

Sitcom as *Endgame*, *Tatort* out of the Volksempfänger

An attempt to understand the culture industry

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“Advertising has absorbed surrealism“ – and sitcoms have absorbed Beckett’s *Endgame*. It seems that what Adorno noticed in the appendix of the “Dialectic of Enlightenment” named “The Scheme of Mass Culture” (Adorno 1997 Bd. 3: 306) is to be extrapolated for *King of Queens* and Beckett. The modern work of art is absorbed by the constant and repetitive culture industry. But if it is really modern – not a prelude of postmodern arbitrariness – the necessary dispositions which make it unenjoyable are already laid out in its form. So it does not stop to illuminate the deforming factors in the last sitcom.¹

On Beckett’s stage Hamm’s old parents are well integrated in the household. They live in garbage cans and when they move their heads out, all they got to hear is: “Have you not finished? Will you never finish?” (Beckett 1976: 36) Even if the father of the serial which takes place in Queens is not dwelling in a can but a cellar, his appearance hardly makes the daughter and the son-in-law more affectionate. But here the punchline comes in quick. All the ugly, new and shabby old pullovers and jackets worn by the spry old retiree who moves out of the cellar-hole like a big exotic fish are all part of it. These elements of the series seem to be assorted in the most careful, not to say affectionate way: here one can hear the heart of the culture industry pounding. The function of sitcoms is to accompany holders of money and commodities from one advertisement-clip to the next. Just as advertisement clips are only made to foster the exchange of commodities.

Hamm and Clov in Queens

The US-sitcom ‘The King of Queens’ tells us about the life of Douglas Heffernan, a parcel deliveryman from Queens and his beautiful wife Carrie who works as a secretary for a law office in Manhattan. One day the

¹ Later in his famous “Trying to Understand Endgame” Adorno himself speaks about “galvanized words appearing as commodity signs – as the desolate echo of the advertising world – is ‘refunctioned’ into the language of a poetic work” (Adorno 2000: 339). “The way Endgame comes to terms with that differentiates it from Finnegans Wake. Rather than striving to liquidate the discursive element of language through pure sound, Beckett turns that element into an instrument of its own absurdity (...). The objective disintegration of language (...) penetrates the aesthetic arcanum. The second language of those falling silent” (338/339) Following Beckett there are also some others, for example Elfriede Jelinek, trying to find a language of those falling silent by liquidating the discursive element. However, bathing in the culture industry can make the use of phrases as commodity signs desolate itself, only euphemising the echoes of the advertising world and therefore doubling in them (see Scheit 2006: 538f.).

happy couple is forced to let Carrie's father Arthur live with them. From this point onwards the life of the Heffermans is turned upside down ... The parcel deliveryman Douglas 'Doug' Heffernan, played by comedystar Kevin James, represents the prototypical average American who loves his football-team, his widescreen-TV and his George-Foreman-grill more than anything else on earth. His parents' influence has made Doug unworldly in his youth. They kept him away from anything evil and all trouble was swept under the carpet. This explains Doug's proneness to lying, his obesity and his avoidance of discussions. His wife Carrie, played by Leah Remini, is responsible for keeping the balance in their relationship. She stands on her own two feet, has a top-body (in contrast to her husband) and does not fear to say what she thinks. This is what makes the quarrel-scenes between Doug and Carrie unique and incredibly hilarious.

The third in the round is Carrie's father Arthur Spooner, played by Jerry Stiller. After his wife's death he moved in with the Heffermans and thus has changed their lives forever. Arthur is the typical retiree: bull-headed and obtrusive! Jerry Stiller plays this role as if it had been written for him!

Apart from the main characters there are a few side-characters always bringing fresh air into the Heffermans' life:

Holly Shumpert, a dog walker hired by Doug and Carrie to walk Arthur through the park during the week. Richie Iannucci once lived together with Doug and is one of his friends amongst Deacon Palmer, Spence Olchin and Danny Heffernan. Almost every day the gang hangs out in Doug's garage.

That's how the everyday life of the Hefferman-family repeats itself in an exciting new way – and we are allowed to be part of it!

Conclusion: The King of Queens started in 1998 in the USA, during the heyday of reality shows. Many feared that the everyday life of an average family might become boring for the audience, but far from it! With its unique charm The King of Queens persuades not only the USA, but also Europe and especially Germany.

(E:\Download 5\King of Queens - Zusammenfassung der Seri.mht)

Maybe the latter is due to Doug's tendency to lie and his lacking the ability to discuss things, or his job which in Germany and Austria can still be interpreted a post-officer.

What Doug and Carrie have to say to each other is – at its core – not more than Hamm and Clov:

Hamm: But that's always the way at the end of the day, isn't it, Clov?

Clov: Always.

Hamm: It's the end of the day like any other day, isn't it, Clov?

Clov: Looks like it.

(24)

Clov *wearily*: Same answer. *Pause*. You've asked me these questions millions of times.

Hamm: I love the old questions. *With fervour*. Ah the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!

(56)

It is this *fervour* which constitutes the culture industry. Adorno on *Endgame*: "The words resound like merely makeshift ones because silence is not yet entirely successful, like voices accompanying and disturbing it" (Adorno 2000: 337). The sitcom churns out transformations of makeshifts into punch lines and drowns out the silence by importing laugh-tracks.

In *King of Queens* it is Arthur the only one who has got something like love-adventures and knows telling about them from his own experience. In Beckett's drama it is only Hamm's stuck in rubbish bins parents who actively remember love and life. They even make love – which looks like this:

Nell: What is it, my pet? *Pause* Time for love?

(...)

Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.

Nell: Why this farce, day after day?

Pause

Nagg: I've lost me tooth.

Nell: When?

Nagg: I had it yesterday.

Nell elegiac: Ah yesterday!

(26)

This love also has got its crises which cannot be overcome – a true marriage, till death does them part:

Nell: I am going to leave you.

Nagg: Could you give me a scratch before you go?

Nell: No. *Pause*. Where?

(32)

In *Endgame* the characters continue to exist with all their bodily needs and afflictions. They do not deny their physical states they cannot escape. But in fact everything has ended, the catastrophe has already happened.

Clov: There's no more nature.

Hamm: No more nature! You exaggerate.

Clov: In the vicinity.

Hamm: But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!

(20)

In Queens location shots are also rather rare, sometimes completely superfluous. There is no more nature. The house which can be seen from outside at the beginning of the studio shots is in the centre of the action. And this is the place where all those pullovers with various patterns one can only laugh about are lying around in disorder. The relationship between Carrie and Doug cannot be divided from the objects in their household, emotions and thoughts of the sitcom-personnel are always bound to the studio-inventory like Beckett's Hamm is tied to the chair moved by Clov. The bed and the kitchen predefine how to speak about the final things, how the question of to be or not to be is asked: should one make love or not, should one lose weight or continue to eat. In Beckett's play Clov takes the role of a woman in many situations – but far beyond gender-differences; what remains from Hegel's dialectic between master and servant is an empty shell – the dialogue: “What is there to keep me here?” – “The dialogue.” (82/84) When fully thought to an end the work of the servant leads to death:

“I love order”, says Clov as if he was the one of *Desperate Housewives*: “It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.” (82)

Hamm: I'll give you nothing more to eat.

Clov: Then we'll die.

Hamm: I'll give just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.

Clov: Them we shan't die.

(...)

Hamm: You don't love me.

Clov: No.

Hamm: You loved me once.

Clov: Once!

(14-16)

In Queens the same dialogue always ends in a punch line in order to wipe away disaster and despair with laughter from the off. Sometimes Beckett also tinkers punch lines, but mostly they are so crude that one might be at his wits end:

Hamm: Why don't you kill me?

Clov: I don't know the combination of the larder.

(16)

This is what happened to humour, „without any place of reconciliation, where one could laugh”; without anything between heaven and earth harmless enough to be laughed at.” (Adorno 2000: 335) – and where humour once seemed possible, almost always a repressive collective has settled in. But it is not like Adorno says that “between heaven and earth” is not anything “harmless enough to be laughed at.” (ibid.) Beckett's *Endgame* tells us that it is worse: This harmlessness is still around – and the laughter provoked by it makes it even more unbearable that this place of reconciliation is no more. This is where the affinity between Beckett's anti-punch line and Jewish humour is to be found: By sticking to the tenaciously physical, to which comedy regresses, the most harmless thing everyone has to anticipate refers to the worst having already happened.

Doug and Carrie in Beckett

The difference between sitcoms and anti-drama is that everyone can identify with Doug, Carrie and Arthur. This is only possible due to the careful search for constant change in the ever sameness – from pullover-patterns to conflicts in relationships. On average there is a punch line every 30 seconds, this is the *beat*, the measure given by ad-clips, the „same inflexible rhythm” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 94). In the chapter on the culture industry in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno und Horkheimer argue that „something is provided for everyone so that no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely. Everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a ‘level’ determined by indices and to select the category of mass product manufactured for their type.” (97) “Such is the industry's ideal of naturalness”, and the “true masters (...) are those who speak the jargon with the same free-and-easy relish as if it were the language it has long since silenced.” (101)

However, in *Endgame* change is always a function of sameness; here the identifying humour, which in sitcoms for good measure is also dictated by the laughter of an invisible audience, is lost. Beckett “lengthens the escape route of the subject's liquidation to the point where it constricts into a ‘this-here’, whose abstractness – the loss of all qualities – extends ontological abstraction literally ad absurdum, to that Absurd which mere existence becomes as soon as it is consumed in naked self-identity.” (Adorno 2000: 325) Identifying with this form of “this-here” is unbearable as it means admitting its expendability and being carried away with things without a joke. Being deadly serious it loses any contour: “Pathetic details which ridicule conceptuality, a stratum of utensils as in an emergency refuge: ice boxes, lameness, blindness, and unappetizing bodily functions. Everything awaits evacuation. This stratum is not symbolic but rather the post-psychological state, as in old people and torture victims.” (330)

Rightly Adorno and Horkheimer stress that the psychological mechanisms of the advanced culture industry have got nothing to do with identification of the type in which one can lose oneself. This identification would require a continuous feeling of similarity. But the culture industry “has sardonically realized man’s species being. Everyone amounts only to those qualities by which he or she can replace everyone else: all are fungible, mere specimens. As individuals they are absolutely replaceable, pure nothingness, and are made aware of this as soon as time deprives them of their sameness.” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 116/117). The sardonic has to be taken literally in every way and it appears in its purest form in the laugh-track having been ripped off from burlesque and cabaret performances: Being dictated the laughter derisively refers to laughter itself. Laughter is the realization of the social nature of the human species through the individuals’ spontaneity. But in our case the impulsive social has regressed to mechanical barking in which every viewer joins in without being conditioned. Not that it does not help to mute the laugh-track (which is often done in Austrian and German productions) it makes things even worse. The very fact that the dialogues are rhythmic and gags are recurring periodically makes the laughter a built in feature of these shows – even if it is not broadcasted. The silence in these sitcoms is only embarrassing and only highlights the hypocrisy which has dominated all this talking about “exalted entertainment” ever since.

Anyway, the product “prescribes each reaction, not through any actual coherence – which collapses once exposed to thought – but through signals.” (109) The product of work is only its effect as the “continuation of work”. Mechanization has total control over “leisure-people” and their happiness. It regulates the production of amusement-articles so accurately that these people cannot experience anything else than “after-images of the work process itself” (109). This is where the connection with the refusing character of these commodities lies. Even if they may allude to the sexual, these commodities are oppressing the sexual systemically anytime it could hinder work. Pornography is just an example based on this: porn provides assembly-line produced satisfaction; and the beat of popular music, a reference to fucking itself, fuses the rhythm of militant marches and mechanical labour. “Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish.” (111) This contrast is also confirmed in the comparison between *Endgame* and *King of Queens*: „Precisely because it must not happen, everything centers around the coitus” (163). Rejection triumphs as suggested lust: the simulated orgasm is the principle of today’s products of the culture industry. These commodities have already left the sexual revolution behind.

Once delayed sexual intercourse and expressing social conflicts this way comically was the law of comedy since Aristophanes. But the culture industry abstracts from the body as a prerequisite for lust: there is no more desire for inner nature, but it being mere means for competition. The only relics of the body are pullover patterns, coitus-frequency and the number of gained or lost pounds as subjects for laughter. The abstract has been provided with a second body making it again appear alive – but in fact we are dealing with ghosts: the pullovers look like human beings, the bedroom inventory copulates and food disappears from the fridge. Individuals are only one stage in the ceaseless process of values

self-expansion; when people are satisfying their needs lust is never an end in itself. It has become one of the main functions of the culture industry to make people happy with the abandonment of lust: deprivation is supposed to simulate satisfaction. But the permanent smile is treacherous: “the malicious pleasure elicited by any successful deprivation” (112). This is where “the collective of those who laugh parodies humanity” and prevents its self-actualization. While in comedies by Aristophanes and Nestroy the delaying of lust opens up for laughter, in the culture industry the consumers are smiling about eternal deprivation: “They are monads, each abandoning himself to the pleasure – at the expense of all others and with the majority in the support – of being ready to shrink from nothing.” (112) Spitefulness is enforced by the fear that one will not succeed in one’s own life. The promise of fortune is absorbed by the competition for fortune – the ranking of unhappy commodity-holders: those who have more lust for life are winners, all others are losers. This is a sort of quantification on the part of the consumers accomplishing the abstraction of real happiness. Behind it there is the lurking majority branding those who enjoy life for living a shameful existence.

Laughter is the actual mechanism of identification. When laughing sardonically enough the culture industry can do without further models of identification: malice becomes so powerful that these models are wiped away. This is the case in the “evil”, cynical sitcoms (e.g. *Al Bundy* or *Married ... with Children*). In a direct and in a sense in a more honest way the culture industry achieves something it normally accomplishes circuitously via lying: individuals are bound to the seemingly inevitable, they are turned into something “what they already are, but only more in the same way” (Adorno 1997 Bd. 10/2: 508). After having achieved the goal the viewers are smirking, identifying themselves only with themselves – self-assured that they can only laugh about others, but that no one will laugh about them – the perfection of mischief and a regress into the unbroken narcissistic phase which now goes together with the collective conscience of the grown up monad. The childish narcissist in front of the TV laughing about any failure is supported by the majority.

As the TV-camera is mediating something while cutting out mediation itself (this is different from the aesthetic creation of form) one gets the feeling of immediate and direct participation. This suggests that you can be entertained by any failure or break-down without having to bear the consequences or being endangered or hurt: every minute in front of the TV proves your own untouchability anew. This extraterrestrial existence of the isolated individual is unconsciously experienced as a new communal feeling. This is the reason for the worldwide addiction to electronic images, a phenomenon that can

only be understood as a religious one. But it is a funny religion.² The hidden sadomasochism of Christianity has developed into the open mischief of the “televisionaries”.

Just like choosing fun over lust, they deny suffering. The body never appears vulnerable “quälbar” (Brecht), but pain is only shown as a chance for gloating. Only *Endgame* is immune against this: by unashamedly demonstrating the collapse of sexual satisfaction the thought that satisfaction actually could happen at all is saved. At the same time the body is the source of all pain. Thus, the process of aging indispensably becomes the subject of Beckett’s art.

Self-Preservation and Annihilation

In mischief and failure, totalised by the culture industry, the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* find the worst: it “postpones satisfaction until the day of the pogrom” (110). The whole chapter has got an apocalyptic tone contrasting with the at first sight foolish subject of amusement-articles. Almost every sentence conjures the extreme; the argument extends from small details to the all-encompassing catastrophe. This way it becomes very concise and this is also what makes many readers start to wonder: this approach represents a kind of hysterical theory. The overall tone is not only caused by the shock of the German emigrates about the grown culture industry in the USA which was much further developed in comparison with Europe. It is much more about an unnamed, and even for the authors partly unconscious fear that the culture industry would be capable of conditioning the American audience and the whole Western hemisphere to appeasement: the culture industry would produce the mental preconditions for the triumph of National Socialist Germany. The text seems as if it was written in a state of panic in which everything threatens to fall apart. Verbatim: In the culture industry the consumers “are virtually already Nazis” (125). Their form “fits fascism like a glove” (129).

Shortly after the USA had been entering the war the book was developed and short before the landing in Normandy it was finished. Still it reflects an almost unrelieved state of shock about Hitler’s

² Karl Kraus, the first great atheist of the culture industry, already criticized television anticipatorily – the “infamy” which lies in “having impressions about other people’s misfortune without intuition, without a spiritual urgency, only to serve the nefarious desideratum of human curiosity”, “poetry based on alien experiences for other people’s moods and being thoughtful without having thoughts.” The newspaper Kraus had in mind seemed to be prevented by its medium, the language, just as entertainment literature. From the overflow of “press-agents bothering our imagination, hearing with our ears, looking with our eyes, quivering with our nerves (...)” Kraus deducted a “dryness” of linguistic expression as an antidote – artistic prudence “which not only says what it has to say, but which spares what it does not have to say” (Kraus 1987ff. Bd. 4: 434). For with each formulated sentence journalists are damned to put in remembrance the **measure** which they abjure; as they are forced to transform anything into language, they are constantly talking ex negativo about how things should have to be. And this is where Kraus takes them at their word. The new medium lacks these things mediated ex negativo, there is no more **measure** which could be put in remembrance. But how could the suggested dry prudence, being transported into the houses via electronic cameras, look like? Which content would be adequate for this medium, for its specific technological character which seems to appeal to all senses and does not have any rates but production costs? The movie, the big cinema production, seems in this respect – regarding production costs – like a early capitalist form of the culture industry: The risk of such a production can be compared with the hazards for the capital of sea-traders in the old days, while in sitcoms or soaps from beginning on the risks are precisely calculated and touched up by polls in order to achieve the desired profit with a certain amount of security. But the questions concerning the nature of the above mentioned dry prudence, the adequate content for this medium and its technological constitution, are not at all meant rhetorically. If it’s possible to free this medium from the bondage of profit and quota, maybe it would be best to return to the silent movies. In this respect *Silent Cooking* – a cooking programme on 3Sat where the cook is not talking – seems almost like a avantgarde project.

boundless success in Europe. The mistrust which did not hinder the members of the Institute for Social Research to confess with emphasis to the USA and to contribute actively to the *war effort* predominates in their critical writings: On every page in the chapter on the culture industry one can feel the fear that the critical confrontation with the Third Reich has not been fundamental and sustainable enough and that appeasement could easily resurrect. This fear was well-founded: Continually the refugees from Germany collected their experiences with [anti-Semitism](#) and authoritarian personality, especially in their empirical studies (see *Studies in the Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno 1997 Bd. 9/1: 143-509) and in the mass media (see *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas' Radio Addresses*, Adorno 1997 Bd. 9/1: 7-141).

Luckily the political decisiveness of the USA was stronger than the two authors thought. This made them wait until the late 60s to accept a new edition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³ “The development toward total integration has been interrupted“, says the new preface. This requires us “to take up cause of the remnants of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: xi). This interruption can only refer to the political intervention, the triumph of the Allied Forces over National Socialism, since the evolution of the culture industry has not been interrupted. On the contrary, all over the world it has been accelerated by the victory of the Western Allies. It is strange but Adorno and Horkheimer have never asked the question whether commodities of the culture industry offer any residues of freedom and tendencies towards real humanity. Maybe this question could be posed at the most concise when trying to understand *Endgame*.

Adorno argued that Samuel Beckett just shows “those deformations inflicted on humans by the form of their society” (Adorno 2000: 334). His characters, unable to act and decide – unless it is about opening the garbage can or moving a chair – demonstrate the real state of the individuals’ right to be autonomous.

Hamm: I feel a little too far to the left. *Clov moves chair slightly*. Now I feel a little far to the right. *Clov moves chair slightly*. I feel a little too far forward. *Clov moves chair slightly*. Now I feel a little too far back. *Clov moves chair slightly*. Don’t stay there – *i. e. behind the chais* – you give me the shivers.

Clov returns to his place beside the chair.

If I could kill him I’d die happy.

(42)

Basically Beckett’s protagonists say everything that is to be said about the “natural law” of society and its state of mind beyond the critique of political economy: “Something is taking its course.” (24) – “I was never there [...] Absent, always. It always happened without me.” (104).

³ When the Western German magazine *konkret* started reprinting the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the late 50s both authors intervened with a “temporary injunction” – this happened after Adorno had obviously acceded to the publication; see Adorno / Horkheimer 2006: 581f.

On the other hand US sitcoms are cultivating standards of civilisation typical for a certain period of capitalism through the deformations which they affirm and in the same way in which they shrivel spontaneity: These standards are those diversified “levels” of which Adorno and Horkheimer are talking with contempt. They are necessary for the smooth transaction of commodities. “If I could kill him I’d die happy.” – but I am not allowed to kill him, as then the cops might come, taking me to the chair which cannot be moved anymore: That is why the individual, marked as a person by law by the sovereign, buys affordable articles, enjoys life as far as possible as a person by law and commodity-holder and watches a sitcom which makes her/him what s/he already is, only more in the same way. “Something is taking its course.” (24) The individual citizen just knows that everything will grosso modo take its course without her/him anyway. But as long as s/he is part of the game s/he wants her/his share and if the other citizens are of no annoyance they may do the same as well. Negg wants some porridge, and even candies – and after all he gets a piece of rusk.

These are the preconditions of emancipation in Western society, last but not least the conditions for the emancipation of blacks, of women and gays. In these standards of coexistence, which naturally offer the best basis for gags in sitcoms (no, not in the German ones⁴), the right to autonomy stays negative universality: the right not to be exploited and humiliated without a contract – and this even against all the demands of family life. Someone having internalized these levels is not automatically losing the right for real autonomy, s/he does not necessarily see a benefit in destroying these levels and a denial of the promises of bourgeois society in breaking all contracts – a hope which fired the imagination of the enemies of Arthur, the old man out of the cellar in *Kings and Queens*, whom he fought against not wearing a bright sweater but a uniform: that is to say he fought as an US-soldier against the Germans on the Italian front. The sitcom owes its existence to advertisement-clips which are in fact often left out by European TV-stations – a gesture regarded as a cultural merit. However, these clips draw attention to the essential: It is the commodity based compensation, the little amount of happiness, which takes the most dangerous potential out of the permanently trained constant denial in the culture industry: finding fulfilment in compensation which erases all other needs; to hallucinate complete salvation in an individual’s sacrifice. This is why American amusement-commodities – from Jazz to sitcoms, Elvis Presley to Al Bundy – have had a civilizing effect in Germany and Austria.

In Adorno and Horkheimer’s study this dialectic gets a raw deal. On a subjective level the critique could only be taken serious after National Socialism had been defeated, when one would not have to face its immediate resurrection. The note “to be continued” which was originally printed in parentheses at the end of the chapter on the culture industry did not work out. As according to its original conception in contrast to Marx’s analysis Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique boiled down to the consumption of the exchange value of commodities itself: “What might be called use value in the

⁴ The tense humour and the pedagogical diligence in the very popular and endless soap *Lindenstraße* and also in the newer and award-winning ARD-serial *Türkisch für Anfänger* show that these standards are quite unnatural in Germany. When the characters of the last mentioned series are having a party it looks as if German and Turkish people are dancing to Prussian march music. All the more they show a lot of effort to play down the repressive potential of the Islam in everyday life.

reception of cultural assets is being replaced by exchange value; enjoyment is giving way to being there and being in the know, connoisseurship by enhanced prestige.” (128). Thus, they assume a state of society where the exchange value is able to exist without the use value, and as such in theory the exchange value functions as the goods of rackets: surplus value and robbery go together. This is pointed out in *Minima Moralia*, Adorno’s dedication to Max Horkheimer, acknowledging a moment of perhorrescing adjuration: “Should the appearance of life, which the sphere of consumption itself defends for such bad reasons, be once entirely effaced, then the monstrosity of absolute production will triumph.” (Adorno 2000: 80/81). But if the term “appearance” has a philosophical meaning and is not a feuilletonist phrase there is no more production without the appearance of life: Dead people do not produce anything. It is obvious that the idea of absolute production means something else: the exact opposite of production.

At first sight the shortcomings of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* result from a certain notion of crisis management and state capitalism, according to which the market is on the ropes, the sphere of circulation is completely cut down and the traditional Marxist categories of political economy would be overridden by state interventions such as deficit spending and armament. Here Adorno and Horkheimer followed Friedrich Pollock’s assumptions of an harmonic suspension of contradictions in a system of state capitalism; they did so against the objections of Franz Neumann or Sohn-Rethel who insisted on the cataclyst contradictions of capitalist process and against their own insight in the continuation of the mechanisms of the market and competition especially in the branches of the culture industry (they thought that in this field demand was not yet substituted by simple obedience).

However, it is basically a first try to comprehend the incomprehensible – provoked by the crisis which was both announcing and obscuring the worst. In a historical situation where valorization process stopped, capital was no more profitable worldwide and the state was transforming into a conglomerate of gangs of robbers and charity clubs form and content, exchange and use value were breaking apart – and in analysis the one seems to diffuse in the other. Nevertheless the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* states its entity as something non-identical, which on its own enables thinking: In the first chapter it is pointed out that “In this way, the moment of rationality in domination also asserts itself as something different from it.” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 29). While National Socialism really abolished this moment in annihilation, and Horkheimer and Adorno were still deceiving themselves about this back them, this moment of rationality was conserved in the USA whose war effort was supported by their institute. In mid 1940 the preface of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (8/1940: 321) had already justified its new way of publication in English with an empathic reference to this cultural difference: “Philosophy, art and science have lost their home in most of Europe. (...) America, especially the United States, is the only continent in which the continuation of scientific life is possible. In publishing our journal in its new form we wish to give this belief its concrete expression.”

Horkheimer’s early remarks about racket and law, on which the above mentioned extract is based, and Adorno’s later critique on Heidegger and his *Negative Dialectic* offer the ideal points of orientation

for such a project. And the analyses of German movies by Siegfried Kracauer exemplarily show how such a critique could take shape. Kracauer finished his study *From Calgari to Hitler* in 1946. With its excoriating characterisation of German ideology, similar to passages in *Minima Moralia* and *The Jargon of Authenticity*, it testifies to a new born confidence in the stability of the US-American society truly being a society in the emphatic sense – according to the experiences of Kracauer who assimilated to American culture with effort and determination and who also wrote his first book in English. After visiting Germany in 1958 he was “shuddering”: “The fact that there has never been a civil society in Germany is demonstrated in a terrifying way. The people are without a form and completely uncanalised, they have got no outer side. (...) In short I do not trust them. And what would happen in case of an economic or political crisis I do not dare to think of.” (letter to Leo Löwenthal, 27. 10. 1958; quoted in Brodersen 2001: 125) The remigrated Institute for Social Research failed to analyze this formlessness on the basis of the products of the post-National Socialist culture industry, even though the “Gruppenexperiment” with its analyses of the attitudes of Germans after 1945 would have offered ideal prerequisites for doing this.

Instead no iota of the criticism should be taken back and any deformation is to be denounced as such. But thinking about how the term “culture industry” is formulated one may find that it already avoids the issue of state in favour of a diffuse idea of power; this may cause a lack of understanding how consumers in the culture industry identify themselves with political instances. Thus, the role of the state in this context still remains to be discussed thoroughly. Such a culmination of the critique seems even more necessary as new German ideology, taught by Lacan, has become very ambitious in fighting the negativism of the theory. And intellectuals like August Ruhs and the so called Neue Wiener Gruppe are searching for meaning in the culture industry, looking for “everyday myths” “die in gemeinschaftsstiftender Weise Hilfen anbieten können, um sich in einer unüberschaubar gewordenen Konsumwelt einigermaßen zurechtzufinden, um aufgebrochene und auseinandergebrochene Identitäten zu reparieren und verunsicherte und verunsichernde Lebensformen zu festigen und zu entschärfen, so daß wir jene Ruhe finden, die wir brauchen, um wieder träumen zu können.” (Ruhs 2006: 116). When Austrian and German intellectuals want to dream, most of the time this means quietening reason and forming “Gemeinschaft”. In the face of this threatening calmness the intransigent criticism of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* should finally be connected with the appraisal of disintegrating effects due to the Western culture industry. At the same time one has to bring to account that still one cannot count on this; meaning that even the American culture industry is capable of producing the best German ideology.

Regardless whether it is an American sitcom or a German soap opera, “the permanent hopeless situations which grind down filmgoers in daily life are transformed by their reproduction, in some unknown way, into a promise that they may continue to exist. One needs only to become aware of one’s nullity, to subscribe to one’s own defeat, and one is already a party to it.” (Adorno 2000: 123). And participation is everything: “Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the

power which beats them.” (124). But identification has to be understood in a more concrete sense in order to get hold of the abstract which is a necessary consequence of power. Where does the one who subscribes to defeat belong to? With which power does the beaten individual identify? In any case he identifies with the capital, the self-valorizing value, and also with the state, the sovereign, which is only the other, the political side of these value. But precisely this side is not identical with itself. It only exists in the form of different states while all forms and groups of capital are completely identical in the value, which is the “automatic subject” of capitalism (Marx). In other words: In their chapter on the culture industry the dialecticians of Enlightenment have missed to confront Veit Harlan’s *Jud Süß* with *Casablanca* by Michael Curtiz or Paula Wessely in *Heimkehr* with Greta Garbo in *Ninotchka*. And also in a much closer sense the musical differences between the *Fehrbelliner Reitermarsch* and Glenn Miller’s *In the mood*, let alone Charly Parker, could have specified Adorno’s critique of jazz (not in the actual musical outcomes, where differences are gradual – however, these are still valid, even if jazz-fans may still be offended – but in the political interpretation of the outcomes marking a qualitative leap in the differences).

It is true, the culture industry means that “everywhere proves to be freedom to be the same” (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 136). But this does not exclude that it may also carry the inherent condition of the possibility to successfully resist extinction – which threatens sameness, meaning anything that is forced to be the same. In this respect the “pseudoindividuality”, of which Adorno and Horkheimer are speaking with contempt, may contain something where the thinking of realizing true individuality is at least not completely eliminated, where the constraint to extinguish this thinking is not respected under all circumstances. The authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* say that “individuals are tolerated only as far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question. From the standardized improvisation in jazz to the original film personality who must have a lock of hair straying over her eyes so that she can be recognized as such, pseudoindividuality reigns.” (124/125) However, the universal with which all individuals are supposed to be in accord is not identical with itself. This is what Adorno and Horkheimer learned after the defeat of National Socialism – be it for better or worse for them, the survivors and the whole mankind.

And what was intended as a critical aphorism could be read as an indication to the difference to defend life within the industrial which is not alive against industrialized death. “That life goes on at all, that the system, even in its most recent phase, reproduces the lives of those who constitute it instead of doing away with them straight away, is even credited to the system as its meaning and value. The ability to keep going at all becomes the justification for the blind continuation of the system.” (119) This meaning is to be accredited without abusing continuation for the blind continuation of the system or even its unalterability.

As long as the German Wehrmacht was on the advance there was no chance to grasp National Socialism as the unfathomable, meaning: not comprehending the unfathomable, but its unfathomability. Just like a defence-mechanism in order not to lose their mind the *Dialectic of*

Enlightenment wanted to rationalize the Germans' delusion at any rate and thus elided what constituted its essence: that total integration, the aim of this delusion, means annihilation for the sake of annihilation. Actually Adorno and Horkheimer tried to deduce even that from a certain rationality whose highest virtue (following Spinoza) is self-preservation. This is why the moment of rationality which contradicts sovereignty as something different from itself remained unstressed: "From Homer to modernity the ruling spirit has sought to steer between Scylla of relapse into simple reproduction and the Charybdis of unfettered fulfilment; from the first it has mistrusted any guiding star other than the lesser evil. The German neopagans and administrators of war fever want to reinstate pleasure. But since, under the work-pressure of the millennium now ending, pleasure had learned to hate itself, in its totalitarian emancipation it remains mean and mutilated through self-contempt. It is still in the grip of the self-preservation inculcated in it by the reason which has now been deposed." (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 24).

Only in 1945 in the text *Minima Moralia* this is retracted. There Adorno acknowledges that the Germans' deeds are beyond understanding: "While they were winning they were raging like those who have nothing to lose. In the beginning of German idealism there was the Wagnerian twilight of the gods (Götterdämmerung), the euphoric prophecy of their own doom, its composition being already tackled with the 1870s war. Two years before the World War II the demise of its Zeppelin, filmed in Lakehurst, was presented to the German people in the same spirit. The airship moves quietly and unflinchingly, only to fall down abruptly. If there is no way out, the urge to demolition becomes totally apathetic concerning its direction: It does not matter anymore whether the drive towards obliteration is aimed at others or oneself." (Adorno 1997 Bd. 4: 118)

Tatort Volk

The more the focus is laid on physiognomic and psychological matters in their narrower sense concerning the products of the culture industry, the higher are the chances that critique is made without rationalization. This can be learned from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* and Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*. Just like Adorno's reflections from the exile in the damaged life of post-Nazistic societies have gained in precision, Kracauer's findings about the German film read like comments on recent productions by German and Austrian TV agencies.

Thus, opening the critique of the state related to the domain of the culture industry could mean opposing Doug and Carrie from Queens with the German couples doing their work as *Tatort*-detectives in the successor states of the Third Reich. In contrast to earlier German thriller heroes like Derrick these modern police officers sometimes even demonstrate humour and document that they are competing with sitcoms. Concerning this issue Kracauer wrote: "That such comedy founded on chance and a naive desire for happiness should prove inaccessible to the Germans arises from their traditional ideology, which tends to discredit the notion of luck in favour of fate. The Germans have developed a

native humor that holds wit and irony in contempt and has no place for happy-go-lucky figures. Theirs is an emotional humor which tries to reconcile mankind to its tragic plight and to make one not only laugh at the oddities of life but also realize through that laughter how fateful it is. Such dispositions were of course incompatible with the attitudes underlying the performances of a Buster Keaton or Harold Lloyd.” (Kracauer 2004: 21) This is not to say that a sitcom like *King of Queens* is similar to a film by Buster Keaton in any way. It is more about questions concerning these differences which have been around for a whole century: Why are the Germans and Austrians failing in all things comical? Why do they come up with a certain emotional humour instead? Where does the hatred for the happy come from?⁵

In Kracauer’s sense a specifically German contribution to the culture industry would be a serial allowing only those to have luck and happiness who have been willingly denying it their whole lives. Amongst others *Traumschiff* presents the Golden Girls of the sea, but just the Golden Girls from BDM, and this is why there is no lust for sex anymore like in the US Golden Girls’ flat-sharing community. There is only new lust for fate. But the series *Traumschiff* is only a swan song. From the start one tends to wish the serial’s holiday cruiser the destiny of the *Bismarck*; it would be best if it was sent to the bottom like all those German political dreams resurrecting as holiday nightmares. However, in *Tatort* the secondary “Volksgemeinschaft” is constituted in a new way. It is the genuine contemporary German soap: The place where all happy creatures, wherever they may appear, are persecuted and punished – or even worse: outside the range of the German state they cannot be persecuted and punished. The German culture industry finding itself in the *Tatort*-thrillers and countless related productions (*Die Kommissarin*, *Doppelter Einsatz* and their likes) is presumably also the reason why in this field the culture industry has reached a considerable high culture industrial level concerning script, direction and acting skills. This level is exceptional for German and Austrian standards (disregarding the TV-serials *Bulle von Tölz* or *Soko Kitzbühl* which underbid anything else). Just like Kracauer perceived “there is an interplay between a way of thinking and body movements. According to their artistic credo the German artists must have felt that their nature was not suited for the gags and gestures demonstrated by the American film-comedians.” (27f.) For a German actor or a German actress the rule is still valid that it is better to play in *Tatort* than in any sitcom in order not to destroy one’s reputation completely.⁶

⁵ The Austrian cabaret scene which has emerged in the 90s can be regarded as an extreme example of this. One-man-sitcoms like Josef Hader or Alfred Dorfer and their likes quieten any promise of happiness with their linguistic bluntness and lack of thought. But the remaining hush can be specified in more detail: The emotional humour reconciling mankind with their tragic plight derives straight from a [mischievousness](#) of an undeniable post-Nazistic character. What in Helmut Qualtinger’s *Herrn Karl* was still laid bare with disgust and demonstrated with inner repulsion has migrated into the peoples’ minds and is now approved: the sons and grandsons of criminal soldiers are making bad jokes about the damages done to them by fathers and grandfathers and they are reconciling with them in a humorous way. This is how the [Volksgemeinschaft](#) is laughing about itself. But if a true creature of happiness should appear on the scene what will happen will be similar to what happened to the Jews in the *Stürmer*-cartoons or to Marcel Reich-Ranicki in the case of Martin Walser. This plague, how Michael Scharang once termed the Austrian cabaret artists appropriately, is Austria’s original contribution to the culture industry. But even in this case Austria does not reach the minimum standards of industrial production and division of labour, rather it sticks to the level of craftsmanship, the lonely individual continues to potter around in solitude.

⁶ In detail once could argue if and how a certain standard is accomplished. When Kracauer describes a celebrity of the early days of German cinema – namely Harry Piel, called the German Douglas Fairbanks – one automatically thinks of the facial

Existing since 1970 and counting over 650 sequels the series has a national German setting. The action takes place all over Germany: By now almost every bigger German city has got its police officers-couple: Berlin, Kiel, Hamburg, Bremen, Hannover, Münster, Cologne, Leipzig, Frankfurt/Main, Saarbrücken, Ludwigshafen, Stuttgart, Konstanz, Munich... And they are not dull, patriarchal types in the vein of civil servants like commissioners Erik Ode or Derrick, from which the generation of the Wehrmacht could get their modes of identification. There are striking similarities between Lena Odenthal and Mario Kopper from Ludwigshafen or Bruno Ehrlicher and Kain from Leipzig or Max Ballauf and Freddy Schenk from Cologne and Beckett's Hamm and Clov: "What is there to keep me here?" – "The dialogue." (82/84) Basically these people are deprived of their sex life, but still they have to appear if they had some. If they are women, they are German feminists, if they are men, they are still no homosexuals. The less sex life they are allowed to show, the more fanatically they try to catch sex offenders, the most popular murderers in *Tatort*. Those who abuse their own sex drive are especially fond of child abusers. Often certain enemy concepts like people smugglers and child traders, but also psychoanalysts, psychologists and intellectuals in general are merged with each other. The ideal case – which in fact exists as a sequel – is the horrible sex offender working as a psychoanalyst and treating alleged suspects in order to hide behind them. "Grasshoppers" are also a popular offender profile. While social democracy is adopting them in a propagandist way, the *Tatort*-series is painting an actual picture.⁷ The rumour which circulated this way is very efficient. Even if it should turn out false in the end, it is working to great effect, maybe then it even works the best. For example in the sequel "Blutdiamanten" ("Bloody Diamonds", first shown: 15.1.2006) it is assumed that a wealthy international gang must be behind the murder of an anti-globalization activist in Germany:

The jeweller Karl De Mestre must have imagined his business-anniversary celebration differently. The noble party for the refined society from Cologne is disturbed by the anti-globalization group "Underworld". The activists are accusing De Mestre of making his money with diamonds from civil war areas. Suddenly there is a shot. The activist Andre Hesse is shot at close range. The two detectives Max Ballauf and Freddy Schenk are dealing with the case. Soon it turns out that the killer must have been a professional. Did Hesse have to die for his commitment against the so called bloody diamonds? Could it be that De Mestre himself is involved in the murder? A trace leads Ballauf and Schenk to the Belgian diamond-metropolis Antwerp. They

expression of the undercover agents in *Tatort* when they are finally jumping at the suspect: "He appeared in the middle of the war as the hero of *Unter heißer Sonne*, a film in which he forced several lions (from Hamburg's Hagenbeck Zoo) to yield to his spell." (Kracauer 2004: 25)

⁷ Different are the upper class offenders in Peter Falk's *Columbo* series which as far as its permanence is concerned can even take on *Tatort*. In California commissioner Columbo appears like someone being on welfare. If he lost his job, he would be one with the Dude in *Big Lebowski*. His impetus is not envy for the rich, which drives *Tatort*-detectives and their audience, but curiosity to see how the rich, entrepreneurs, movie-actors, conductors, athletes live. He wants to see the things they got, which he cannot afford and maybe does not really need. In any case everything is strictly limited to California. Naturally the audience identifies with the lonesome agent Columbo whose wife is constantly mentioned, but never appears. His relationship with his old Peugeot and his dog, tired as Columbo himself, are supposed to illustrate his character traits. Everything seems more like a tame version of Nestroy's *To ground floor and first floor*. The first floor is Hollywood, and Colombo is moving on the ground floor.

start investigations on their own initiative and risk their lives” (E:\Download 6\DasErste_de - Tatort - Blutdiamanten.mht)

As a matter of fact it turns out that De Mestre is indeed earning his money with “bloody diamonds” and is involved in several murders. However, he is not responsible for the murder of the activist Andre Hesse, as he was killed by a comrade who had degenerated into a fanatic. In bringing the fanatic up before court it clearly turns out that the resolute police officers and the moderate activists from “Underworld” share their attitudes; and in the case of Freddy this rather raving attitude (Freddy was once part of the German peace movement) is aimed against De Mestre who embodies the metropolis of the bloody diamonds, Antwerp. There a similarly sincere female police appointee is doing investigations, but altogether the situation is worse than in Germany: According to the police appointee De Mestre has the public authorities in his grip – just like in Fassbinder the rich Jew has power over the authorities in Frankfurt.

Identifying with this action means identifying with the state.⁸ This is a structure of consciousness resulting from a difference from the actual existing state: The detectives are only able to retain their life by investigating on their own account and thus inevitably violating existing laws.

By the way, it is also Vienna (and not Zurich or Bern) which belongs to the cities where the “Volksgemeinschaft” is investigating. Be it tough as in Western Germany or be it worthy as in the new German provinces and the very old ones in Austria, it is always the successor states of the Third Reich where the detectives are up to their tricks. Consequentially one gets to see a characteristically brown map of the German Reich after the “Anschluß” of the Ostmark on the *Tatort*-website (there are certain cut backs on the margins as one clearly has to stay abreast of political changes).

But it is out of question that actual standards of civilization are built both in the plot of *Tatort*-sequels and in the detectives’ attitudes – just as after the liberation from National Socialism rule of law has become possible again. But somehow they are always poisoned. For example there is detective Charlotte Lindholm, investigator for the criminal department Hanover, who is hunting down killers in Lower Saxony: “With her dry and easy humour she is taking grumpy guys and men who are underrating her on a ride” (<http://www.daserste.de/tatort/kommissare>); she is not married and except for a tragic affair with an undersecretary of state she shies away from “close relationships” in general. Instead she lives with a quiet author in a kind of apartment-sharing community. However, his “crankiness” does not go as far as him being gay (here a border is drawn to a topos in US-sitcoms where single women are living together with gay men); in the relationships with her mother and colleagues she is showing solidarity like only women in the editorial of the feminist magazine *Emma* would do; and she is cooperating with a *Tatort*-detective of Turkish origin who has started his job in 2007 in Hamburg. In fact here the ideal world of the German movement of 68’ is established with pedagogical diligence as part of the state; most of them have from beginning on been horrified by the

⁸ The legendary *Kottan* from Vienna, meant as a left-wing parody, owes its astonishing success to the systematic belittlement of exactly this constellation.

negativity in Adorno's critique of the culture industry. "There is right life in the wrong one" is their motto – and the detectives are demonstrating it to us. But they only get enough power of persuasion when the wrong is personified as a delinquent being up to his mischief outside the German state: as a worldwide operating power which finds its henchmen in German, but which has got its basis in Antwerp or the USA. Poisoning of springs is not necessarily the adequate means for denunciation: That is why in the *Tatort*-sequel "Atemnot" ("Dyspnea"; first shown on the 23.10.2005) German children are poisoned by a spaghetti-sauce produced by an American corporation. The group is not held to account as no one can satisfactorily prove their guilt.

One of the German servants of the American company kills himself because he has got a bad conscience; and one employee of the solicitor representing the corporation is killed. Charlotte Lindholm starts investigating, and at first contre cœur she has to suspect her beloved undersecretary of state that he is not worth her love, because she believes he is lying to her – just as German citizens are always contre cœur suspecting their state and its politicians that they are acting against the people on behalf of foreign interests. But, – and this is where the civics education in *Tatort* lies – the lover is not guilty, he is only marginally involved and even dies the death of a martyr by jumping in front of the detective during a fire exchange in order to protect her. Finally, in a much seamier light the American businessmen turn out to be the originators and beneficiaries of the crime. They cannot be caught by German policemen and -women and thus they will continue to be able to poison German kids. It turns out that a German food technician has advised against the contamination of the sauce, but he let himself be bribed by the bosses of the corporation in order to pay the expensive doctors for his cancer surgery. Furthermore, Charlotte Lindholm discovers a DVD with a hidden camera video where an American is forcing the man who later committed suicide to start no recall and rather to risk the food-poisoning than damaging the business. His last words are "Business as usual".

But before all central matters of the plot the incorporation of certain standards of civilization is done with an exposing tension liquidating any ironic distance in the performance. One has to observe in detail how under these circumstances the logic of the culture industry makes everything even worse. Accordingly in its genres the figures of identification become stars. As a consequence the characteristics of the actors tend to become more important than the differences between their roles, even if the stars are only little starlets like Maria Furtwängler. The blonde impersonator of Charlotte Lindholm not only arranges for the abolishment of possibilities of civilization in the secondary "Volksgemeinschaft" by branding herself as the modern single woman in *Tatort* and as a displaced Eastprussian on the run in *Die Flucht*. Playing Lena, countess from Mahlenberg, in a costly produced epic movie by the ARD (first showing: 4./5. 3. 2007) she flees from the approaching Red Army and as it is told in the internet-propaganda she leads the people entrusted in her care through the inclement last war-winter to Bavaria. Naturally she is giving series of interviews ("the biggest role of her life"; *Bild*; "Maria Furtwängler is showing will power"; *TVSpielfilm*): "Our film demonstrates the fate of the civil population, which were basically Hitler's last victims as these people were not evacuated

although it was clear that it was impossible to hold the frontline” (www.focus.de/kultur/kino_tv/die-flucht_aid_28704.html) - “I have been fortunate to get this role, to delve into this world, in which I have been interested for a long time. A world with a totally different value system. In Prussia the individual interests had to be subordinated to the community’s interests. Today this is very strange and this is also one of the reasons why I really want to tell this story to my children. A little bit of this lost world has rubbed of on me during the shootings.” (www.daserste.de/dieflucht/)

One just has to watch how detective Lindholm is crying and moaning with her dead undersecretary of state in her lap at the end of the *Tatort*-sequel “Atemlos”. This is the way how German mothers and women cried for their sons and men at the end of the war. This is the way the Germans mourned for their Führer. Or how she bursts out in tears in a sequel called “Das namenlose Mädchen” (“The girl with no name”; first showing: 15. 4. 2007) over the destiny of a German family she does not know at all. Basically the ruin of these people is only just another victim during the endless flight from the globalised allies, and the German detective is sensitively feeling the mission to lead those entrusted in her care through the merciless economic crisis to a secure existence. And she really shows a lot of understanding for the father who killed his own child out of despair after losing his job: a German “Ehrenmord” so to say. And she even carries a child beneath her heart, sired by a Spaniard with who she had a holiday flirt. This is how the “Volksgemeinschaft” is procreating these days.

Form and Content

In Beckett’s *Endgame* the catastrophe which had turned all life into an endgame is not told. It only becomes apparent that it had happened and that it can by no means be reversed. In his essay “Trying to Understand Endgame” Adorno tries to ascertain what has happened in Germany: “Beckett’s trashcans are the emblem of a culture restored after Auschwitz.” (Adorno 2000: 343) Maybe Beckett’s play only becomes true because it is abstracting from Auschwitz. Beckett’s trashcans are emblems in this abstract sense which Adorno captures in the already quoted sentence, in that Beckett “shows as humanly typical only those deformations inflicted on humans by the form of their society” (Adorno 2000: 334) The term form is to be stressed here and it is to be taken as serious as in Marx’s analysis of value-form: everywhere this form is the same, though it is not yet the “catastrophe” which Beckett has to leave in the dark, but the precondition of its possibility to happen. To realize it, it takes individuals flocking together in the “Volksgemeinschaft” like in *Tatort* and not dispersing as commodity-holders like in *King of Queens*.

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