

TELEVISION

This year's model

“**T**here are only seven original plots,” Aaron Spelling once explained. “You try to do them with style and moderation.” And if you’re Spelling—the most prolific and commercially successful television producer in history, the auteur responsible for *The Mod Squad*, *Charlie’s Angels*, *Starsky and Hutch* and *Dynasty*—you boil those seven original plots down still further, to extract from them the philosopher’s stone of network broadcasting: a formula to turn trash into gold. Typically, Spelling’s programs have been populated with attractive people who (1) are affluent, (2) have exciting jobs, and/or (3) live out their fantasies. In short, he has made a career of showing people what they want, but haven’t got.

Aaron Spelling, the king of unreality programming, turns his sights on the Hobbesian world of high fashion.

By Scott McLemee

Of course, not every experiment has been a success. The alchemy worked with *The Love Boat*, *Fanta-*

sy Island and *Hart to Hart*. But a finicky public withheld its esteem from *San Pedro Beach Burns*. And nurses were outraged at *Nightingales*—a show that (as industry legend has it) Spelling sold to a network executive in a parking lot with this one-line description: “Student nurses in Dallas in the summer and the air conditioners aren’t working, so they sweat a lot.”

For a brief period in the early ’90s, Spelling’s programs disappeared from the prime-time schedule. His old productions thrived in syndication, but Spelling’s imaginary universe was crowded out of the evening network broadcasts by so-called “reality programming.” In interviews, he always refers to these actorless, unscripted programs with distaste. With admirable candor, Spelling has labeled his own creations “cotton candy for the mind.” The man is no snob; but the endless flow of tabloid “news” programs and cops-with-videocams shows offends him.

So there are layers of irony to his recent comeback. When Spelling returned to prime time—first with *Beverly Hills, 90210*, then shortly after that with *Melrose Place*—it was on Fox, the network most responsible for “reality” programming. No one would confuse *90210* or *Melrose* with naturalistic grit: they are prime-time fantasies of togetherness among the young and beautiful. Yet the extraordinary popularity of these programs has had something to do with objective social processes. The 71-year-old Spelling admits he is “very intrigued” with the younger generation, and the Lollapalooza-niks have returned his fascination. But few, if any, would recognize the name of the *eminence gris* behind these series.

It is tempting to regard *Models Inc.*—the latest installment of Spelling’s youth chronicles—as merely another variation on a successful theme. Once again, we have a set of uniformly good-looking young people in Southern California, their lives interlocked, romantically and otherwise, in a sort of mini-community. The high school students in *Beverly Hills* all look like models (indeed, models in their late 20s). So, for that matter, do the denizens of *Melrose Place*. And Spelling himself acknowledges the resemblance of *Models Inc.* to the other shows in his Wednesday-night dynasty: “I’m changing the title,” he told an interviewer. “How much more creative do you want me to be?” But *Beverly Hills* and *Melrose Place* seem virtually to be PBS documentaries by contrast with *Models Inc.*—a fantastic (as in “dreamlike”) account of life in the fashion industry. In its first episodes, the virginal, corn-fed Sarah joins an agency presided over by the motherly (but managerial) Hillary Michaels. As perhaps befits a woman named Hillary in this day and age, Ms. Michaels is a post-feminist entrepreneur. She defines her

essence neatly enough in the first episode: "You hear that I'm tough, that I built Models Inc. from scratch, that I'm the kind of woman who gets what she wants, and absolutely *hates* to lose." Her other employees/surrogate daughters include Julie (scheming), Linda (low self-esteem), Carrie (not getting any younger) and Terri (Carrie's little sister, poised for super-model status).

The plot twist of the debut episode was kept tightly under wraps, lest reporters spoil it for everyone. But now the truth may be told: During a party in her honor, Terri falls from a very high floor of the building. Her death effectively creates a vacuum within the agency, into which Sarah (the naïf) is rapidly drawn. It also generates a mystery: was she murdered? Well, no. But she *did* scuffle with her sister just before plunging, accidentally, to the street below. This key fact is revealed in the second episode, along with information regarding an illegitimate baby and much else besides.

It is, in short, a soap opera—which we might define here as a genre in which the creation and distribution of secrets form the characters' main preoccupation. Modeling itself counts for little in the narrative. The characters might be stewardesses—or sweaty nursing students—for all the difference it makes. Yet *Models Inc.* has an almost mathematical elegance: because it is set in the world of fashion modeling, the show reveals a maximum quantity of bare skin with the minimum convolution of the story-line. The plot does not merely permit young women to disrobe every 15 minutes; it practically demands that they do so.

Now (I should hasten to add) Aaron Spelling is, by his own account, a kind of feminist. He has insisted over the years that *Charlie's Angels* was a reflection of the women's movement (which perhaps explains why they wore those particular halter tops). Presumably his good intentions explain a conspicuous difference between the genders in the new program. With *Models Inc.*, the women all bear some kind of burden, some painful memory or history of abuse—all of them but innocent Sarah, who is due to get hers presently. By contrast, the men are all either dull or rat-bastards.

Worst of all is Eric, boyfriend of Linda (low self-esteem)—a slacker Svengali with a wolf tattoo on his shoul-

der, whose chief activities are playing guitar and saying things like, "Damn it, Linda, you can't afford to blow any opportunity. I need the cash for my demo." And in one memorable scene of twisted intimacy, he purrs: "Who looks after you, baby? Who knows you better than anyone? Who would you die for?" (With this, I suspect, the script writers are trying a bit of foreshadowing.)

In a way, *Models Inc.* is the antithesis of Spelling's other post-boomer dramas. The appeal of *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Melrose Place* doubtless comes from the projection, in each, of a little utopia: the close-knit world of the high school clique or the cozy apartment complex. Things look altogether nastier within *Models Inc.* (even though the program is a direct spin-off of *Melrose*). The modeling agency seems to be a war of all against all. People are vain or parasitic; their careers, a zero-sum game which somebody has to lose.

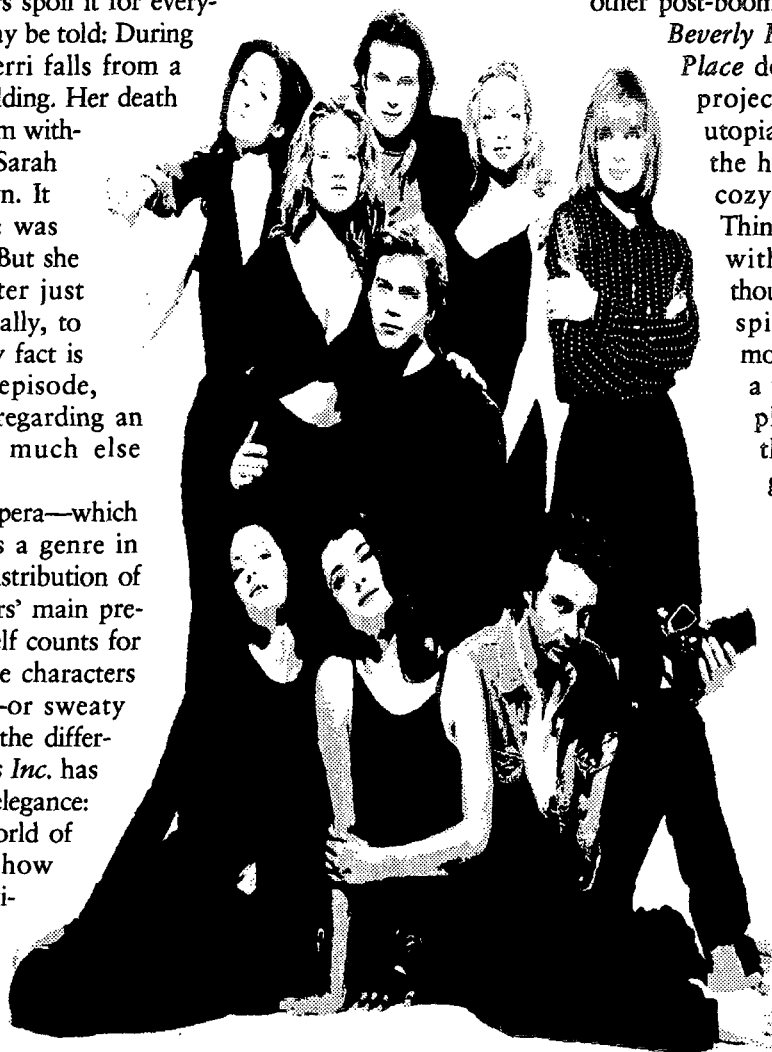
Perhaps that nastiness is as close to realism as Spelling is willing to let the program get. Melodrama may be the closest approximation to the lived experiences of the models themselves.

No doubt, an earnest effort to portray the world of modeling would be the most subversive program in the history of television. It would reveal how the whole ideology of glamour is produced and circulated within

the advertising market; how women are (quite literally) "fashioned" into images that are then attached to commodities.

But then, would the Coca-Cola Corp. have tied in its \$350 million summer advertising campaign with any series that pushed the envelope too far? The fate of the women in *Models Inc.* is the fate of the show itself: to bring the consumer to the consumer goods. Thanks to that fact, no program on prime-time network television will ever portray the guys who really manipulate the models—guys who could probably teach Eric a thing or two. ◀

Scott McLemee writes regularly on culture and politics for *In These Times*.



I N P R I N T

Art and anger

By Ilan Stavans

Alberto Manguel, the editor and translator, once divided writers into two groups: those who perceive a single corner of the world as their entire universe, and those who look everywhere in the universe for a place called home. Judith Ortiz Cofer and Cherríe Moraga, new American female voices with a Hispanic ancestry, exemplify the opposition between the particularists and the universalists—the one introspective and self-possessed; the other outspoken, her writing meant to unsettle.

Ortiz Cofer, born in 1952 in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, writes delicate, carefully shaped poetry and prose. She believes that literature doesn't need to come to us as a shock. Instead, it should deliver its recreation of what Gershom Scholem once called "a plastic moment," an instant in life in which a single insight might provoke a whole re-evaluation of our worldview.

She assumes her writing life fully, and without apology. In her essay "5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual," Ortiz Cofer says: "Since that first morning in 1978 when I rose in the dark to find myself in a room of my own—with two hours belonging only to me ahead of me, two prime hours when my mind was still filtering my dreams—I have not made or accepted too many excuses for not writing. This apparently ordinary choice, to get up early and to work every day, forced me to come to terms with the discipline of art." An unequivocal particularist, as well as a transcendentalist in the 19th-century sense of the term, she may well be the most important Hispanic writer in English today, the one who will happily leave behind ethnic writing to insert herself and her successors in a truly universal literature, one that is neither apologetic nor falsely "representative." She has no national or racial vanity. In that sense, Ortiz Cofer is the most American of Latino writers. Like Thoreau, she is a writer intoxicated with the personal, enamored with a democracy that leaves the individual alone to struggle with

internal demons. Like Emerson, her poetry is her faith.

Her novel, *The Line of the Sun*, chronicling the years from the Depression to the '60s, is sweet and amorphous. Her autobiographical essays, particularly "Silent Dancing," about growing up in Paterson, N.J., are touching and impressive. Her Puerto Ricanness is neither intrusive nor exclusive. I once heard Ortiz Cofer address the questions most frequently put to her: If you consider yourself a Puerto Rican writer, why do you write in English? And, what are you doing living in Georgia? "This is what being a Puerto Rican means to me," she answered unequivocally. "To claim my heritage, to drink the life-giving *aguas buenas*, to eat the mango fruit of the knowledge of good and evil that grows in the Borinquen of my grandmother's tales. And also, to claim the language of my education, English, as well as the culture and literature of the country my parents chose as home for me. To claim both places. And so I plant my little writer's flag on both shores. There are exclusivists that would try to coerce me to take sides. I do not find that I need to make such decision any more than Isaac Bashevis Singer needed to give up being Jewish when he wrote his universal stories. ... My books are neither Puerto Rican immigrant history nor sociological case studies."

Moraga, on the other hand, understands literature as sister to politics. Born in Whittier, Calif., (also in 1952), she puts art at the service of anger. "Sometimes when I write," she notes, "I feel I am drawing from the most silent place in myself—a place without image, word, shape, sound—to create a portrait of la Mechicana before the 'Fall,' before shame, before betrayal, before Eve, Malinche and Guadalupe; before the occupation of Aztlán, *la llegada de los españoles*, the Aztecs' War of Flowers." In her eyes, the writer's odyssey is a journey of social discovery and commitment, a text is a *j'accuse*. Moraga recognizes the cosmic forces constantly affecting our behavior. Our sexuality, our self, our schizophrenic identity—all have to be reclaimed, remastered, rearticulated, repossessed. Thus, to write is to recognize ourselves as ideological animals. She writes



The Latin Deli
By Judith Ortiz Cofer
University of Georgia Press
172 pp., \$19.95

The Last Generation
By Cherríe Moraga
South End Press
197 pp., \$14