HOLLYWOOD ACTIVISM, DAYTIME VERITÉ, AND THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

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Several hours after the conclusion of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, six participants in the march gathered in a television studio to discuss the day’s events. Sponsored and taped by the U.S. Information Agency for distribution to international broadcast stations, schools, and consulates, the 30-minute dialogue was intended to counter negative foreign perceptions of U.S. race relations by showcasing a collegial exchange of ideas between black and white Americans. With live satellite coverage of the march picked up by six countries, and recorded coverage scheduled by many more in the coming week, the conversation would serve as a coda to those images, reinforcing the day’s spectacle of peaceful protest by offering a more personal glimpse of “unrehearsed discussion” among people with “deeply held personal views” (according to the program’s voiceover narrator). To represent American discourse in action, the USIA chose “a small group from Hollywood, California”: James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Marlon Brando, Charlton Heston, director and screenwriter Joseph Mankiewicz, and Sidney Poitier. To ensure that few would confuse the production with a sampling of just any American discourse, however, the USIA called it Hollywood Roundtable.

While the propaganda value of this group of literary and film stars was openly acknowledged in the grave intonation of each participant’s name and repeated references to the men’s fame and status, a subtler, and perhaps more effective, rhetorical aspect of “Hollywood Roundtable” was its deceptively simple mise-en-scène. Arrayed in a semi-circle around the program host, veteran reporter David Schoenbrun, the six celebrities embodied nothing so much as mid-century American “cool”: dark suits and thin ties on bodies alternately sprawling and sitting at attention, serious recitation punctuated by easy laughter, chumminess interrupted by sudden intensity, chain-smoked cigarettes tapped out of packs and dangled from fingers. Decades before it was stylized by the hit series Mad Men, this was the look of cosmopolitan American masculinity in the early 1960s, and it was the look of live television.

Hollywood Roundtable may have been “unrehearsed,” but its first minutes echoed a script that had been heard earlier that day when

1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1u27coFIGXg. Subsequent quotations from the program are taken from this site.
Martin Luther King Jr. had compellingly described “the fierce urgency of now.” In choral fashion, Mankiewicz announced that the “urgency of civil rights” had brought him to Washington, Schoenbrun confessed that he had “felt this sense of urgency myself,” Poitier divulged that “the urgency that was evident today has been bubbling in me, personally, for most of these years,” and Heston, completing the tribute, declared that he “could no longer pay only lip service to a cause that was so urgently right and in a time that is so urgently now.”

After its epigraphic beginning, though, the program quickly strayed from the USIA’s tacit script. Hoping to move attention from the cause of the march to the fact of its success, Schoenbrun turned to American exceptionalism: “Demonstrations of this kind could not easily be held elsewhere, and when we talk about oppression and repression I haven’t seen any march on Moscow or march on Peking.” Mankiewicz allowed that although the U.S. is almost the only Western country in which this could happen, it is “also the only country in which it is necessary.” When Heston disagreed, Belafonte put an emphatic end to the comparisons: “It is long since past the time when we can measure our own conscience and our own sense of morality based on what some decayed society refuses to give its own.”

With the program veering dangerously from its intended purpose, Schoenbrun issued a warning to Mankiewicz and Belafonte: “Remember, the entire world watches this sort of thing. The world doesn’t have a correct measuring stick.... Here, we are talking to the world. More than a hundred countries will be listening to the discussion today.” Shifting to a seemingly safer topic, Schoenbrun asked Poitier how he had faced the “problem” of Negro rights. “My country has to successfully negotiate the Negro question,” Poitier replied. “It is to me not a problem. It’s the question.” When Heston voiced agreement with “the vital importance of this question not only for Negro Americans but for all Americans,” Mankiewicz once again cut against the grain: “That’s why I think, for a starter, why don’t we sometimes refer to it as the ‘white’ question?”

“It’s an American question,” Heston responded.

“No, I think it is the white question.”

“It’s a human question,” Brando interjected.
“I think you’re both right,” Heston offered in an attempt to end the debate, but Brando, warming to the subject, continued his historical ramblings.

“There’s always an ebb and flow in history. One country’s up, one country’s down....”

“No, it’s been cozy to think of it, Marlon, as the ‘Negro question,’” Mankiewicz interrupted, stepping in to educate the actor he had directed in *Julius Caesar*.

“I don’t disagree with that,” Brando conceded, hanging his head.

“The responsibility has shifted to the white people of America,” Mankiewicz concluded, at which point Schoenbrun rushed to ease the rising tension in the studio by suggesting that they all seemed to agree that “words often get in the way of what we mean to say.” After all, he noted with some relief, even Poitier had felt moved to correct himself earlier when he had changed “Negro problem” to “Negro question.”

“Implied in ‘Negro problem’ is a suggestion that I represent a problem. I do not represent a problem,” Poitier fired back, and Mankiewicz interrupted again to emphasize the point: “The Negroes are not a problem for us. We’re a problem to the Negroes!”

“It’s the same thing,” Brando suggested, trying again to argue for universal equivalence.

“No, it’s not the same thing, at all!”

“Yes, it is, Joe,” Heston asserted with authority.

Belafonte interceded to say that Mankiewicz was right, “because the person who holds the power in his hands to fulfill the American Dream ... happens to be a person who is white.” Still not understanding the issue, Heston tried to restore the illusion of group harmony. “To imply that it’s solely a white problem is to deny the burning interest of every fellow Negro citizen,” he said, before turning to the others to plead for agreement. “Really, we all feel the same!”

Realizing that he had lost control of the intended narrative, Schoenbrun moved to shut down the free-for-all, but not before reproaching his unruly guests. “Gentlemen, the crosstalk is such that what you’re saying, which I think everybody wants to hear, is being lost over your words of wisdom.”
For all of Schoenbrun’s (and no doubt the USIA’s) exasperation with the trajectory of this star-studded propaganda experiment, *Hollywood Roundtable* was a showcase of American-styled democratic discourse. This was live television, with its risks exposed and its rewards coming unexpectedly. Because it was not edited for distribution (all cutting being done through camera-switching on the set), the program revealed moment-by-moment shifts in personal and political alliances within the group, as each man tried and (except for Heston) failed to stay “on message,” supported and then took issue with others, and ultimately threw out the script altogether.

Although Brando never brandished the cattle prod stowed under his chair (a memento from a demonstration in Gadsden, Alabama, that he had attended a week earlier), a more serious breach of TV etiquette had threatened the proceedings from the moment Heston had seconded Schoenbrun’s case for American exceptionalism. With the march concluded and already being lauded as a triumph, the Hollywood contingent’s tolerance for Heston’s conservatism was quickly disintegrating. Having reluctantly acceded to Martin Luther King Jr.’s wish to allow Heston, an actor whose politics usually situated him “across the divide” from Hollywood liberals,2 to serve with Brando as co-chair of the coalition, the others now began to break rank, exposing the fault lines that had run beneath the group for months.

Schoenbrun’s frustrated description of what he saw as the discussion’s chaos illuminates how central television had become to American politics. Contrary to his assertion, the men’s “crosstalk” did not obscure the substance of their dialogue; if anything, it was the substance of the dialogue. Urbane “crosstalk” was a form of political discourse that Americans had grown used to seeing on television by 1963 (as opposed to the witless “crossfire” of political shouting matches made popular by CNN and Fox News forty years later). Improvisation, spontaneity, impatience, anger, embarrassment, fatigue, furtive asides — in short, going “off script” — were the hallmarks of live television itself, and were far more credible expressions of U.S. “freedom” than well-rehearsed and edited testimonials.

One might wonder how Schoenbrun would have managed an even larger group of celebrities. Whether misreading or sticking too closely to the USIA’s script, he introduced the roundtable as “seven men,” though only six were present.3 The missing guest might have been on the “celebrity plane” that had left Los Angeles that morning carrying not only Brando, Heston, Belafonte, Mankiewicz, and Poitier,

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3 As of this writing, the identity of the possibly missing seventh member hasn’t been found.
but also Paul Newman, Diahann Carroll, James Garner, Sammy Davis Jr., Joanne Woodward, Gregory Peck, Lena Horne, Tony Franciosa, and Tony Bennett. On the other hand, he (and it was assuredly a “he”) might have been Ossie Davis, who served as an emcee at the Lincoln Memorial, or Burt Lancaster, who had come from Europe to read a petition in support of the march signed by 1500 Americans living in Paris.

Although most of the celebrities who attended the march had been supporting the cause of civil rights in additional ways, Belafonte, Brando, Lancaster, and Newman were the most visible faces of Hollywood activism. Early in 1963, the group had organized a rally and fundraiser in support of the SCLC at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, and Brando and Newman had later joined a sit-in organized by CORE at the Georgia state capitol. In the month leading up to the march, Brando had been particularly active, joining Newman, Lancaster, Heston, Anthony Franciosa, and James Whitmore to press for greater representation of African Americans in the film and television industries; participating (with actor Pernell Roberts, star of Bonanza) in a housing discrimination protest in Torrance, south of Los Angeles; and, along with Newman, Tony Franciosa, and actor Virgil Frye, lending support to protesters against hiring discrimination in Gadsden, Alabama (where he encountered the notorious cattle prods used by police, one of which he would take to Washington as evidence of police brutality in the South).

Against the backdrop of popular films that had been made in and about the postwar South starring Brando, Newman, Woodward, Franciosa, and Peck, the stars’ public support of civil rights generated associations that, for the most part, enhanced Hollywood’s value to the movement. Brando had most famously played New Orleans factory worker Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire (1951), a film that co-starred Gone With the Wind’s Vivien Leigh, but he had also played a southern Air Force officer who struggled to overcome his racism in Sayonara (1957) and, more recently, a Mississippi Delta drifter in Tennessee Williams’s The Fugitive Kind (1959). By 1963, Paul Newman had risen to stardom in adaptations of works by William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams (The Long, Hot Summer and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (both 1958)), and had maintained his familiar southern persona in both Williams’s Sweet Bird of Youth (1962) and Hud, a widely acclaimed movie that was showing in theaters across the country in August 1963. Newman’s wife Joanne Woodward, a
southerner herself, had won an Academy Award for her 1957 performance as a Georgia housewife in *The Three Faces of Eve*, and had co-starred with her husband in *The Long, Hot Summer*. Like Newman, she had often starred in Faulkner and Williams adaptations (*The Sound and the Fury* [1959] and, with Brando, *The Fugitive Kind*). Anthony Franciosa’s roles in *A Face in the Crowd* (1957); *The Long, Hot Summer* (1958); and Tennessee Williams’s *Period of Adjustment* (1962) had established him as a recognizable southern sidekick to stars like Newman and Andy Griffith. The regional character types represented by these roles were familiar and almost predictable installations in mainstream Hollywood films by 1963. Regardless of the kinds of characters they played, it was the fact of the actors’ entrenched celluloid “southernness” that offered justification of a kind for their highlighted attendance at the march.

Gregory Peck’s presence, however, did more than simply conjure associations with the Deep South. *To Kill a Mockingbird* had opened across the nation just five months earlier, and in April Peck had won the Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Atticus Finch. Standing apart from the contemporary and blatantly regional characters played by Brando, Newman, and Franciosa, Atticus had been played by Peck as a timeless, universally appealing patriarch, white America’s emblem of enlightened racial tolerance. For much of the movie-going population, Gregory Peck was Atticus Finch. The sight of his tall frame and composed face among the marchers and dignitaries must no doubt have collapsed the distance between fact and fiction for many television viewers, as if Atticus himself had simply walked off one screen and onto another.

As useful as such stars were to the public appeal of the march, however, their media compatibility proved especially valuable. In its first event staged for a global audience, the civil rights movement could not claim expertise in television aesthetics. Industry professionals behind the cameras and in network control booths could ensure broadcast-quality coverage of the day’s events, but whether or not those events would “work” on television was a different matter. As it turned out, the occasional organizational stumbles, inelegant orations, or redundant monologues that threatened to curb dramatic momentum on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial did little to diminish the day’s inherent “televisuality.” In fact, they ensured it.

Perhaps easy to forget is that what most people experienced as the March on Washington in 1963 was not the parade of colliding sensory
pleasures later recalled by those who marched, sang, and sat on the
National Mall. For many, the march was a purely auditory experi-
ence, a live monaural soundtrack heard on transistor and car radios,
while for others, who only glimpsed the front pages of afternoon
newspapers, it was an already registered historical event, devoid
of sound and motion. For most, however, the march took shape as
a two-dimensional electronic canvas of black, gray, and off-white
images, a “special” broadcasting event that interrupted scheduled
programs throughout the day (on ABC and NBC) but was in fact
visually indistinguishable from the rest of daytime TV.

Unlike news coverage of critical events in the movement’s history,
which had often seemed profoundly discordant with the sensibili-
ty of network programming (never more so than in the footage of
Birmingham police turning high-powered water hoses and attack
dogs on peaceful protesters just months earlier, on May 3 and 4), the
August 28th broadcast settled comfortably into the unhurried pace
of non-prime-time television, especially on CBS, where it unfolded
in real time from 1:30 to 4:30 Eastern Time. Like the live serial
dramas and game shows it displaced for the day, coverage of the
march’s schedule of events was restricted to a location that had to
accommodate an astounding amount of equipment: tripods, cherry
pickers, unwieldy wiring, bulky sound recorders, and bulkier static
cameras. Turning confinement on sound stages to an advantage by
using extensive close-ups and dialogue, afternoon programming
had become the domain of faces, emotion, and continuous talk. If
in addition to songs and speeches, participants in the march heard
revving motors, walkie-talkies, twittering birds, crying babies, air-
plane engines, radios, and even occasional silence, television viewers
heard continuous talk — not just from dignitaries on the podium,
but from network anchors, field reporters, celebrities, politicians,
random marchers, and, of course, commercial sponsors. Introduced
early in the day, the march eased into the community of daytime
TV conversation in brief but predictable appearances, becoming
a familiar constituent by afternoon. Considered within its original
context, a crucial aspect of the broadcast’s historical significance is
apparent in every frame — in its unremarkable formal features, its
nearly seamless embeddedness in the TV schedules of a late-summer
Wednesday afternoon, its stealth integration of the national airwaves.

In late August of 1963, black and white news was within two years
of its demise. CBS would broadcast the first all-color evening news

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report on August 19, 1965, eight days after the beginning of the Watts eruption, bringing an end to a particular way of perceiving American race relations. From the film clips of the 1955 Emmett Till murder trial, which had been rushed by car through the Mississippi Delta to New York-bound planes at the Memphis airport, to the videotaped Selma marches in 1965, “civil rights” was framed, transmitted, and received as a literal black and white narrative, an elemental story of contrasts — racial, regional, and moral. The splintering of black unity would be told in color against a background of urban flames, and journalism would struggle to fashion a revision of the old story from unconventional characters and unfamiliar settings.

Color programming had appeared sporadically during prime time in the late 1950s and early 1960s (the NBC series Bonanza, the Rose Bowl parades, special broadcasts of The Wizard of Oz), but black and white was the lingua franca of the quotidian and the familiar — soap operas, talk shows, game shows, and children’s programs. It was, in effect, the language of “reality,” and by 1963, it had attained a cultural cachet unimaginable in 1961, when newly installed FCC Chairman Newton Minow had called television a “vast wasteland.” Monochromatic images and monaural sound transmitted electronically within fractions of seconds from studio sound stages to less finely tuned living-room receivers were simply what TV was in its first decade. What TV was by 1963, however, appeared to be less the unavoidable product of its limitations than the skillful exploitation of its uniqueness, to the point that a televisual aesthetic was now recognizable. At the heart of this aesthetic was simply the fact of visual immediacy. Crossing generic boundaries and blurring distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, television — and live television especially — signified authenticity in a way that was unavailable to other media. Even at its most banal, TV could convey an authenticity of space, time, and character.

Thanks in large part to Newton Minow’s unrelenting pressure on the broadcast industry to elevate the quality of its offerings, networks in the early 1960s had made an unprecedented investment in a type of literate, adult programming that began to sensitize audiences to the social value and rhetorical meanings of electronic authenticity. The unprecedented outpouring of television documentaries between 1961 and 1963 coincided fortuitously with the development of cinéma vérité, a style of filming that used lightweight cameras and make-shift synchronized sound to capture the private conversations

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and unrehearsed actions of people in a way that had never been seen before — and in a way that made viewers feel as if they were hearing and seeing how those figures “really” talked and behaved. Shaky hand-held cameras and inadequate lighting often erased the past tense, creating the impression that what was in the frame not only was happening here and now but was also slightly illicit and immensely personal.

This kind of documentary sensibility had already begun to retune the look and sound of prime time programming in series like *Naked City* (1958-63), *Route 66* (1960-64), and *The Twilight Zone* (1959-64). *Naked City* and *Route 66* were shot on location (in New York and on back roads throughout the U.S., respectively), while *The Twilight Zone* attempted to render realistically “a dimension of mind,” but all three were written and performed by artists intent on examining, often relentlessly, the emotional depth and psychological complexity of “ordinary” people in stressful situations. The immense popularity of Alan Funt’s *Candid Camera* (1960-67), a “reality” comedy show that used hidden cameras and microphones to record anonymous people’s reactions to practical jokes, indicates the widespread fascination with observing (seemingly) unstaged behavior at close range (a fascination that was fueling the demand for spy movies and novels, notably the James Bond series).

The verité era of television was also the Kennedy era, to the benefit of both. As a presidential candidate, Kennedy had allowed the pioneers of the style, Robert Drew and Ricky Leacock, to shadow him on the campaign trail, and had appeared coolly televisual during his live debates with Nixon; as president, he allowed documentary makers ample access to his office and began holding live televised press conferences within five days of his inauguration. He also hired TV and film director Franklin Shaffner to be his production advisor for live broadcasts from the White House. So important was Shaffner to the administration that on October 22, 1962, he was called in to direct the lighting, makeup, and videography of Kennedy’s Cuban Missile Crisis announcement.5

Shaffner’s central qualification for this role was his experience directing live dramas during TV’s “golden age,” that period in New York from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s in which acting studios, theaters, and television studios shared an interest in what might be called dramatized verité. Stanislavski’s “Method,” as the style was loosely called, had been employed by artists for decades, but by the

1950s it had become a cultural style (to many, *the* cultural style) for communicating postwar angst, anger, and love on stage and on the screen. For several decades, Lee Strasberg, Sanford Meisner, and Stella Adler had been training aspiring actors to approach their art as an unstinting revelation of emotional truth. Improvisation, word play, and (in Strasberg’s case) memory recovery were tools for achieving one overarching goal on stage: being present.

Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Gregory Peck, and Anthony Franciosa had studied under one or more of these mentors, and James Baldwin would soon develop and stage *Blues for Mister Charlie*, a thinly disguised study of the Emmett Till murder, at Strasberg’s Actors Studio. Countless actors (Sidney Poitier, for example) had learned Method techniques informally, often on the job (in Poitier’s case, through tutoring by Joe Mankiewicz during the filming of *No Way Out* in 1950). Method-inspired acting pervaded screens and stages and had come to define contemporary American self-expression. The era’s anxieties would find their most convincing and powerful representation through unwavering focus on being “in the moment.”

If ever a dramatic style were suited to the “fierce urgency of now,” it was the Method, and if ever a medium were suited to the Method, it was live television. Theater may have been the most prestigious showcase for the style, but live television was its laboratory. In the hands of writers like Rod Serling, Paddy Chayefsky, and Gore Vidal and directors like Arthur Penn and Delbert Mann, teleplays that premiered on *Kraft Television Playhouse* (1947–58), *The Philco Television Playhouse* (1948–56), *Playhouse 90* (1956–61), or *The United States Steel Hour* (1953–63) showcased the talents of actors, directors, and writers who understood the unique demands of the medium.

“Sets had to be improvised and tucked into each other, together with the commercials, which were done live in the same studio,” Mann later recalled. 6 Vidal remembered it more vividly: the studio was “concentrated hell,” rehearsal was “the time of distinct disaster,” and going live was “terrifying and exhilarating.” 7 Performers who worked best under live television’s constraints turned out to be theater actors, especially those who were skilled in dramatic spontaneity and improvisation. According to Penn, “These were theatre actors, not actors who needed four takes or five takes…. They had the flexibility, the training, the sense that once they began performing the play, there was no stopping it, and that is what was consistent with

7 Ibid., 86.
live TV. There was no going back. We’d go on at nine and off at ten, and it was a complete living experience.”

The danger of this kind of immediacy was felt by viewers, but in a way that was strangely new. “It had that highly personal feeling about it,” Mosel would remember: “Because it was live, when you sat in your living room and looked at a live play, you really honestly had the feeling that Paul Newman was performing for you. Just for me, sitting here ... and you saw he was nervous and you said, ‘Oh, I hope he’s going to get through it all right’.” Rather than being depleted by the weekly ritual of anticipation and relief, viewers were invigorated. According to *Playhouse 90* director Buzz Kulik, “The audience was so excited about this new thing, that they brought a kind of energy and vitality to it also.”

Enduring both the “terrifying and exhilarating” process of making the production and the tension-ridden intimacy of watching that production created a bond among the survivors. Gore Vidal recalled thirty years later, “Sunday nights we had the country. Monday morning you would be walking down First Avenue and every other group of people would be discussing your play.” Undergirding this bond was a shared understanding of what had been attempted: With the clock ticking, anything could have happened. For that hour, they all had been “in the moment.”

Actors weren’t the only artists at the march who understood the urgency of live performance. As increasing numbers of stand-up comedians became recording stars in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they too had begun to move between the worlds of theater and television. Nightclub stages were the stand-ups’ traditional venue, but younger comics (such as Mike Nichols and Elaine May) had begun gravitating to improvisational theaters. In contrast to an older generation of apolitical, Borscht Belt comedians, performers like Lenny Bruce, Godfrey Cambridge, Mort Sahl, and Tom Lehrer embraced satire as the most effective weapon against political and social hypocrisy. During this era, even the most controversial popular comics appeared on television, and often live. Among them was Dick Gregory, the only comedian who spoke on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28.

Ossie Davis introduced Gregory to the marchers as a “comedian fresh from the jail,” a reference to Gregory’s arrest and four-day imprisonment during the Birmingham protests three months earlier.
“I can’t tell you how elated I am over looking out at so many of our smiling faces,” Gregory said in his brief remarks. “And to be honest with you, the last time I’ve seen this many of us, Bull Conner was doing all the talking!” The press had covered the Birmingham protests extensively, largely because of the brutality exercised by police commissioner Bull Conner and the arrest of Martin Luther King Jr., and most people in the audience were undoubtedly familiar with Gregory’s outspoken support for the campaign. What many in the audience were probably less familiar with was Gregory’s activism on other fronts. Ironically, his blink-of-an-eye appearance on the Lincoln Memorial steps gave no indication of the role he had played in the transformation of popular American discourse — a transformation that in no small measure had ensured the success of the march as a broadcasting phenomenon.

In January 1961, Hugh Hefner, founder and editor of *Playboy* magazine and owner of the Playboy Club in Chicago (the sole club in what would soon become an international franchise), had asked Dick Gregory to fill in at the club for a white comic who had canceled his spot. When Hefner’s staff later discovered that the audience would be a group of white southern businessmen, they decided to cancel Gregory’s performance but to honor their contract to pay him. The club manager tried to prevent the comedian from walking on stage, but Gregory, running late, rushed past the manager to arrive in front of the audience at 8:00, right on time. Taking his measure of the audience, Gregory loaded his routine with southern race jokes and was a hit. He stayed on stage for three hours, and Hefner himself came to the club after midnight to offer Gregory a six-week engagement at the club.

“Never before had white America let a black person stand flat-footed and talk to white folks,” Gregory said in 2006. “You could dance, and you could stop in between the dance — Pearl Bailey could talk about her tired feet or Sammy [Davis] could tell a joke — but you could not walk out and talk with white America.” The courage of the stand-up comic is estimable to begin with, but Gregory evokes a stark picture of the black comedian’s dangerous position in that era: one person isolated on a stage, armed with nothing except words, a clearly lit target surrounded by half-hidden strangers. Talking first, talking back — talking at all — had for centuries been reason enough for white men to kill black men with impunity. As Gregory would repeatedly say of that night in 1961, “Blacks were allowed to sing and dance, but not talk.”

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13 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4xpgha7m7l.

14 He said this most recently in *Hugh Hefner: Playboy, Activist, and Rebel*, dir. Brigitte Berman (Metaphor Films, 2009).
Gregory’s triumphant run at the Playboy Club earned him notice in *Time* magazine and an invitation to appear on *The Jack Paar Show* (the original *Tonight Show*), the most popular late-night program on television. An ardent fan of the show, Gregory was appalled when musician Billy Eckstine pointed out to him that black performers were never asked to sit next to Paar after they finished their acts. Crushed that he had failed to register such obvious instances of racial hypocrisy, he declined the invitation. When Paar himself called Gregory, he agreed to change the seating policy on the show. Gregory would appear on the show six times over the next eighteen months, always sitting down with the host after he performed to “talk with white America.”

That it was Hefner who initiated the series of events that would break two hardened conventions of American entertainment was not surprising to those who were familiar with his career or his public pronouncements on race. With the profit generated by his immensely popular magazine, Hefner had been able to finance an independently produced television program that would promote the publication and showcase his artistic and political tastes. Beholden to no network or sponsor, *Playboy’s Penthouse* debuted as a syndicated series in October 1959 on stations willing to invest in a racially integrated program featuring premiere jazz musicians, folk singers, and controversial comedians. No stations in the South made the investment.

Appearing on the first episode of *Playboy’s Penthouse* were Lenny Bruce, Ella Fitzgerald, and Nat “King” Cole. Subsequent episodes featured Pete Seeger, Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett, Count Basie, Dave Brubeck, Ray Charles, Josh White, Tony Curtis, and Dizzy Gillespie. More striking than the guest list of the series, however, was the visual form of each episode. Talk shows had become a popular TV genre by 1959, and variety shows had made the transition from stage to television as early as 1948, with *The Ed Sullivan Show*, but Hefner’s creation was different. A hybrid of both genres to some extent, but with a verité inflection, it was a new, more contemporary way of talking, singing, and joking on television.

“What set it apart was the concept,” Hefner claims. “It was a penthouse apartment in which the subjective camera came up the elevator and then into the apartment ... as if it was a guest there.”15 The premiere episode, for example, opened with shots of a sports car on its way to Hefner’s penthouse (in reality, a Chicago TV studio), accompanied by Cy Coleman’s jazzy “Playboy’s Theme.” After the car pulled up to a tall building, the introduction cut to a shot of an 15 Ibid.
elevator control panel, its buttons lighting as floors passed until the top button (identified only by the *Playboy* bunny icon) was lit. The door slid open, revealing the penthouse living room with Hefner in the center of the frame, his back to the camera. Like someone visiting the penthouse for the first time, the camera scanned the living room unobserved by the host, giving a first-person point of view shot of clusters of people in different parts of the large living room and balcony, all smoking, drinking cocktails, dancing, or affably talking. After allowing time to take in the scene, Hefner, pipe in hand, finally turned to greet the viewer: “Hello there. Glad you could join us this evening.” Subsequent episodes would find Hefner dancing or talking somewhere in the living room, always happily surprised to see “you” arrive.

The sophistication of the setting was mirrored in the sophistication of the talk between Hefner and his guests, but it was a casual sophistication — literate yet unpretentious, humorous and serious by turns, and, above all, confident, comfortable, and inclusive. Unlike the fly-on-the-wall verité viewer, Hefner’s viewer wasn’t spying or overhearing the guests; instead, “you” (in a style consistent with Hefner’s opposition to prurience) were openly acknowledged by the host as a welcome member of the groups he chatted with, free to listen in as you chose.

Understanding an essential difference between film and television, Hefner presided over a mise-en-scène that, in spite of its luxury, was at heart deeply domestic and a soundtrack that often seemed remarkably like that of a middle-class neighborhood gathering (to the point of growing boring at times, as unscripted conversations are wont to do), but with one difference: the guest list was racially integrated. Had Hefner not been perceived by many Americans as a glorified pornographer, or had his magazine lacked centerfolds and sex jokes, his program might have been acceptable prime-time fare in many cities. In look and sound, *Playboy’s Penthouse* was a production that easily accommodated itself to television’s tacit role as a domestic medium by being, above all else, personal, and even intimate. Presenting de facto integration in such a context was unprecedented.

The program lasted a year, and in 1961, eight months after Dick Gregory’s groundbreaking performance at the Playboy Club, it began a second season, which ended later that year. In all, twenty-two episodes were aired. Hefner continued to alter the political landscape of entertainment, however, by installing the highly regarded “*Playboy*
interview” as a monthly feature in his magazine in 1962 (the first interview being, notably, with Miles Davis) and in buying back the franchises of the New Orleans and Miami Playboy Clubs when their owners refused to honor the memberships of black patrons from clubs outside the South.

In June 1962, Hefner appeared on The Jack Paar Show to defend the “Playboy Philosophy,” a loose collection of beliefs centered on personal and political freedom that he would soon publish in a book of the same name. “You have to understand the power of The Jack Paar Show in the sixties,” Dick Gregory recalled in 2000 about the program whose race-based seating policy he had nullified in 1961. “It was a hell of a thing to be on national television,” he said, “on the biggest show in the country, and be allowed to make honest racial jokes right in everybody’s living room.”

Thinking of television as “everybody’s living room” was, as the directors, writers, and actors of live TV drama (and, yes, Hefner) had understood, the key that opened the medium to the greatest number of viewers. When Jack Paar had become the host of NBC’s late-night show in 1957, he sensed that a television program could escort urbane, adult conversation into American homes if it recognized that “most people were watching it in bed or in their dens.” Although all-talk programs existed at the time, the “talk show” had yet to take shape as a recognizable genre. “There was no format,” Paar insisted forty years later. “I did the only thing you could do: get a desk, and try and find witty people and start something called a conversation show.” At the same time, his late-night predecessor at NBC, Steve Allen, was also experimenting with the boundaries of broadcast talk on his weekly prime time show, which ran from 1956 to 1961. In 1959, Allen, a champion of free speech, had told his audience that “once a month, we will book a comedian who will offend everybody … a man who will disturb a great many social groups watching right now.” His first “offensive” guest was Lenny Bruce, who delivered a riff on the nature of offensiveness (“‘Offend,’ there’s a funny thing …. There are words that offend me. Let’s see, ’Governor Faubus, ‘segregation’ offend me. Night-time television offend me — some night-time television. The shows that exploit homosexuality, narcotics, prostitution under the guise of helping the societal problem.”)

From 1957 to 1962, Paar brought eclectic groups of celebrities and eccentric artists together for almost two hours every weekday simply to talk. Paar would be followed in 1962 by Johnny Carson, but by
then television talk — serious talk — was abundant, especially on Richard Heffner’s *Open Mind*, David Susskind’s *Open End*, and *The Irv Kupcinet Show*. Paar and Allen had made literate conversation not only glamorous for much of America but also, in some ways, normal. The ongoing presence of ironic, informed discussion in living rooms, dens, and bedrooms installed “talk” in the soundscape of domestic life during the height of Cold War tensions and resistance to civil rights. Having only three or sometimes four channels available, television viewers, whatever their politics, found urbane discourse about controversial subjects hard to avoid.

In a telling exchange on the afternoon of the March on Washington, Marlon Brando signaled an awareness that the influence of television had begun to eclipse that of the movies. Asked by a reporter from the Educational Radio Network whether “people like you could make an ever greater contribution if more of the products turned out by the movie makers in Hollywood concerned controversial social questions like the race question,” Brando responded by deflecting the responsibility from movie makers to talk show hosts. “People like Johnny Carson, Jack Paar, Steve Allen, David Susskind,” he said, “are interested in presenting this point of view fairly and using their good offices and programs for a revelation of little known facts about this issue to be brought before the court of American society.” When pressed to disclose whether they would express “their personal values as well,” Brando vouched for their politics: “Jack Paar has expressed himself to me about that. Johnny Carson has given support to this. Steve Allen certainly has great interest in this.”

By 1963, “the court of American society” could indeed be found in front of the television screen — a more advantageous position, from the perspective of the civil rights movement, than most jury boxes and judge’s benches. After more than a decade of habituating viewers to the look and sound of American behavior, television found itself encouraged by the Kennedy administration and viewers themselves to move closer to its subjects. As live drama gave way to recorded performance, its emotional frankness was supplanted by the observational intimacy of verité-inspired documentaries, which, too, would fade from prime-time programming in several years. No genre, however, could offer greater cultural candor than the talk show, and its influence showed no sign of waning. From the early 1950s to the summer of 1963, television talk had been steadily attuning listeners to the unrehearsed rhythms of black and white discourse and acclimating.

viewers to the shape of an informally desegregated society, its “good offices and programs” laying significant groundwork for the reception of the march as a broadcasting success.

In crucial ways, the unfolding of the March on Washington could not have been better suited to the constraints and liberties of live television. Both the procession from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial and the official program of events on the steps of the memorial were timed to the minute to ensure that marchers could leave Washington before nightfall. The possibility of any number of disasters shadowed the organizers until the end of the event: the embarrassment of a small turnout, the provocation of violence by segregationists, the inadequacy of the audio system, disorderly conduct by anyone, the failure of buses and cars to leave the city carrying all marchers. Going “off-script” could, in the eyes of the event’s major directors, derail the production, hence the last-minute rewriting of John Lewis’s “incendiary” speech behind the pillars of the Lincoln Memorial. On the other hand, improvisation could energize and redirect the narrative, as it did when Martin Luther King Jr., heeding Mahalia Jackson’s promptings to “tell them about the dream,” went off-script to chant what became the most famous words of August 28.

In the relief and exhilaration that evening of having helped to produce an almost flawless spectacle, the celebrity guests on Hollywood Roundtable showed how close the orchestration of the march might have come to upsetting the exquisite balance of tension and flexibility required of live television performances. With ninety seconds left in the program, host David Schoenbrun turned to James Baldwin to ask, “What’s the most important thing to be done by each and every one of us?” When Baldwin hesitated, Schoenbrun indicated the direction he had in mind: “I happen to think, just to give you an idea of what I’m getting at, that the most important thing at the moment now is jobs.” Not taking the prompt, Baldwin responded, “The American white republic has to ask itself why it was necessary for them to invent ‘the nigger,’” an idea he had articulated on talk shows earlier that year but hardly one that the U.S. government would have chosen as an internationally broadcast coda to the March on Washington.

Skillful orchestration of the march was not all that was needed to ensure its positive execution and reception on television, however. Three months earlier, Medgar Evers had delivered a 17-minute televised appeal in Jackson, Mississippi, for racial justice. Twelve days later, he was murdered in the driveway of his house, just hours after
President Kennedy had delivered his own televised address on civil rights. “It seems probable,” biographer Adam Nossiter claims, “that until his final month, Evers was an obscure figure to a majority of white Mississippians.” By stepping in front of the WLBT camera, he “had entered a new, ultimately fatal zone of notoriety.” Three months after the march, U.S. networks were broadcasting live, continuous footage of the funeral of John F. Kennedy when NBC interrupted its coverage to show Lee Harvey Oswald’s transfer from the Dallas jail. In the midst of a funeral, the network broadcast the first live murder in television history.

In 1963, the era of television’s celebratory role in documenting debates, rocket launchings, and inaugurations was drawing to a close. Increasingly it would be drawn to immediacy of a different kind — in Birmingham, Newark, Selma, Watts, Vietnam. Poised midway between Evers’s fateful television appearance in May 1963 and the doubly morbid broadcasts in November 1963, the March on Washington seems all the more remarkable for having navigated the straits of this “ultimately fatal zone of notoriety” to leave the most sustained record of the civil rights movement’s fullest presence “in the moment.”

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