it will examine the peculiar case of *Dinner for One*, a sketch originating in England but produced in 1963 in English for the German NWDR, the North West German Broadcasting Corporation. The particular reception and henceforth cult use of this sketch in Germany and later also in other countries pays tribute to the uncanny ability of television to deconstruct national borders, while leaving cultural stereotypes intact. It also highlights the need to take TV seriously as a means of (virtual) reality creation, not just for one's own culture but for any resulting intercultures as well.

Introduction

There exist many ways in which cultural material is transferred from one country to another - through institutions, cuisines, wars, student exchanges, tourism, souvenirs and the like. An integral part of this transfer is always at least a partial translation of such artefacts and practices. After all, cultural transfer is never pure - many factors facilitate interferences. More often than not there is a slippage in the movement from transference to translation, with translation in many instances ending up as a misinterpretation of the translated. The film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980) chronicles one such misunderstanding and its results. An empty Coca-Cola bottle is discarded from an airplane and finds its way to a South-African bushman who interprets it as a sign from the Gods. Here, both the (sign-) language of culture and the linguistic barriers between languages proper play an important role as agents of interference. Such misunderstandings are the rule rather than the exception when different cultures meet, at least in the first instance. What is more, such stereotypical mistranslations do not exist only in regard to individuals or small parts of another's culture, but also in regard to another's culture viewed as a whole. And while phenomena might not do justice to an originating culture, they can bring out new and exciting cultural productions and in due course challenge traditional views of one's own culture.

In the following, I will analyse one such curious mistranslation concerning *Dinner for One* or *The 90th Birthday*, a British sketch written by Lauri Wylie for the theatre in the 1920s and which had been performed at seaside varietés in England until the 1960s As such it comes out of the English Music Hall and Variety show tradition, popular for centuries in England, and oftentimes used to poke fun at class and linguistic differences with much tongue-in-cheek and risqué humour. The piece was funny, but not spectacularly so. Today, it is mostly forgotten in the UK; while a small part of the recoding was broadcast on the satirical quiz show *QI* (BBC 4/BBC1 2003-) in January 2010, to date it has not been broadcast in its entirety on British TV or in the USA. It was 'discovered' by two Germans, Heinz Dunkhase, a producer for the NWDR broadcasting corporation and Peter Frankenfeld, a prominent show host. In 1962 the pair had travelled to England in search of new ideas and happened upon a performance of *Dinner for One* to which they both took an instant liking. The main star of the skit, Freddie Frinton, agreed to travel to Hamburg and record the show in English and live at a local theatre for German TV, with a short German introduction setting the stage. Frinton had bought the rights for the show from Wylie in the mid-1950s and thus was at liberty to work with the material. The show's broadcast went well, and infrequent rebroadcasts were scheduled, but it did not achieve its current cult status overnight. This would take over a decade and had to do with the programming slot of the programme. Only after it was given a regular slot on New Year's Eve in 1972 did audience figures increase and this trend has never stopped. The show would be later sold to other countries, such as Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Austria, Switzerland, and South Africa, where it also achieved cult status. In Norway it is a staple of the annual Christmas programming on December 23. Other versions would be screened as well, for instance: a cut version with much drinking omitted for Sweden and Switzerland; a Danish parody entitled 'The 80th Birthday'; a version in Low German language; a puppet version starring the character Bernd das Brot ('Bernd the Bread'); a 2008 parody starring German comedian Otto Waalkes; a 1999 NDR post-processed colour version and a 2010 stage production at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. In 2003 Danish TV produced a documentary about the sketch, which was nominated for a Rose d'Or in 2004. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records* (1995), it is the most frequently repeated TV programme ever.

When assessing the cult status of a TV show, one could do worse than to start with Robert Holtzclaw's definition of cult TV. He alleges that a TV programme's cult status can be measured by 'the fervency of a program's audience support, the degree to which its language and catchphrases enter into the audience's vocabulary, fans' determination to amass collectibles and memorabilia, and conventions at which like-minded souls can congregate and share their passion' (as quoted by Lavery 2009: 4). While there might not yet be conventions celebrating *Dinner for One*, memorabilia certainly exists, including a cookbook and a host of for-sale items on display during the show. English catchphrases such as the eponymous 'Same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?' certainly have made it not only into fans' vocabulary, but into that of most Germans. Add to this the annual repetition of the show on over 20 German stations during New Year's Eve prime time programming, the creation of spoof shows by cartoon characters, and even one starring the German chancellor Angela Merkel and the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy in 2011 (cf. Eling 2011), and the cult status of this show is beyond doubt. But what is all the excitement about?

The plot is quickly told. It involves a birthday party hosted by Miss Sophie and administered by her servant, James. Unfortunately, Miss Sophie is quite advanced in years, it is her 90th birthday, and the four invitees, Sir Toby, Admiral von Schneider, Mr. Pommeroy and Mr. Winterbottom, all of them pillars of the British Empire, have long been deceased and it is up to James to impersonate all four of them. Mostly, this involves him drinking all their drinks, toasting Miss Sophie and getting rather drunk in the process. In between the dining room table and the drinks cabinet there lies a tiger skin whose head he has to circumnavigate on every trip. Much of the humour derives from his (in)ability to do so as well as the frustrated expectation of the audience who time and again expect to see him finally trip over this tiger head, which in the end he does of course. Another pivotal plot device is the oft-repeated and already mentioned exchange between James and Miss Sophie: James would say, 'The same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?' In response, Miss Sophie would say: 'The same procedure as every year, James!' culminating in the following, final exchange between Miss Sophie and a by now rather inebriated James:

Miss Sophie: I think, I'll retire.

James: You are going to bed?

Miss Sophie: Yes.

James: Sit down; I'll give you a hand up, Madam.

Miss Sophie: As I was saying, I think, I'll retire.

James: Ya... Ya. By the way, the same procedure as last year, Miss Sophie?

Miss Sophie: The same procedure as every year, James!

James: Well - I'll do my very best!

Thus the skit ends in the best *Carry On* double-entendre tradition.

This sketch has become a 15 minute-or-so ritual not to be missed, and many New Year's Eve parties stop in their tracks to allow party-goers to watch its screening. As one reporter stated: 'Whenever I watch *Dinner for One*, I know it must be New Year's Eve (*Dinner for One*: 9). Most people know all the lines, and it is a ritual co-produced by the audience, an avant-le-film *Rocky Horror Picture Show* in its own right.

In the following discussion, three focal points of this TV programme shall be discussed: (i) its use of humour, (ii) its ritualization and role in the formation of national identities and (iii) its location within media theory.

Humour

Humorous TV shows are myriad; much of today's televised entertainment contains elements of humour. This situation emerges from a tradition originating in ancient theatre and also evident in the fairs of medieval Europe and the music halls, variétés, and cabarets of 18th, 19th and 20th century Northern Europe. In the age of electronic mass media, comedies constitute a large part of the programming and are widely discussed at office water coolers, in cafes and on social networks. No wonder then that they take on an important role in configuring our social lives. Take for instance one of the most successful British comedy series, *Only Fools and Horses*:

> *Only Fools and Horses* ran for several series on BBC and its final episode was
> watched by a record 24.5 million people, so it indicates the current British

taste in television humour… The title comes from the theme tune: "Why do only fools and horses work?" Although this seems to be a critical comment on working-class culture, many of the episodes contrast the ethics of their way of life with yuppie lifestyles (Ross 1998: 90).

Much comedy cannot help but contain social commentary and criticism, and at times this might be the easiest or even the only way to broadcast such. The more such commentary exists in a show, the more local it becomes. If this is true for TV series and specials, it is all the more true for jokes.

According to Freud's theory of the joke and the comical, one of their main markers is compression, a compression wherein one finds a representation of something larger, the chance for easy, tongue-in-cheek generalisation, similar to how an *aperçu* attempts to define a much larger, serious subject. Freud is careful throughout his text not to differentiate between different national humours. His examples are taken from English, Irish, German, Austrian, French and Jewish cultures, possibly because his foremost interest lies in establishing a general, trans-cultural theory of the joke rather than differentiating between different national humour cultures.

Nevertheless, in his treatment of the 'tendentious joke', Freud shows how such a national identification might arise. He states:

> An especially fortunate case exists for the tendentious joke, when the intended criticism of rebellion is directed against one's own person, or to express it more carefully, against a person in which one's own has a part, a collective person therefore, for example, one's own people (Freud 1960: 90).

Freud is quick to differentiate between jokes made about one's own people and those made about another people or 'collective self'. The latter he dismisses as of no import, because they would stop at the other people as an other, a foreign entity, and would be denied the subtler humour derived from self-irony. In particular, he mentions the Jewish people and Jewish self-deprecating-humour. For Freud, a humorous description of another collective self is done through a seemingly

humorous, yet ultimately degrading speech act. The other, the foreign becomes funny, non-threatening, and thus ultimately consumable (Freud 1960: 172). In *On Humour* (2002), Simon Critchley discusses this kind of humour further. In one telling passage, he states the following:

> It is a curious fact that much humour, particularly when one thinks of Europe, is powerfully connected to perceive, but curiously outdated, national styles and national differences. There is something deeply anachronistic about much humour, and it refers nostalgically to a past whose place in the present is almost mythical, certainly fantastical. For good or ill, old Europe still has a robust fantasy life (Critchley 2002: 70-71).

This would certainly apply to *Dinner for One*, and perhaps also to such texts as those written by Jewish humourist Ephraim Kishon (1972), but things are not quite as benign as they seem. More recent research elicits the fact that laughing about the 'Other' does have its limits, since it has the potential to display an ill-judged history of one's own ethnic superiority. The problem here is aptly described by Billig: '[The] debate often assumes that it is possible to determine whether a joke is prejudiced or unprejudiced by examining its content in the abstract, rather than studying the social contexts in which a particular joke is told' (2005: 31). Billig claims that this is the limit of humorous discourse.

Such is also the case with *Dinner for One*. Couched within the discourse of 'strange but benign' British humour, German superiority is cherished as the joke that is consumed; the backwardness and 'funniness' of the English are ascertained. What is more, this can seemingly be done with a clear conscience, as the English themselves allegedly produced the show. So if they were laughing at this, Germans would be allowed to do the same. However, this argument is fallacious because English audiences exposed to the piece are much more familiar with the history and context within which it appears and are able to critically place it within an entertainment context not readily available to a German audience. They would be better placed to understand the anachronisms involved in such a scene and reference it with present-day Britain in mind.

Such consuming glee, however, is short lived. Any intercultural interaction with the Other, be it through humour or other cultural means, forces a presumed (collective) self to confront the rifts within itself vis-à-vis the view of the Other as an ambivalent entity with its own chronological horizons. One always (de)forms one's self-identity through the encounter with equally fractured Others. Consumption here is likely to lead to some kind of self-transformation as well. This is also the case for English - German joke relations that need to be reconfigured in the light of this identity crisis.

The place of ritual in the formation of national identities

Ritual is easily one of the most important formative devices for establishing a cultural identity. Be it recurring dates of national celebration, the lowering/raising of the national flag or the eating of certain dishes on certain days – all of these contribute to a performance of cultural and/or national identity. At first, these events have a limited number of participants, but in order to become a ritual, these numbers would have to increase. Media play an important role in this, as some shows have gone mainstream with larger numbers of viewers once a show had developed its own identity (Lavery 2009: 4). Sometimes, this takes as long as one generation and while it did not take quite so long for *Diner for One*, it did take considerable time and a change in the programming time.

The ritualistic performance of this piece is important here. Rituals can be viewed as a stabilising force in times of fear or decision-making, for an individual or a collective. To a large extent, rituals define the passage of time as an eternal return of the same in any society and thereby guarantee its perpetuity. In personal terms, this would involve birthdays, anniversaries, etc. In religious terms, they would include Christmas, The Pope's *Urbi et Orbi*, Purim, Ramadan, Diwali etc. In social/political terms, they would include recurring elections, festivals, memorial gatherings, the Christmas Address by the Queen of England, the New Year's Day Address of the German President, the address of the French President on July 14, the playing of the national anthem at certain events of national importance (e.g. before sporting events or at the end of a broadcasting day) and the like. Not only do these latter events structure time, but they structure symbolic *national* time. On this point at last, they

express a potential seriousness that theoreticians need to consider. But fortunately not only theoreticians: Just as rituals re/mark a symbolic national consciousness, they are also a natural target for comedians, such as Britain's Channel 4's hugely successful Camp Christmas programme and its seminal 1994 broadcast featuring, amongst others, Quentin Crisp dressed as the Queen, giving his own Christmas address; and this not even from English soil, but from New York. *Dinner for One*, as a ritual and as a comedy, has become such a marker for several European countries. Stewart (2005) calls it 'a comfortable old-time ritual' that 'has an almost religious attraction'. Furthermore, it is not a ritual from/of a certain country. As stated before, it was a German production of a British sketch virtually unknown in its country of 'origin'. Any German queried will be convinced that it is a British production; the brief German introduction is quickly forgotten. Due to its hybrid genesis, it has at its root not a self-ironical presentation of a country, but, in a literal sense, the presentation of a performed, of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983), in this case as imagined by another. This pseudo-self-ironical presentation of a nation is then used to differentiate one's self from this other community in an effort to establish and solidify one's own identity. Already the mixture of the German introduction with the English corpus of the text should give one an idea of the hybridity of this phenomenon; however, it seems that Germany, at this instant of its own ritualization in 1963, had accepted, even welcomed, the foreign language English as a representation for its ideal of *Weltoffenheit* (openness toward the (foreign) world) as a constitutive ingredient in its own identity.

Furthermore, the yearly repetition of *Dinner for One* in itself became another element of attempts at national cohesion, the viewers still being able to laugh with the 'live' audience from 1963, in effect saying, 'See? We are the same, we share the same sense of humour, we are one people'. What added to this historicisation was the fact that an attempt to reshoot the sketch in colour in 1968 had to be abandoned due to Freddy Frinton's death three months before the retake should have taken place. A colourized version of the old black and white sketch was eventually produced, but failed to achieve audience support. That the sketch is therefore available so far only in black and white lent gravity to the feeling of watching part of one's own national media-identity in the making, similar to the nostalgic feelings certain channels, such as TNT or UK Gold, attempt to evoke in their audience.

At the time, *Dinner for One* was not the only British cultural material given a work-over by German media. Another cultural figure, this time also revered in his home country, evolved into a German media cult. This person was Edgar Wallace, a well-known English crime writer (1875-1932). Between 1959 and 1972, 38 German language films were produced based on his works (Kramp 2005). Edgar Wallace's treatment of England is very much rooted in the past and modern day England is rarely thematised. Despite this, his work was presented to German audiences as representative of a modern-day Britain. As Critchley rightly observed above, stereotypes tend to remain solidly rooted in the past. The reception of English culture in the beginning of the 1960s in Germany literally translated the British Channel towards Europe and reformed German cultural self-understanding as national self-understanding in the making and as opposed to a particular English Other.

The German media system at the time played an important part in this. In the early days of broadcasting, national frontiers were taken very seriously. Unlike its Anglo-American model, the German mediascape was/is highly regulated, with representatives from churches, political parties and other media vying for percentage points of influence on the boards of the state-run broadcasting corporations. One important feature of TV images at the time was the fact that they were supposed to represent and simulate the national soul to itself. Continuing trans-Atlantic quarrels about quotas for American films and television production on European screens show that imagined national/lingual borders continue to inform the politics of media transmissions. This view is shared by Jean Chalaby when he writes about broadcasting in the 1960s and 1970s:

> It was not long ago that television was the preserve of the nation-state. Many governments kept control of broadcasting to preserve national culture and engineer national identity. Any breach of their prerogatives was considered an infringement of the sacrosanct principle of 'cultural sovereignty' (Chalaby 2009: 243).

It was alleged that this would create a stable environment for the creation of one's own identity. It is helpful to remember that the Germany of the 1960s was still in search of an identity. If national identity at least partially rests on pride and achievement, it was difficult for Germany to find things to be proud of. Basing it on the recent past was impossible as there lay only Nazism. Therefore, and depending on where one was located in Germany, these models differed according to the occupying powers. In the north, British cultural paradigms played an important role; in the southwest, French influence ruled up to a point, but even here the American influence, prevalent in central and south eastern Germany gained considerable momentum. East Germany was ruled by the Soviet Union and became increasingly isolationist. As such, Germany attempted to re-imagine itself, and foreign role models played their part, both positively and as a negative foil. In terms of the culture industry, Germany largely depended on its returning exiles who would bring back not only their own texts, but also connections to foreign writers and cultural movements. The 1950s and early 1960s were a time when foreign cultural experiences were instrumental in stimulating and bringing to light new 'German' artists, art, media and, it was hoped, a new national identity. In terms of media spectacles, perhaps the pivotal event was the 1954 Football World Championship Finals in Berne, Switzerland. In this instance, Germany won the trophy and the live television broadcast thereof was her first national post-war media event. This feat significantly contributed to the restoration of national pride in an otherwise downtrodden country.

On an economic scale, some sense of pride was restored by the end of the 1950s as by then the German *Wirtschaftswunder*, the economic miracle, was quickly becoming a reality and this represented a balm for the national soul. Beginning in 1955, foreign *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) were hired to help in the booming manufacturing process, partly due to the general conscription introduced in 1955 in order to placate the wishes of her Western allies. As confidence/pride in the economy began to recover, cultural consumption swiftly became a kind of economic power game to be won. This was the certainly the case in Heinz Dunkhase's mind. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Freddy Frinton hated anything German. His two discoverers had attempted to make him perform his sketch and others in German, something he adamantly refused to do; however, he was willing to perform his *Dinner for One* in Germany in English. Dunkhase is quick to establish that Frinton happily received

4150 German Marks for his efforts, minus 622.50 German Marks in tax. Did this not prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that although Germans felt unloved in the world, at least they could buy parts of it? Here, in effect, part of their own identity, as it turned out to be. Be that as it may, the ritual transmission of *Dinner for One* contributed to the ways in which German post-war identity was formed, and it also offers insight into how electronic media participated in this process.

However, this imagined image of Britain was bound to change, and change it did. Attempts at endogenetically creating a national consciousness needed to be accompanied by contrastive exogenetical reference points in order to succeed. The attempt to laugh at an unrealistic portrayal of British society did not bode well for the attempt to base one's own identity on a difference in culture that had never existed as represented in the first place; not only in a temporal sense, but in a constitutive sense. At the time, England's representation in the German media largely rested on *Dinner for One*, Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie, fish and chips, Bowler hats, the monarchy and Double Decker buses. A wonderful foil against which one could present oneself as modern and progressive. If stability was sought after, it is only natural that the culturally traded models of the Other were supposed to be stable as well.

But such an attempt was doomed to failure. With the advent of the British musical invasion, in the form of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other British bands beginning to dominate emerging national and international music charts, a more modern Britain would find itself imagined and aurally consumed on the continent. Interestingly enough, rather than doing away with older cultural material such as *Dinner for One*, this would allow for the reconfiguration of *Dinner for One* as a sort of post-modern pastiche, as an imagined Other twice removed, in place *and* time. Mass media had a hand in this as well, but this time as a modernizing and trans-nationalising force. Olga Bailey accentuates this fact well when she writes:

> At stake are not only relationships between the transnational lives of those diasporic subjects, individual and collective, and their new 'home' or a shift in their access and uses of new technologies and media, but ways of being in a

world dominated by contradictory and chaotic processes of globalization (Bailey 2007: 1).

If previously *Dinner for One* had played a role in attempts to assert adjudicate one's own national identity, this move did not figure any more in its post 1970 reception. Beginning with 1970s media programming, '[t]he meanings of the national *vis-à-vis* the transnational need[ed] to be reconceptualised in the context of cosmopolitanism ... Transnationalism thus is useful in shaping multicultural politics which is more reflexive to national and international affairs' (Bailey 2007: 3-4). As globalisation re-shaped the world, in many ways national media identities became a thing of the past.

With the advent of satellite and commercial TV and the creation of many new stations in the late 1970s in Europe, national mediascapes themselves became either obsolete or un-policeable. National media frontiers became porous, permeable and national television ceased to be a tool for creating national identities. For example, there exist serious claims that the downfall of the German Democratic Republic was at least facilitated, if not co-produced, by the broadcasts of West-German TV and its adverts into the East (Roemer n.d.). This does not mean, however, that national agencies became completely outdated. 'The new paradigm does not make the national dimension disappear – national markets and audiences still have irreducible specificities – but it is curbing the influence of national governments over communications systems' (Chalaby 2009: 243). Identity and non-identity ceased to be constitutive binary oppositions, but instead, came to be seen as already entwined in each one's own genesis. New identities, new communities were and are being created/destroyed daily, be they communities of people watching 'live' sporting events, soaps or communicating in Internet social groups. This notion of community is not weak, but perhaps counter-intuitively, strong. In her innovative study on media and minorities, Marie Gillespie has shown the ways in which specific media consumption can strengthen community bonds by tracing the impact of television on the Asian community in England. She states, rather than interrupt the cohesion of a community, TV serves as a prominent 'topical resource' for such a community. It is not so much the consumption of a programme in itself that lends cohesion to a group of people, but rather the usage of such a programme as a quasi-central topical resource for conversation, a fact that had previously been highlighted

by Miller and his treatment of the reception of American soap operas in Trinidad (1992). It is 'TV-talk' that constitutes mediascapes, often transcending previous ethnoscapes. In her study she goes on to use the Australian soap *Neighbours* as an example of how such a programme is able to medially supersede ethnic chasms among a younger generation of British Asians and the British majority; furthermore, she uses news programmes and Asian soaps as a way of demonstrating how such TV talk also can cement the intra-ethnic cohesion between the children and parent generation. She states:

> All cultures are lived and therefore always in flux. In fact all cultures are 'hybrid', 'syncretic', 'creolised', or 'impure'. Culture, by its very nature is changing by encounters with 'others', although it is commonly also reified as shared possession… as purportedly objective 'heritage'... This strategy of familiarising one's 'otherness' in terms of 'others' may be viewed as a typical 'subaltern' culture seeking a public platform in a national or transnational context (Gillespie 1995: 25).

If this is already the case within a minority, it could prove to be a compelling model for such mechanisms to exist on a grander scale as well, perhaps even on a national scale. Other more recent work on transnational media suggests that this is indeed the case (see for example Chalaby (2009) on European transnational TV and Weissmann (2012) on the relationship between UK and US mediascapes).

(German) Media (Theory)

Dinner for One's shift from a tool for the creation of cultural identity to a postmodern cult emblem of identity deconstructions warrants a closer look still. Much of this is associated with the shift that appeared within German media theory and practice in the latter part of the 1970s and beyond.

The North-West German Broadcasting Corporation (NWDR) began its transmissions in September 1950 from Hamburg. At first these were occasional programs; starting in November 1950, the schedule became more regular with broadcasting taking

place three times a week, and then, from 1952 onward, on a daily basis. On 1 November 1954 the ARD (General Broadcasting Corporations of Germany), a collective and syndicating broadcasting body, was established with a remit to transmit the various Länder-produced programmes throughout the Federal Republic of Germany. TV's debt to high culture, *logos*, and theatre was acknowledged when, during an introduction to regular programming, a TV-movie based on Goethe's 'Prologue on the Stage' from *Faust* was broadcast. It was thought to be fitting to commence broadcasting with the greatest piece of German high culture from Germany's national scribe. A second channel, ZDF, began broadcasts in 1963, again beginning with Goethe's 'Prologue'. While German TV thus made its aspirations to be counted among the other high arts very clear, it can be argued that much of early German media broadcasting never wanted to fulfil this claim in earnest. Ultimately, *Dinner for One's* attempt to contribute to a recreation of a German identity was hampered by the very medium within which it appeared.

While television in general and *Dinner for One* in particular worked its way into the German unconscious, balanced TV theory remained a neglected field within the German academe; this might still be fallout from its earlier unfulfillable pretensions, and from the continuously harsh criticism it received from the institutionalised German left. It might even be argued that TV's use/pleasure value was not theorised in its German context until the late 1980s. Up until that time, television theory in Germany existed only as an array of oppositional statements - between utter rejection and uncritical acceptance. This can be exemplified by the about-face performed by one of its earliest and harshest critics, Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, an eminent German media and cultural theoretician. In 1970 he published a harsh Marxist critique of TV, his *Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien* (Building Set for a Media Theory). It was roughly in line with arguments put forward by other television critics at the time, such as Theodor Adorno or Günther Anders. However, in a 1988 text he renegotiated his terms so as to argue that TV (of the 1980s) in all actuality is a 'Zero-Medium' with little to no societal impact whatsoever. This move stands roughly in line with his development from late modernism to post-modernism during these years, but can also be seen as typical for much of the media theory appearing during that time period. What is overlooked in both of his texts, though, is how important TV is for reality formation, how well TV can problematize identity and

community and how much audiences take control of the medium, all issues that have been taken up by television theory since. Similar moves can be observed in other seminal works on media at the time. Klingler (1998), Hickethier (1980) and Kreuzer (1980) all offer an in-depth but ultimately limiting view on TV; Prokop (1984), Weissmann, Fickers and Engell (all 2012) offer a more inclusive engagement with TV theory work.

Given this state of neglect, and as is the case with many other cult products, *Dinner for One* has remained largely untreated by academia. So far, there exists only one text that is able to demonstrate how this television programme actually was able to achieve the cult status it has today. The text itself is called *Dinner for One* (1985) and it offers a short introduction, then the English original and its German translation, a short newspaper review and an essay by the 'well known Viennese Professor Serebriakow', a piece which promises a review of secondary literature on *Dinner for One*. Upon reading it, I was quite amazed at how many scholars had already worked on the text. A theatre researcher, Iris Fleischhauer, gives a Brechtian analysis of the piece, focusing on its role as societal 'Lehrstück'; an opposing view is put forth by the Gestalt analyst Dennis Buckle, who views the piece as a closed universe unto itself and works with the dichotomy of Bergsonian versus Freudian definitions of laughter. Professor Frederic Rudolfsheimer views it as propaganda for early Thatcherist supply economics; a medical doctor analyses the drinking excesses of Butler James and finds him to be a Delta-type alcoholic; other philosophical and feminist interpretations follow.

Strangely enough, and irking my professional honour, I didn't recognise any of the names. With appropriate awe I went and looked for these texts, only to find that neither texts nor authors existed. I had been had! This text then makes it clear that any attempt at using such media today to create nationalistic practices are doomed to failure and that its cult value by far supersedes its ability to incite stereotypical thinking about the Other. And while its tongue-in-cheek humour playfully engages its topic, this does not mean though that it has become trivial; while some of *Dinner for One's* functions have been lost, others remain. It still connects viewers with their past, with the ritualised performance of a deconstructive nationalism and hints at the

need to historicise television viewing. This need is clearly expressed by Alex Badenoch, when he states that:

> In terms of television heritage, the issue here then is not only about the transnational space of television. It is also about the way we understand the time of a broadcast when it appears as history. When we shift our attention here slightly out of phase with the 'natural' segmentation of the programme to focus on its borders, transitions and margins (by now a classical analytical manoeuvre), its entire nature seems to change before our very eyes. It becomes (interestingly) unstable, and recognizable as being in flux. It raises new questions about broader processes, and creates new forms of sympathy with the television text by inviting readers to engage in their own acts of translation (Badenoch 2012).

Television and its uses simultaneously influence, determine and negate imagined national identities. It is not the *grandes récits* that structure realities successfully, but TV talk, which attempts to define and delineate such communities as already hybrid and in flux. The reception of *Dinner for One* is just such a discourse that has worked its way into a national unconscious, destroying its myth even as it is creating it. Translations performed by its audiences might be tinged by their being caught up in New Year's Eve celebrations, but they nevertheless remain and remind them of their mediated past, connecting them to earlier selves and giving permanence to a ritual which has taken on a new meaning over the years by achieving cult status.

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