

There's a weird, new genre emerging on prime-time. The three different series and at least two TV specials that have so far comprised it are curiously fascinating enough to warrant attention, especially because this is quite literally television scraping the bottom of its own barrel.

TV's *Bloopers and Practical Jokes* (shown weekly on Global and NBC), *Life's Most Embarrassing Moments* (a weekly offering from CBS and CBC-Barrie), and *Foul-ups, Bleeps and Blunders* (ABC's weekly contribution) are nothing less than a recycling of production garbage — the outtakes from popular TV series and specials. Audiences are threatened to a stream of bloopers, goofs and foul-ups by such luminaries as Susan St. James, Penny Marshall, Dom DeLuise, Mr. T., John Byner, and Sammy Davis Jr., or from taped shows like *M.A.S.H.*, *Too Close For Comfort*, *Three's Company*, *Hollywood Squares*, and *The Tonight Show*. In addition, CTV carried a special called *TV's Funniest Game Show Moments*, in which Bob Barker, Garry Moore, Bert Convy, Steve Allen and Bill Cullen share outtakes from their shows, and another called *All-Time Greatest TV Censored Bloopers* on CHCH, celebrating motion picture and TV outtakes.

The "best" of these weird shows is *TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes*, hosted by Dick Clark and Ed McMahon. An hour-long program, it also includes regular segments devoted to classic commercials (foreign ones, too), a "salute" to the days of live TV (with foul-ups from shows like *Houdy Doody*), clips from old movie serials (like *Spymaster*, vintage 1942), outtakes from foreign TV (Britain, Australia), and clips from local TV shows around the U.S.

What's notable about this new genre is that it is totally fixated on television itself, with no other reason for being. While other shows are also "about television" on some level, they simultaneously have a latent or overt social purpose: a content that refers to the "real world" in some way. This genre of TV refers only to TV. It is completely self-referential and self-contained. According to its parameters, there is no real world, only the television-world in which even its garbage-outtakes can bring delight, or, more importantly, ratings.

Of course, there are other dimensions or sub-themes worth exploring in this genre: covert viciousness towards the (also beloved) celebrities who goof and blunder; nostalgia for the days of live TV when the risk-laden moments of performance were part and parcel of overall affect; exploitation of the audience's desire for behind-the-scenes knowledge of TV production; even mocking examination of television's compulsive perfectionism — here exposed through revealing what has been repressed in other shows. It is also worth noting that while American commercial TV broadcasts virtually no foreign programs, it is quite ready to air the outtakes from other countries — a strange selection process that

SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

Scraping the bottom of the TV barrel

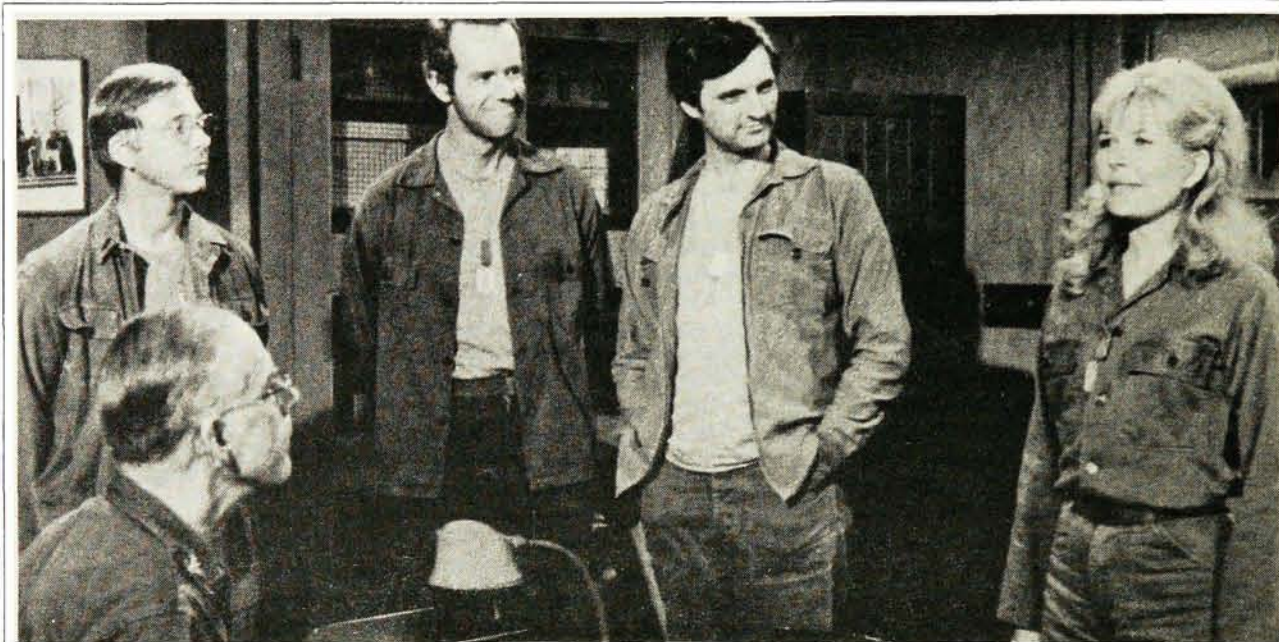
suggests a kind of flattening-out of cultural difference. (Why bother to see the final work from another country? We are all the same in our goofy outtakes.)

On the positive side, there is, in this genre, a tiny spark of deconstructive potential in terms of the television image. The hosts for the shows guide the audience through

the clips via voice-over: "Here comes the line...", "Watch that briefcase...", "Notice the expression on her face..." The occasion for television examining television, even in this most simplistic fashion, at least expects a degree of alertness on the part of viewers. Rather than sitting stupefied or stunned before the flow of imagery, audiences are asked to focus and

concentrate on specific areas of the image. The humorous pay-off is directly connected to close attention.

Perhaps it's worth noting that, in North American culture, new ideas and viewpoints seem to enter the mainstream first through humour. For whatever reasons, the threateningly new must initially be filtered through mass-consciousness in terms of jokes. Given this, it is possible to suggest that the "television-outtakes genre" (or whatever you want to call it) could be a weird harbinger of other deconstructive efforts emerging on the screen itself. Then again, it could just be nothing more than television recycling its own garbage — for a laff, of course.



• The folks from *M.A.S.H.*: new ideas enter the mainstream through humor

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