**Video Script**

**Lecture 21: Film Stars & Quiz Shows on Early TV**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

We spent a few lectures during earlier weeks of this course considering what stars meant to the nascent film industry. But regardless of the image Hollywood produced for them—whether they were America’s sweetheart like Mary Pickford or a snake-eating ghoul like Theda Bara—film stars were larger than life. Literally so—people consumed the images of movie stars projected on big screens in dark theaters, but also figuratively so. They had scandals, they were glamorous, they were rich, and they were *not* like us.

Today we’re going to investigate whether that model of stardom works on television. Are TV stars like movie stars? Or does the new medium and its new programming produce a new flavor of celebrity?

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**Review**

But before we jump in, a little quiz show-themed review for you? Play along at home.

Answer: Evidence presented by a high school chemistry teacher let Philo Farnsworth triumph over this media manufacturer in a court battle over television patents.

**Trebek**

**[ANIMATION]** Who is RCA? Remember, you must answer in the form of a question or you will be disqualified.

**Review**

Answer: This unethical financial practice got its name from bankers who drew on maps around neighborhoods they would not invest in based on demographics alone.

**Trebek**

**[ANIMATION]** What is redlining.

**Review**

Answer: This was a fear people had about the effects of television during the 1940s and 1950s.

**Trebek**

**[ANIMATION]** We will accept: pale, bug-eyed weak little children, violent kids, radioactivity, poor eyesight, undercutting dad’s authority, and/or lazy moms.

**Stoves**

On that last bit, I wanted to quickly show you these images I found of a potential solution to the “problem” of moms so obsessed with television they refuse to do their housework. For a moment in the 1950s, they tried to sell ovens with televisions in them! Mom could watch television *while* she roasted the turkey and…flipped the burgers? What is this woman on the left *making*? Ah yes, that classic American meal: turkey and burgers.

On the right, a similar product. Here, they make an argument that having a television in the stove would allow women to follow along with televised cooking segments more easily, which, knowing how many times I’ve gotten my iPhone covered in pesto or cake flour while following a recipe, makes a little more sense to me.

**Review**

And finally: this agency froze licenses for all new television stations between 1948 and 1952.

**Trebek**

**[ANIMATION]** What is the FCC, Alex?

Okay, everyone feeling up to speed and invigorated by the majesty of Trebek’s 1980s mustache? Let’s move on to new business and think about television and stardom. And in fact, Alex Trebek is a great bridge into that discussion. This condescending Canadian *is* a television star. He’s an icon of the quiz show genre.

**Cameos**

He’s famous enough to have appeared as himself on shows like *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons,* and Will Ferrell performed a celebrated impression of him for years in recurring sketches on *Saturday Night Live*

He’s a bonafide star—but a *television* star. If we love Alex Trebek it’s because he’s beamed into our homes five nights a week, and some of us have played along with Jeopardy! since we were children. It’s a kind of fame built on *familiarity,* not on glamour or mystery or being larger than life—all the hallmarks of film fame of the twentieth century.

**Stars**

There are some cultural *and* academic assumptions we used to make about television stars. For many years, there was this sort of belief that television was where film actors went to die, or else it was filled with performers who couldn’t hack it in the film industry. Television was generally seen as less prestigious than film—although I think that belief has changed somewhat in the last decade or so, with the proliferation of the prestige television drama and also high-budget limited series like *Little Fires Everywhere*, *Watchmen,* and so on.

**Becker article**

Dr. Christine Becker, a media scholar, tried to settle the question of whether television and film were truly separate camps set in opposition to each other in an article from 2005 called “Televising Film Stardom.” In it, she looked back at historical publications, interviews, and other sources from the 1950s to try to discern the contours of how stars and audiences viewed the new medium of television in relationship to what was then the very established Hollywood film industry.

**[ANIMATION]** What Dr. Becker finds is that film stars were generally wary of television in its early years. They feared that no one would come to the movies at all if they could see stars in television shows at home, for free. They also feared overexposure. Would people get sick of a star if they could see them all the time?

**Oscars**

By 1953, the film industry began to come around a little bit. They started to see television as a promotional partner, at least. Film stars would do some television press to promote their films, and that was the year of the first Oscars telecast as well. The host, Bob Hope, did a whole extended riff that gives you some insight into how the film industry saw this new medium.

**Quote**

He joked **[ANIMATION]:** *“…this is indeed a wedding of two great entertainment mediums: motion pictures and television. And with Oscar at 25 years old, it’s high time he got married. While it’s true that he has a child bride, it’s a comfort to note that the kid is loaded. In fact, the bride’s father is picking up the tab for this wedding reception.”* What he’s saying there is that television is a cash cow! And that NBC was picking up the tab for the whole fancy ceremony just so they could air it.

He goes on to joke that housewives across the country would be telling their husbands to put on a nice shirt because Joan Crawford, an A-list star of the 1940s and 1950s, would be “in their homes,” highlighting the rarity of seeing such a famous face on television. And he even jokes that television is where “movies got to die,” a nod to that anxiety that film stars felt about having their work on a supposedly inferior medium.

**Becker, continued**

As the 1950s progressed, **[ANIMATION]** Dr. Becker finds that some film stars were happy to use the more prestigious forms of television broadcasting as a way to supplement their income. This included things like teleplays (a.k.a TV movies), specials, and anthology dramas like CBS Studio One, which you watched last week. They weren’t all popping up on *I Love Lucy*, like you see Rock Hudson doing here on the left, but many stars *were* able to act on television in ways that didn’t tarnish their film brand.

**[ANIMATION]** It was really only the most elite film stars who resisted television, she finds. Katharine Hepburn, for example, an enormous film star of the era, didn’t do anything on television until the 1970s, and even then it was just a few high prestige television movies.

**[ANIMATION]** What Becker concludes is that television produced a *different* kind of star. Film stars weren’t always suited to the medium, and television stars weren’t always suited for film, either. Television needed performers who could communicate *intimacy* and *authenticity*—the kind of people you’d want to have in your home.

**Ida Lupino**

A great example that illustrates the difference between film stardom and television stardom is Ida Lupino. Lupino had a fascinating career in Hollywood. She was an actress, starring in dramas and noirs like 1941’s *High Sierra*. As the film critic Kristen Lopez wrote, Lupino played “tough dames, villains, romantic idols, and noirish femme fatales.” Lupino was also a director—her 1953 film *The Hitch-Hiker* was one of the only mid-century film noirs directed by a woman.

**Mr. Adams and Eve**

When Lupino made the jump to television, though, she did not bring along the gritty persona for which she was known on the big screen. She and her real-life actor husband Howard Duff instead starred in a goofy, lightly fictionalized domestic sit-com called *Mr. Adams and Eve*, where they played (surprise!) a married film star couple. Even though they were supposed to be very famous, the characters they played on television were portrayed as everyday people—they got into scrapes, had mix-ups, bummed around the house, and behaved like people in every other family sit-com you’ve ever seen. The fun of the show was seeing film stars at home, just like you, instead of up on the screen.

**Review**

That’s if there was any fun to be had with *Mr. Adams and Eve* at all. **[ANIMATION]** I took a peek through some contemporaneous sources to see what people were saying about the show at the time and, as you can see here, this review from the New York Times in 1957 calls it mediocre and threadbare. So, not a rave.

**[ANIMATION]** I was also able to find this *TV Guide* cover which I think is fascinating.. Look at the composition of this photograph. It’s so zoomed in on Lupino and Duff that you can practically see up their noses—but that’s so different from how you would see them on the big screen! It’s like the photo is explaining how close television can bring you to a star.

So—to recap, television and film had a tense but somewhat symbiotic relationship as television grew throughout the 1950s. And film stars often had to adapt their personas when they did television work, because television valued stars that seemed authentic and accessible. Weirdly, that last bit takes us into our discussion of quiz shows.

**Quiz Shows**

**[ANIMATION]** Quiz shows became and remain popular television programming because **[ANIMATION]** they can make stars out of authentic, relatable, everyday people. We get to see contestants’ personalities through game shows and, as we play along, we can root for or against them. Everyday people with extraordinary abilities are sort of the perfect combination for television stardom—they’re just like us, but they’re also somehow fantastic.

There are lots of other reasons why quiz shows became popular in early television. Give yourself a second and try to think of some….

…okay, do you have some guesses? **[ANIMATION]** Well, in the first place, they’re cheap to produce! You only need one set, and very few regular performers.

They’re also engaging, as content goes. Viewers can play along at home but doing so requires a certain amount of attention paid to the show—it’s hard to half-watch a program that’s constantly asking you questions. That undivided attention makes sponsors happy.

They reinforce the American Dream ideology. By that, I mean that they take everyday people who, by a combination of brains, decision-making, and luck, get to make it big. Quiz shows are meritocratic in a way that jibes with a lot of stories America believes about itself.

And finally, the shows manufacture their own drama. If you have a really good contestant, the tension of when they might finally lose is a compelling narrative.

**The 64,000 Question**

There were lots of different quiz shows on the air in the early 1950s. This is a view of the set of *The $64,000 Question*, sponsored prominently by Revlon. *The $64,000 Question* was one of those shows that migrated to television from the radio. It was a pretty simple quiz show—you were asked questions of increasing difficulty for lower prize money, and you moved on to harder questions. The structure was a lot like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, if you’ve seen that show.

The difference was that after answering the $4,000 question correctly, a contestant was assigned a category. You got to go home and study, and come back the next week to answer one really difficult question about that category.

In 1955, a young female psychology student named Joyce Brothers was doing really well as a contestant. Maybe *too* well. The show gave her the category of *boxing*. But, lo and behold, she managed to answer the $64,000 boxing question and became the first woman ever to win the show.

**Joyce Brothers**

Interestingly, she went on to become one of our first television psychologists. Shegave mental health advice on the airwaves for *years*, decades before Dr. Phil.

**Dotto**

Another game show was Dotto, which was gamified connect the dots. Contestants got lines and clues by answering trivia questions, and you won by identifying the portrait—the one in this ad is Bob Hope, the comedian who hosted the Oscars in that 1953 telecast at the top of the lecture.

**Twenty-one**

But perhaps the most famous, or should we say *infamous* 1950s quiz show was *Twenty-One,* sponsored by Geritol, a vitamin supplement. Contestants answered trivia questions from inside isolation booths, where they supposedly couldn’t hear anything, including how the other contestant is doing. You needed to get 21 points of trivia questions right, and you could gamble a bit and bet that you did better than the other contestant.

*Twenty-One* went on the air in 1956. The ratings were in the toilet. As a game shows went, it was boring, and the sponsor, Geritol, was pissed.

**Herb Stempel**

And so, producers began manipulating the show. A few months in, they’d engineered the game so the reigning champ is this guy, Herb Stempel. I have a weird soft spot for Herb, I’m just gonna put that out there. Herb didn’t grow up with much. He’s the son of a single mom and they never had much money, but he was always really bright. He went to college on the GI Bill, but when he got to *Twenty-One* he’s working in a post office in Forest Hills, Queens. Poor Herb wound up on the show because he wrote in to be a contestant, and he is genuinely a smart dude—the producers later called him “a freak with a sponge memory.” But instead of letting him play the game straight, they offer him $25,000 and a future job on another quiz show to help them rig *Twenty-One*.

In Herb’s own words, *“I had been a poor boy all my life, and I was sort of overjoyed, and I took it for granted that this was the way things were run on these programs ... I was stunned, I didn't know what to say ... I told him I would do it.”*

The producers shape his performance in such a way that he comes across as a human computer. He’s boring. He’s kind of awkward. He comes off like a know-it-all. The producers turn the air conditioning off in the isolation booth, so he looks all sweaty. And he keeps winning.

**Charles Van Doren**

Enter Charles Van Doren. He’s a college professor who comes from a line of intellectual bigwigs—his father is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, his mother is a famous novelist, and his uncle is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer. By 1950s television standards, this is a star. He’s not a *movie* star, but he’s telegenic and he’s interesting and he’s someone audiences want to root for.

The producers pit Van Doren against Stempel and arrange it so they tie in a series of games. The ratings jump like crazy. This is what I meant by quiz shows being able to produce narratives and drama, even though that’s not really the format of the show—people identify with or against the characters and they tune in to see what happens.

**Twenty-one clip**

During their final match-up, the producers tell Herb through his headphones that he’s got to throw the question you’re about to hear and lose the show.

**[Pause, play clip from 10:15 to 11:48]**

The reason why Herb is in my heart forever is because *Marty is his favorite movie.* Herb *loved “*Marty.” He saw it three times in theaters! And that’s the question he has to pretend not to know. So brutal.

As he explained the producers’ thinking, years later: *“This was supposed to be the twist of the Twenty-One program. In other words, the omniscient genius was supposed to know all the hard answers, but miss on the easy ones, because the public would figure one of two things. Either in his very, very erudite studies he had either glossed over this and missed it, or it was intended as a sop to the public at large to make them say, 'See, I knew the answer to this and the great genius, so and so, didn't.' That is about the effect of it.”*

**$122,000**

With the producers’ help, Van Doren wins that episode and reigns as champion for 14 weeks. People love him! When he finally loses, NBC gives him a three-year contract. He does a little bit of newswriting, but he pretty quickly stars working on the air on *The Today Show.* He was being groomed as a television personality.

**Covers**

Except Herb Stempel is out there, frigging’ *livid* about the whole thing. They made him pretend he didn’t know *Marty* on television, they didn’t give him the rest of the $25,000, and they didn’t give him that job like they were supposed to.

So, in 1957, Herb goes to the newspapers to say the show is rigged, but he has no proof and the article doesn’t run.

In 1958, though, *Dotto* is abruptly cancelled because a contestant found answers in another contestant’s notebook before the show. The producers were feeding her the answers.

This gives credibility to Stempel’s allegations and it begins to get some press—but Van Doren denies everything.

**Microphones**

Throughout 1958, more quiz shows are implicated in the scandal. *The $64,000 Q uestion* is guilty of letting the sponsor pick telegenic contestants and then giving them a category that would match their expertise, making it easier for them to stay on the show. Dr. Joyce Brothers is investigated, but she’s clean! She really did memorize all of those boxing facts.

So, Van Doren goes down. He goes from Quiz Champ to quiz cheat. He has to testify in front of a grand jury and in front of Congress. He lies to the grand jury and later admits it.

**News reel**

Here’s some footage of Van Doren testifying. **[PLAY CLIP]**

**Congress photo**

After this, Van Doren’s NBC contract is canceled. He resigns from Columbia University and becomes a book editor, spending the rest of his career with Encyclopedia Britannica. For years, he threw Herb under the bus in interviews, pinning the whole scheme on him.

Herb, on the other hand, spent his entire career working as a legal researcher for the New York City Department of Transportation. He made a little money as a consultant when Robert Redford made a movie out of the scandal called *Quiz Show*, but he didn’t much like John Turturro’s performance of him. You’ll read about that in Herb’s *Hollywood Reporter* obituary, your reading for this lecture.

Legally, the fallout from the quiz show scandals is that **[ANIMATION]** in 1960, Congress amended the Communications Act of 1934 to make it illegal to air any contest or game designed to deceive the audience.

Industrially, networks respond by putting a cap on game show prizes that remained in place until the 1990s. By lowering the stakes, it made it less likely producers or contestants would want to manipulate the results. Networks also ended single-advertiser control of programming. No longer would Revlon provide all the money for *The $64,000 Question*, which meant they got to say which contestants they liked or didn’t like. This was the beginning of the multi-company ad break, which we still have today.

**Herb**

The cultural effect of the quiz show scandals was phrased most simply and most eloquently by Herb Stempel himself. **[ANIMATION]** The quiz show scandals were “how America lost its innocence," he said. "People believed everything they saw on television. After the scandals, they didn't."

**Agnes Scott College team**

Even in the era after the prize pots were reduced, quiz shows still made for dramatic and sometimes even heroic television. The story of the 1966 Agnes Scott College *College Bowl Team* is one of my favorite TV stories.

The GE College Bowl was one of those replacement quiz shows where competitors didn’t win much money, but at least the game play was honest. In 1966, there was an unlikely and seemingly uneven matchup between Agnes Scott College, which is a very small, womens-only liberal arts school in Decatur, Georgia, and Princeton University, which at the time was still all male.

The Agnes Scott team studied for this show like a Rocky montage. Engineers at Agnes Scott built a countertop with electric doorbells in it to simulate the game show buzzers that they used while they practiced.

The Princeton team mostly drank at their professor’s house, pretty sure they were going to cream these ladies.

**Clip**

Cut to: the game being tight as hell. The Princeton team can’t shake Agnes Scott. These women were ready and they came for blood.

Let’s watch what happened.

I love that moment when you can hear the audience figure out that Karen Gearrald’s last answer—that Balmung and Durendal were swords—clinched the game for them. They’d won.

Now. What might not be clear from this clip is that Karen Gearrald, the woman who answered the last question, *is blind*. She couldn’t see the points or the timer throughout the entire game. Karen—and really, all of these women—are my *heroes*.

**Team**

**[ANIMATION]** Malinda Snow got a PhD and became a professor of English at Georgia State; **[ANIMATION]** Katherine Bell went on to get a PhD and become a professor of botany at the University of Nevada;

**[ANIMATION]** Betty Butler became an expert on reproductive health and worked in public health in post-war nations.

**[ANIMATION]** Karen Gearreald, College Bowl rock star, got her PhD at Harvard, a law degree at Duke, was a Navy lawyer for 20 years, and when she retired became a Braille music instructor and an adviser to the Library of Congress.

I love them. I love them *so much*.

But in summary—quiz shows might still make heroes, and they might occasionally make a star, but most importantly, they’re still subject to strict regulation after Herb Stemple blew the whistle on producer manipulation during the 1950s. And the resulting fallout changed the commercial model of television from one sponsor dominating a show to many sponsors, so none of them exert too much power.

I can personally attest to the strict regulation of shows because…

**Alex Trebek**

..I’ve been there! My backstage experience on the set of *Jeopardy!* highly regulated. We contestants *always* had production handlers with us, and the only time we interacted with the host or judges was when we were actually filming our episodes. Other than that, though, there’s little to tell you about my experience that hasn’t been said…

**Weird Al**

…by the Weird Al Yankovic classic “I Lost On Jeopardy.” But I’m happy to talk about it! Feel free to ask me anything you like over on the AMA board on Canvas.