



IN ONE SENSE at least, the General Election provided a surprise, though its result did not. Anyone who ignored the television version of the election campaign, or the predictions of the polls, and simply remembered the events of last winter, when during the worst weather for many years the public was subjected to continuous harassment by the trade unions, could not have had any doubt that the unions and their allies, the Labour Party, would be defeated. People have short memories, but not as short as all that. They do not easily forget, or forgive, remarks like Mr Sidney Weighell's, adjuring the railwaymen in the event of a wages free-for-all "to get their snouts in the trough." Such specimens of trade-union eloquence, betraying as much contempt for his own union members as for the general public, simply confirmed the electorate in a hostility to the unions which, in my opinion, proved decisive in the final result.

One could hardly have guessed this from the election campaign itself, in which both parties were careful not to emphasise the trade union issue.

In this, they underestimated most people's feeling that the power of the unions has increased, is increasing, and ought to be reduced and seen to be reduced. Prices, wages, taxation they insisted were what affected people most closely, not trade unionism. In this way, for fear of giving offence to potential supporters, they delicately skirted the fringes of an issue which, I think, in the end most powerfully influenced the result.

This helped to intensify the general air of unreality which surrounded the campaign and perhaps to explain one of its most striking features, which was its apparent failure to arouse any passionate interest or sense of personal involvement. The people watched the campaign on television as they might watch a prolonged football match, or comedy series, and with rather less sense of spectator participation. In the event, there was almost as much interest in whether the BBC or ITV had won the television battle as in who had actually won the election. What was surprising, after the apathy and indifference displayed during the campaign itself, was the numbers in which, on polling day, the electorate took the trouble to go out and vote.

I talked to a cameraman belonging to a television

crew assigned to what he himself described as the intolerably boring task of tracking Mrs Thatcher day by day on her campaign tour. Not that it was Mrs Thatcher's fault; things were just as bad on the other side of the street. He explained how difficult it was for the camera to discover anything of interest in scenes to which the immediate audience appeared totally unresponsive. "On the same job", he said, "I have followed general elections in France and in Germany. In Paris, François Mitterand could fill the Palais des Sports which will hold ten thousand people. In Germany, when Walter Scheel addressed an open air meeting in drenching rain in a market town, the square was packed by a crowd which overflowed into all the neighbouring streets. Thatcher and Callaghan have difficulty in half-filling a small parish hall, which from the camera-eye point of view is strictly a non-event."

Is this another symptom of the "English disease", to which ENCOUNTER, together with so many foreign observers, has devoted considerable attention in recent years? It could be so; but it might also be that the apathy and indifference displayed by people in the course of the campaign itself were an inevitable result of the electoral process as it is conducted in Britain today. For by far the most powerful single influence exercised on that process is television, which profoundly affects the form, the style, and the content of an electoral campaign, to such an extent that general elections no longer perform the function which they once had, which was at recurrent intervals to bring the electors and their representatives into direct and immediate contact, so that each might see what kind of people they really were.

When I was a child my father often used to tell me how as a boy he watched Mr Gladstone addressing an unruly crowd from a brewer's dray in the East End of London. The memories of the Grand Old Man, passionate and patrician, and the turbulent mob, had left an ineffaceable impression on him, as an image of what politics really are or ought to be. But faced with daily and hourly exposure to the television camera could even Mr Gladstone have maintained his magical power to charm, to dominate and to persuade; and in such circumstances would there have been any turbulent mob to listen to him? Perhaps I should have said to my friend the cameraman that if, during an election campaign, it was difficult to find material for an interesting programme, he and his camera were at least partly to blame.

★

TELEVISION PRODUCERS might protest, in their own defence, that they command by far the

most effective medium ever invented for enabling statesmen and politicians to present themselves to a mass audience. It goes out into the streets and on to the hustings, and brings us back the reality of the political battle without our having to move from our fireside. Moreover, it does this on a scale which was never previously imaginable, and today is essential in a mass democracy exercising universal suffrage. Political techniques adapted to a privileged few enjoying a limited franchise no longer serve their purpose when politicians and parties must appeal to all and everybody, and television gives them the means of doing so.

But it is not really so. It is not with the direct reality of politics, or indeed of anything else, that television presents us. It necessarily, and literally, projects a screen between us and reality, and what it shows us has already been pre-digested, selected, cut, modified and manipulated to serve the purposes of a medium designed to attract the largest possible number of people, that is, to the lowest common denominator of their intelligence. Politicians and parties appeal for votes, television for ratings, and the two purposes conflict. Television projects, not a reality, but an illusion of reality, and thereby the real life of politics is obscured and drained away.

Television may claim that, in its presentation of public affairs, it employs different methods and techniques, and pursues different aims, from when it is merely seeking to entertain. And moreover that it presents us with a far wider spectrum of events than anything we could ever attain by any other means. Yet its fundamental purpose remains the same, which is to hold us, immobile and passive, in front of the box.

IT MAY PERHAPS be inferred from what I have just written that I look on television with a somewhat jaundiced eye, and thereby disqualify myself from any serious discussion of the subject. In the hope, however, of removing or modifying my prejudices, and enlarging my view, I have been reading a short but fascinating book about American television by Mr Ben Stein called *The View from Sunset Boulevard*.¹

I feel sure that Mr Stein's view can be accepted all the more readily because he himself regards those responsible for producing television programmes with admiration, affection, and respect, and is quite sincere in his freely confessed ambition to become one of them himself. As he says:

"I would consider this book wasted if it were not read with the same love for the people of

Hollywood that I have felt since I got here. Among the people I talked to for this book are the finest people alive.

When Mr Stein uses the phrase, "the people of Hollywood", he writes advisedly and deliberately, because, he says, the heart and vital centre of the television industry are the small community of producers and writers who are directly responsible for creating its twenty or so most successful programmes, some of which can expect to be watched, on any one night, by up to seventy million people. The members of the community do not number more than about two hundred people, on whom the television industry depends for its most successful products. With few exceptions, they all live in Los Angeles; they earn upwards of \$250,000 a year, and the annual income of some of them runs into millions of dollars.

Mr Stein, who has been a teacher, a government servant, a journalist and novelist, now wishes to join this highly privileged group which he admires so much. He has had the interesting idea that it might help him in his new career if he were to investigate the community of "the people of Hollywood", in order to try and discover how far their own views and attitudes are reflected in the television industry's most successful enterprises. His enquiry took the form of interviewing a large and representative number of the industry's most successful producers and writers, with results which are in some cases startling, and nearly always disconcerting.

The range of products which "the people of Hollywood" are responsible for creating is a narrow one, and can be divided into two characteristic and classical forms. The first is the adventure-thriller, of which some, like *Kojak*, *Hawaii 5-0*, *Colombo*, *Charlie's Angels* and others, are familiar to British television audiences; the second is the domestic situation comedy series, or "Sit-Com", like *M.A.S.H.*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *All in the Family*, or *Happy Days*. The common quality of this second type of programme is that it presents what Mr Stein calls the "lovable high jinks" of a group, lower or lower-middle class, black and white, and also lovable, with which audiences of millions find it easy to identify. On the whole, we in Britain prefer to produce our own indigenous version of this kind of rubbish for ourselves.

Mr Stein finds that both these types of phenomenally successful programme present certain rigidly stereotyped images of America, to such an extent that they are an essential element in any smash-hit. One of the most rigid of these stereotypes is the image presented of the Rich, and of Big Business in general. Big Business in American television is invariably corrupt, vicious and greedy, and lives by exploiting the poor. It has

¹ *The View from Sunset Boulevard*. By BEN STEIN. Basic Books, \$8.95.

close and extensive connections with the underworld, and is largely dominated by the Mafia, which invests its huge ill-gotten gains in the most prestigious blue-chip enterprises. When, as so often in the adventure-thriller, like *Colombo*, the seedy but honest cop is called upon to investigate some particularly horrid murder, it is almost invariably discovered to have been committed by some prodigiously rich and successful businessman concealing his evil designs, financial or sexual, beneath a cloak of impeccable respectability. Big Business in television is Bad Business and the Rich, its beneficiaries, are necessarily evil.

Just as business and riches are Bad, so the poor and poverty are Good. The antithesis of the wicked rich are the poor but honest, in adventure-thrillers frequently unjustly accused of crimes they have never committed, in "sit-coms" displaying the virtues of warm hearts, generosity and neighbourliness, and an unaffected gusto and spontaneity in the simple pleasures of life, as opposed to the sophisticated depravity of the rich. When, in *The Streets of San Francisco*, a beautiful co-ed is found brutally murdered on the campus, the obvious suspects are a Chicano on parole for a violent crime and a student junkie who is having an affair with the wife of a medical professor, but in fact the killer is the victim's rich Lesbian roommate, who has murdered her out of jealousy.

The virtues of the poor are displayed especially by the young and ethnic minorities.

"In the thousands of hours I have spent watching adventure shows [says Mr Stein] I have never seen a major crime committed by a poor, teenage, Mexican or Puerto Rican youth, even though they account for a high percentage of violent crime."

A similar antithesis to Rich and Poor is to be found in the view from Los Angeles of Big City and Small Town. Despite its outward manifestations of violence, Big City is the home of virtue because it is the home of the poor, and its festering slums and ghettos preserve the warm-hearted humanity characteristic of the poor. The Rich do not live in Big City but hide their depravity in the seclusion of their country houses and out-of-town estate developments. Big City is generous, outgoing, with an intense zest for life and a metropolitan disdain for whatever is parochial and provincial. Crime does indeed flourish there, but the poor cannot be blamed for this, because in their case, unlike the rich, crime is the product of social conditions.

By contrast, Small Town, wherever it is situated, is the apotheosis of parochial vices. It is hypocritical, mean and narrow-minded, capable of every kind of petty trickery, deceit and sexual perversion; behind a façade of puritanism, respectability, and pretty timber-frame houses and churches, it is a festering hotbed of vice and corrup-

tion. The innocent from Big City needs to have all his wits about him when he enters Small Town. When Kojak, the big, smart, wiseacre New York detective, is sent to investigate a crime in Small Town he finds himself thwarted and hampered at every turn by the corrupt local police force, and in the end is lucky to get away with his life before the crime is solved. Small Town is Snopestown.

MR STEIN PURSUES his enquiry into many other aspects of the View from Sunset Boulevard, though in none does he find such dramatically clear-cut contrasts as between Rich and Poor, Big City and Small Town. But in all he finds attitudes at work which run contrary to generally accepted views of American life, and even more to the image of America propagated by traditional folk-culture, and with none of its roots in history or present-day reality. Indeed, he concludes that for traditional folk-attitudes "the people of Hollywood" are rapidly substituting a new folk-culture of their own devising. What is surprising, and perhaps dismaying, is that this should be the work almost entirely of the tiny TV community of Los Angeles. But what is more surprising, even startling, is that (as Mr Stein's interviews show) this new popular culture accurately reflects the ideas and attitudes of those who are in process of creating it. It would be easy to think that the totally false picture of American life which they project on the screen is merely a cynical attempt to exploit the feelings of their nation-wide audience. The contrary, rather, seems to be true. "The people of Hollywood" genuinely and sincerely, crudely and naively, believe in the illusion which they have created for themselves and, through the TV screen, project on hundreds of millions of others.

I am not sure what lessons, if any, one should draw from this. Mr Stein himself suggests that his interviews in Hollywood provide a number of problems and paradoxes. Perhaps his final words are worth considering:

"It is not that it is good or bad that the views of the TV community get the prominent display they do. I have certain opinions which are undoubtedly revealed in this book, but I have no overall feeling that something terrible is happening. In a free society, different groups will obtain power over different institutions at different times. Certainly the government should do nothing about it. But then again, no one should be stopped from pointing out what has happened in Hollywood."

One can only thank Mr Stein for pointing out what has happened so clearly, moderately and effectively. But I am not at all sure that I remain as optimistic as he does.

R

Peter Porter

At Lake Massaciuccoli

*Ecco il lago Massaciuccoli
tanto ricco di cacciagione
quanto misero d'ispirazione . . .*
D'ANNUNZIO

A huge bombardment on the lake's long plain
As green worlds collide and skim above
The oily surface—visible to us only
As a dust of spume and green confetti
Where small frogs jackknife on to lily-pads—
Tall rushes begin beyond the rotting jetty
And over their grave heads an oriental bridge
Leads nowhere. Toffee-coloured heat
Holds the outdoor café and the pampered villas,
A stain of rice-fields in the middle distance—
Indiscreet lemons lean across the road
To naturalise the noonday tide of cars:
Italy still fights its history
With engines. Where, though, I ask myself
Are the descendants of those ducks Puccini shot
With all the skill of a Ferrari engineer,
Where the ghost of that armed man wading
“To terrorise the palmipeds of his adoration”?
Boom. Boom. Fall of the executioner's axe,
The cancer surgeon's scalpel, the gong
Which announces that death's challenge
Has been taken up. Eighty cigarettes a day—
Pilgrims waiting at the gates observe
The lung-coloured lake. *L'homme armé*
Goes too far back, and yet walled Lucca
Has a league of high composers no less
Pungent than Castruccio. Putting on his waders,
He might think of art, of facing the public
Armed with the visible part of dreams. Disappointment,
For all his calculation to a quaver's whisper,
Leaves him no resort but slaughtering ducks.
No one produces the art he wants to,
Everything that he makes is code,
To be read for its immaculate intention.
Then in death he finds the final disappointment,
That no clarity comes anywhere, the perfect
Vision has gone into the mist, as when dawn
Wakens the wet-winged skimmers on the lake
And every hazy lineament lures the hunter
Into a picture-postcard world. *O mors inevitabilis*,
Not to be held back by more than function,
A pot of Stephens' Blue Black Ink, a gale
All night among the pines and yet no air
Upon our planet—nothing so well observed
As pain, apotheosis of things out of place.