

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Cantor, professor, University of Virginia

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I: High and Low Art on TV (00:15 – 20:30)

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol. And welcome back to Paul Cantor. We've had one conversation on Shakespeare, and now we're going to go from the high to the low, from Shakespeare to popular culture.

CANTOR: Ooh.

KRISTOL: You're going to correct me.

CANTOR: I resemble that remark.

KRISTOL: I'm wrong to even associate popular culture with the low, right? I am wrong, right? So explain.

CANTOR: Okay. The problem is that people identify certain media with popular culture as if television is simply popular culture and is low. My thesis is that in every medium, we have both the high and the low, whether it's drama, whether it's the novel, whether it's movies, whether it's television. And I would never question that there's a lot of low stuff on television. But I'd just say there are a lot of low things among Shakespeare's fellow dramatists and the same with the 19th-century novel and many of these other areas of culture.

What I object to is the identification of high and low with different media as if, let's say, the novel was high and television was inevitably low. I say we get the high and low in all different media, all different branches of culture.

KRISTOL: That's a good corrective and, in fact, though you've talked about a recent "Golden Age of Television." And you've even said that if Shakespeare were alive today, he might write for television.

CANTOR: Yes, I can't be sure of that. Judging by his financial transactions in real estate, he might have been an investment banker. But he worked in the equivalent of television in his day. People think that he wrote for academic audiences and that it was high culture to begin with.

There's an English actress, Janet McTeer, whom I always love to quote from an ill-advised interview where she was criticizing Hollywood, and she said, "If Shakespeare had to write for the commercial theater, he wouldn't have written the plays that he did." As if Shakespeare wrote for PBS or something, when in fact, he was the most successful commercial dramatist of his day. The majority of his works were produced for the commercial theater.

In his day, people thought high culture was poetry, especially epic poetry. So people like Edmund Spenser, John Milton – they dreamed of writing the great English epic. There are even signs in the early 1590s Shakespeare tried to take that route. The theaters were closed as they often were for plague, and he wrote a couple of fancy poems, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece* – Latin subjects, mythological subjects. He dedicated them to the Earl of Southampton. It looks as if he was trying to pursue the route of aristocratic patronage and get out of this dirty theater business.

The poems were actually quite successful. Many times reprinted. But, fortunately, he realized that drama was his medium and went back to the theater. And so instead of getting a lot of fairly good mythological poems, we got these great plays of Shakespeare because he really was in active contact with an audience. And my guess is if he were alive today, he would be attracted to television as his medium as probably the most inventive, creative medium we have at the moment.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I guess it is amazing. I mean, he was the greatest playwright – let's just stipulate – of all time or something like current times.

CANTOR: The greatest writer of any kind.

KRISTOL: But in terms of the plays – but he was also very popular, right? I mean, he was one of the most popular of his times.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: And that is a good rebuke—what's the word I'm looking for--a kind of reminder to some people who want to separate entirely what's popular from what's good. I mean, if you're really a great writer, often you have a knack to be both deep and popular.

CANTOR: Yeah, I mean, plays at that time were looked upon pretty much the way television is looked on up to now. And, in fact, there was not much interest in who wrote them. In fact, Shakespeare was the first person who got his name on the title page of a published play. I think it was around 1598. Because people suddenly realized he was a guy whose name sold. And there isn't a Hollywood screenwriter to this day whose name can sell movies. So Shakespeare was extraordinarily popular.

KRISTOL: And in terms of the medium – media, I guess – I guess film people would have acknowledged the 40s, 50s, 60s, that there's a high culture form of film and kind of just schlock stuff with something between. But some of the schlock stuff is better than you think. *Casablanca* was popular, but it's also a great movie. But TV, I think your argument is, and I think others have said –

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Television has sort of become that type of medium today.

CANTOR: Yeah, it has reached that medium. Now every medium has a history and the problem is that people intervene – critics intervene too early in the history. And they assume that what they're seeing is the limits of the medium.

Television, I feel, had a uniquely sad fate that it was growing up in the 40s, and mainly the 50s, at the same time as what's called "critical theory" was first developing. These guys, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, wrote a famous book about the Enlightenment, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. And these were German émigrés, refugees. They ended up in Los Angeles, for reasons I won't get into – I can't quite explain.

But what a horrible fate. They came out of Weimar, Germany and ended up in LA and were watching TV in its infancy and they thought it was horrible. And I've inferred from one of Adorno's comments that he was watching *I Married Joan*, which I used to like as a kid, but, I admit, is not great art. And he just

attacked television. And one of the things he says is “How can you tell a great drama in 15 minutes?” Now, if you remember early TV as I do, yeah, shows were often 15 minutes long, and I admit there’s not much you can do in 15 minutes. Though it’s amazing how much television learned to do in a half hour.

But here he was talking about the nature of television, and he saw 15-minute shows and so he thought that was going to be it. And there’s an awful lot of that, of critics thinking that the state of the art is exactly what they see. If you had looked at the English theater around 1585, you would have said, “This is awful. What an awful medium. A bunch of academic, boring stuff, basically translated out of Latin and then just complete junk, pandering to the audience.”

If you’re a critic, you’re not Christopher Marlowe or you’re not William Shakespeare, you don’t see what could be done with that medium. And that’s the point, that artists look at a medium and they see a challenge. Critics look at a medium and they see its limits.

It took a while for television to develop, although you get an early genius like Ernie Kovacs, the wonderful comic genius who very early in television saw its potential. He was the first to see that videotape could be used to do funny stunts. And people have shown how people like David Letterman descend from this. And I remember absolutely loving Ernie Kovacs as a child.

But that’s what happens. It takes a while for people to gravitate towards a new medium. It’s been happening continuously with television. Now we’ve reached the point, where it really is attracting the best writing talent.

KRISTOL: Was there a moment where sort of people realized – the Shakespearean moment where people realized television can really be a first-rate medium? Is there a show? Is there a person? Is there a –?

CANTOR: It’s hard, and I will say there’s yet to be a Shakespearean moment. There’s no one as good as Shakespeare. There’s something I call the Shakespeare fallacy, which is to invoke Shakespeare to judge anything.

KRISTOL: Right, fair enough.

CANTOR: By that standard, the 19th-century novel doesn’t measure up, nothing measures up to Shakespeare. But what I do think is by now, television has reached a stage where it’s producing a body of material that roughly ranks with any cultural achievement of the past. I started making this argument with movies, because after all, for a long time, movies weren’t taken seriously academically.

I remember as an undergraduate in Harvard when the first course on movies was introduced. It was a course on Alfred Hitchcock and people – many people thought it was the most ridiculous thing that ever happened. “How could you teach movies? And above all, teach this Alfred Hitchcock hack, the maker of *Psycho*?” And, you know, now that would be regarded as high art and cultural heritage. And the same will be true someday if not already of television shows.

KRISTOL: And so give me a few instances. If someone came down from – time traveled from 1600 and said, “What two or three should I watch?”

CANTOR: See, my problem is I’m too into time traveling. And my tastes are, I have to say, somewhat vulgar in television. I’m attracted to the more extraordinary and the genre things. But, for example, I think *Deadwood* is one of the greatest shows in the history of television. Now, here I have to add the immediate proviso is every other third word in the show is a four-letter word. So if you don’t have the stomach for that, you’d better avoid it. I don’t want people getting heart attacks on my recommendation.

But *Deadwood*, which is by David Milch, one of the greatest creators of the history of television. He actually goes back to some of the earliest shows like *Hill Street Blues*, and *NYPD Blue*, which are among the first shows that people think of as leading to the current era.

Deadwood's the story of the South Dakota town, the Gold Rush there--at a time when it was by happenstance outside the jurisdiction of any government. And the show was fascinating because it seriously examines the question of whether people can function without government. Milch has said that the great theme of it is order out of the mud. I like to say the theme is spontaneous order, Friedrich Hayek's term. But it's a very interesting show conceptually, and it's also just extremely well-written.

Milch came out of Yale. He had worked with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren on a literature anthology. As he said, if it had not been for his cocaine and his gambling habits, he would have stayed at Yale, but fortunately or unfortunately –

KRISTOL: So he's more the Christopher Marlowe of our time than the Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Yes, it's interesting – I was quite –

KRISTOL: Wasn't Marlowe a big gambler?

CANTOR: More than that.

KRISTOL: Among other things.

CANTOR: But there is a very early book on movies, Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture*, 1915, compared D. W. Griffith to Christopher Marlowe.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: Which was extraordinary. That's the first serious book ever written on movies, and it's an extraordinarily interesting book to see what he saw and didn't see about the future of movies. But that's another interesting case of this weird intersection here.

That book is called *The Art of the Moving Picture*, and he was convinced that that's what movies were, that they were moving pictures, and he compared it more to painting and, in fact, was somewhat upset that it was moving in a narrative direction. And most people don't realize this, but for the first 10, 20, almost 30 years of film criticism, there was a body of people who wanted moving pictures. They thought it was a corruption of this new art that it was devoted to narrative.

And, you know, there are avant-garde artists to this day who create moving pictures, often on television, for example. And it just shows you that any new medium is complicated, people don't know quite what to do with it. And when it is introduced, people work with analogies. We inevitably today think the motion picture relates back to drama. But many people in the teens and the 20s thought, no, this was an art of pictures that moved. And if you go back to the 19th century, you can see a lot of artists who were moving in the direction of moving pictures, these dioramas they created or these flip pictures that you get motion out of it.

Anyway, a medium's pretty wide open when it comes along. And it's interesting to see, again, a good example of that was the transition to sound. We inevitably think of the movement from silent to sound pictures as an advance. Many people, including Lindsay, at the time – I mean, Lindsay's funny--in 1915 and then in 1922 in a second edition – he says, "Sound's impossible." You couldn't have talkies. Now, again, that's the result of an academic or in this case a scholar of some kind.

The early attempts at talkies were a disaster. And so he concludes, say 1922, it's impossible. But people keep working at it, and they make it possible. But the interesting thing is Lindsay was saying, "I don't think it's possible, but it wouldn't be good if it happened." Because, again, he's saying these are moving pictures, so there shouldn't be any sound.

And, of course, it's remarkable what great films were produced in the silent era. A guy like F. W. Murnau. *Sunrise*, many people say, is the most beautiful picture ever. And he was unbelievable at telling stories without sound. He took what we think of as a very limited medium, and he extracted the last ounce of power out of it. And he's the guy that did *Nosferatu*, the original Dracula film. And he was an amazing artist. And there were people – you know, the early talkie films were nowhere near as good as Murnau's films.

Again, this is a good way of illustrating the point. When talking pictures came along, all people were impressed by was talking. And so you could just have Al Jolson come out, sing a few songs, do a little dialogue. And who cared if *The Jazz Singer* was a sentimental overdone drama, comparing it with, you know, like Abel Gance's *Napoleon*, for example, this epic film, but silent.

So indeed, it's very interesting to see that in the 20s you have critics saying, "This isn't going to work. You've just destroyed film." And indeed, film historians will say that talkies set back the medium by about 10, 15 years. Because all of the wonderful cinematic qualities that had been developed couldn't now be employed on a sound stage. But then very quickly you hit something like Fritz Lang's *M*, which, was maybe 1931. And it's a great film. It's as great as any film that had been made up to then. And it uses sound in this uncanny way, where so much of the drama depends on this eerie whistle that the Peter Lorre child- murderer character has.

So, again, I'm fascinated with going back and looking at media and how they're received and to see, quite frankly, the bad record of academics because they're always fighting the last war. A new medium comes along. They see how it's not as good as the last medium. When you looked at early films, they weren't as good as stage plays. When you looked at early television, the shows weren't as good as movies.

And, indeed, the point is media come along for other than artistic reasons. Philo Farnsworth, who invented TV, was not a great artist. He was a tinkerer, and he wanted to create the visual equivalent of radio. And so you got TV for other than artistic reasons. And, again, when a new medium comes along, people are mesmerized by the new medium.

Now, I like to say I'm the same age as television. I was born in 1945, and television's basically a post-World War II phenomenon. We got a TV in 1949. I can't remember life before television. And we used to watch television just to watch television. There were 15-minute commercials. Charles Antell hair tonic, which had lanolin in it. See, the commercial has stuck with me. But we would watch a 15-minute commercial because it was the only thing that was on and it was fascinating. It wasn't radio. There was a guy there you watched. And media can move along on that basis.

The earliest films are films of a train coming into a station and people applauded, "Wow, look at that." Now it takes a while for people to get bored with the sheer novelty of the medium and it, therefore, has to up its artistic content. And it takes a while for artists to migrate to it and to understand this is a new medium and how powerful it is. And to develop especially the new potential.

Another interesting aspect of media history is that a new medium comes along, it tries to do what the old medium did. The first television shows were all radio shows televised. The same formulas, game shows, or whole shows like *The Shadow* or *The Lone Ranger*. They'd get transferred to television. And in a way it was now bad radio because things that you could do on radio didn't work as well on television. It took a while for people – Ernie Kovacs is a good example of someone who began to see what you can do with television that you couldn't do with radio. And that's been true of every medium.

KRISTOL: So the critics who take a snapshot and say, "The medium is the message," or "This is the character of that medium." That sounds like a deep point that actually the critics are not just sort of – they don't just happen to be wrong though they could happen to be wrong. But they're wrong because there's something about that mindset that sees – I don't know – wants to see into the nature of a medium, instead of understanding that it's a dynamic process.

CANTOR: Right. And my point is that although all media have their limits, great creativity is possible in any medium, and people have denied this. Now you take Marshall McLuhan, probably the most famous media guru of all time and he had many insights into the differences among the media. But a couple of years ago I went back and reread his book, *Understanding Media*, and I was stunned to discover that he defined television as a low-definition medium. He went in there saying “Here’s the difference between movies and television: movies are high-definition, television is low-definition.” And he develops a whole theory of the difference based on that.

Now when Marshall McLuhan was looking at his 11-inch screen on a black-and-white TV in the 1950s, yeah, it was a low definition medium. I wonder what he would do now that we have high-definition television, which is such a big deal now? And, indeed, you can barely tell the difference now between somebody’s home theater with its giant screen and some multiplex theater with its small screen. The experience is almost the same visually.

And so, again, it seemed perfectly reasonable to call television a low-definition medium in 1959 and to say close-ups will be impossible on television and so on. But there you’re just misidentifying a temporary technological limit of the medium with its very nature.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that’s interesting.

II: The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture (20:30 – 36:30)

KRISTOL: We’ve been discussing the media through which, I guess, popular culture is transmitted. But let’s talk about popular culture. You’ve written a lot about that, thought a lot about that when you watch these TV shows, movies, and so forth. You see more about America, about the contemporary world than a lot of us who just watch them casually and they go in one ear and right out the other. So what should we learn from looking at what’s popular today?

CANTOR: Well, there’s a lot.

KRISTOL: Obviously, many aspects of this.

CANTOR: There’s a lot of things to learn, but one thing – I wrote a book called *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*, and I’m working on that over the years. One thing I began to notice is the split between elites and the common people in America. I think that’s one of the great problems, political problems in the world right now, and it plays out all the time on so many different issues. And I was somewhat surprised to see that that gets embodied a lot in popular culture.

And a good example of that is a very popular show called *The Walking Dead*. And I’m very interested in zombies and their significance. This was an interesting case because I actually had not been watching the show the first two years, but I kept seeing all these zombie things. And I said, “This thing is so popular, there’s got to be something in it.” So I got –

KRISTOL: That’s, I think, an interesting statement. And I think it’s a true statement, but not one that all your fellow academics would make. When something is popular, therefore there’s something in it. That’s really –

CANTOR: Yeah, and part of it was just a puzzle because I never liked the modern zombie. I liked the old *I Walked with a Zombie*, *White Zombie* (the Bela Lugosi film). These things from Val Lewton’s *I Walked with a Zombie*. And I never liked the George Romero flesh-eating zombie thing. But at great personal sacrifice, I decided, “Let’s investigate this because why is the show so popular?” And I was really surprised to see how well written the show is, how well cast, how dramatic it is. I wouldn’t rate it with something like *Deadwood* or *Breaking Bad* or the – really what I consider – classic works of TV. But still, it’s awfully good.

And what I saw was that this show was a defense of the resilience and self-reliance of the American people. And I was able to relate it to a number of other catastrophe narratives, alien invasion narratives I've been studying. But basically, you've got a situation where the ostensible order of the world collapses. And then the question is: what happens? And there's a long tradition. It goes back to flying saucer movies of the 50s to suggest the American people can't take care of themselves. That in the light of, let's say, a flying saucer invasion, they must rely on the military industrial political complex to save them.

It's amazing when you go back and look at films like *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers*, the incredible faith they had that especially the federal authorities are the only things saving the American people. And that goes back to World War II and the prestige of the Manhattan Project and the whole idea that only a combination of science, government, and the military has saved us from the German and Japanese threats. And I can understand that. Also a feature of the Cold War in the 1950s.

And there are a number of zombie narratives that are like that. *World War Z*, for example, both in the book and the movies, celebrate only the power of government to protect us against a zombie threat. In fact, Max Brooks shows an amazing predilection for totalitarian dictators in that novel that only in North Korea and Cuba is a zombie problem solved. Because in North Korea you can order everyone's teeth removed. And, therefore, even when they turn zombie, they can't bite anymore. That's Max Brooks' idea of a solution.

By the way, that is a typical government solution to a problem. But what struck me about *The Walking Dead* was here in this terrible situation, people managed to band together and save themselves in a very Alexis De Tocqueville fashion. The show was kind of a Tocquevillian celebration of the associative power of the American people to solve their own problems. And, in fact, throughout the show, the military fails to solve the problem. The Centers for Disease Control fails to solve the problem. Whenever they turn to any form of elite, particularly scientists, to solve their problem, it turns out to be exactly the wrong thing and may, in fact, be the source of the problem.

And what you see is a local sheriff. I think he may have only been a deputy sheriff – Rick Grimes, he can become the leader. Again, it's very funny in these 50s films, the science-fiction, flying-saucer films. The local authorities are shown to be buffoons. They try to shoot flying saucers with guns and are made out to look like idiots.

Anyway, *The Walking Dead*, I think, is a kind of tribute to the ability of the American people to solve their problems. This last season was extraordinary. Even I couldn't believe what was happening. For a variety of reasons, they try to make their way to Washington, DC, where surely they will solve the problem. What they come upon is Alexandria, Virginia. And it turns out to be a gated community that the federal government set up with plans to save privileged people from any apocalypse, including a zombie apocalypse. And it's real upscale. It's \$800,000 a unit, we learn.

And it's presided over by a – she's a Congresswoman from Ohio, but I think she's an Elizabeth Warren lookalike. They got Tovah Feldshuh to play the part. It's very interesting. I do scholarship and so in this case, the show is based on a comic book. And you can go back and I checked the original comic. And see in the original it's a Congressman. And so they've clearly changed it to get more political resonance. And, in fact, they come to this community and they're assured that it's characterized by transparency. That's the word used, "We have transparency in this community. You don't have to worry about anything. We're going to interview you and don't worry, we just want to know more about you."

Moreover, the community has gun control. They've been surviving four seasons on their marvelous home arsenal. Now they've got to surrender their guns. And the show is just extraordinary the way it sets up the contrast between our heroes and heroines who've been battling their way through a scarred landscape. And this bubble, this protected bubble in Alexandria, Virginia where these privileged people connected to the federal government have not had to suffer at all the way the common people have.

And there are extraordinary scenes where our heroes who've been battling cannibals most recently stumble into this suburban cocktail party where they're serving Chardonnay and talking about recipes for

quiche. And our heroes and heroines are just staring at this like, “What world are these people living in?” And, I mean, it seemed to me the show captured exactly the problem that many people are focusing on right now, the insulation and isolation of our political elites from the common people and the real troubles they experience. And this community was proud of its pacifism, that it was protected, but you didn’t need guns.

Things don’t quite work out too well though when one of the guys in the community goes rogue and our hero, Rick Grimes tries to beat him up and gets in trouble for that. And then this evil character kills the husband of the Congresswoman. And there’s this great moment at the end of the season when Rick is pointing a gun at this evildoer and the Congresswoman says, “Do it!” And you realize she has converted to the ethic of the common people, which is you’ve got to take care of yourself and you can’t mess around.

It was an amazingly cathartic moment for the audience. And, again, it’s in the comic book, but with none of the background or richness that they develop in the TV script. Now, again, I’m not saying that this is Shakespeare and it’s not even the level of the best television. But it’s extraordinarily well-written and well-developed for a TV show, and I must confess, I’m a big fan.

KRISTOL: I noticed that as you talk about it. Yeah, but it sounds terrific. I’ll have to watch it. What about zombies in general, vampires? I know you’ve written about that. That’s sort of an interesting – what’s with the preoccupation with the dead, either living or the undead? That seems like a deep kind of theme.

CANTOR: Yeah, well, look, for one thing all these shows confront the issue of death, which is very hidden in our culture. It’s quite extraordinary, throughout human history most human beings have had to encounter death, I won’t say on a daily basis, but on a personal basis. In most history, people died at home and people were there to watch it. And we have done so much in our culture to hide the fact of death. Martin Heidegger would agree with that.

And one of the functions of popular culture is to bring back to attention things we tried to hide ourselves from. It sounds odd that you would say this of popular culture. It’s supposed to be fun and happy and so on. But it’s interesting how dark popular culture can get, and why I’ve always been fascinated with horror movies for this reason. And I think this fascination with the undead has to do with something that, you know, people want to confront this stuff. They realize they’re avoiding something. That’s why fairy tales, the traditional Grimm fairy tales, were so grim. This was Bruno Bettelheim’s theory about fairy tales in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment*. That people need to confront these things and that even children need to confront them.

You know, we’ve done so much to purge fairy tales of the horror element, of the grotesque and grim aspects. It shows you – a lot of these shows reveal that people want to be able to confront these things. There, again, not to go back obsessively to *The Walking Dead*, there have been amazing episodes in that of people having to confront death of their loved ones face to face. And some of the most powerful drama comes from that.

Now, vampires have more to do with sexuality.

KRISTOL: Good. Moving from death to sex.

CANTOR: Yes, well, it’s –

KRISTOL: Another major theme.

CANTOR: Yes, well, it’s actually interesting how much – I mean, sex and violence and death have been the obsessions of popular culture from the beginning. It’s there in Greek tragedy. It’s there in Shakespeare and all his contemporaries. It’s there in television today.

And with vampires, the reason why they're so associated with teenagers, is that the classic vampire situation going back to *Dracula* is the dead preying upon the young. And, classically, it's an older man drinking the blood of a young woman. And psychoanalysts have seen this as a reflection of, I guess you'd say, the Electra complex, the young woman's fascination with her father, the opposite of the Oedipus complex.

It's very interesting that typically – *Dracula* is a good example – typically in the vampire story, there's the evil old man who's the vampire. And do remember a vampire's two, three, four, five hundred years old and is that because he preys off the living. And then there's Abraham Van Helsing, the kindly old man who protects you from the vampire. And people have argued that this is a split in the young woman's archetype of the father. There's the image of the father as the protecting angelic figure who nurtures you and helps you grow up. And then this predatory nature of the parent. The fear that the parent won't let you grow up and lives off your blood. It's very interesting and therefore, vampire movies are constantly dealing with teenage sexuality.

Werewolf movies are the same way and there's a whole genre there, *Teen Wolf* on MTV and there are werewolves in the *Twilight* series as well. And that's just a perfect image of male puberty. I mean, where did all this hair come from suddenly? So it's fascinating to me that these vampires, these werewolves, they are sexual archetypes and the *Twilight* series is a good example of this, although I can't say I follow that too much. But *Buffy* was very interesting, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the TV show, was very interested in this. Buffy's fascination with Spike and with Angel, the vampires there. They reflect the famous motif, the bad boy. Buffy always had to choose between the good boy and the bad boy. And the bad boy was so fascinating. And *Buffy* was a great series. It took the metaphor, "high school is hell," and turned it into something real – took it literally and suddenly high school had all these vampires and werewolves and so on.

And again, I think there's a reason adolescents are particularly attracted to horror movies – in some ways, I think of myself as a perpetual adolescent – in the sense that they allow teenagers to confront just the problems they're having to deal with like puberty, like these sexual urges. How do you relate to an older man in the case of a woman? Or sometimes how do you relate to an older woman in the case of a man? There's a reason these stories have a power. They are the equivalent of the ancient myths for the modern world. And often the ancient myths, the Greek myths, for example, take similar form.

Camille Paglia is very good on this subject in a book, *Sexual Personae*, showing that the dying young man, Adonis, the Greek myth, that becomes Elvis in the modern world. And Elvis bore a curious resemblance to Antinous, the young man that the Roman Emperor Hadrian fell in love with and immortalized after his death with images all over the world. And it's so funny, you can go to museums and see Antinous. He's got the lips of Elvis on him.

Anyway, so these myths had a certain function in society. And in a way we claim not to work with myths any more, that we're in a rational society. But a lot of these issues, like sex and death, they're hard to grapple with on the purely rational level because they're such irrational forces. And so our culture needs myths. And they tend to appear in popular culture with amazing regularity and consistency.

III: Are Gangsters Tragic Heroes? (36:30 – 45:47)

KRISTOL: I guess one of the longest American running myths with popular culture themes or tropes or whatever is the gangster movie. Both novels and particularly, I guess, the gangster movie from way back to – obviously, through TV and through *The Godfather* and all that.

CANTOR: But all the way back to the 30s, Jimmy Cagney, *White Heat*, *Little Caesar*. And, you know, in a way, it's very Nietzschean, the gangster movie. It's stories beyond good and evil. That is, on the surface the stories are moral and they often try very hard to present a moral that you're seeing a difference between good and evil. These gangsters are criminals. They murder people. They rob people. They do all these horrible things. But it's very interesting that, again, they reflect a certain tension in our culture. And it's no accident that gangsters have been popular, even in real life. So that people like John Dillinger,

for example, were folk heroes because they're often seen – they're often seen as an alternative to the settled order.

Now, the prevalence of gangsters in America can be traced back to Prohibition. And Prohibition was probably the most idiotic political act in history, though it's got many rivals these days. But it was a crazy thing to do. It had all these terrible consequences. And so these gangsters were the product of Prohibition and in a way people sympathized with them. What were they doing? They were providing a product.

Now, it's funny, in some ways, these gangster movies can be read as critiques of capitalism. And Coppola when he talks about *The Godfather*, sees it that way, that these are just images for how rapacious businessmen are. But you can flip that and say these gangsters are just businessmen, who were defined as criminals by a government that outlaws something that shouldn't be outlawed in the first place.

And so, in the absence of legal access to alcohol, guys like Al Capone come along. I'm no big fan of Al Capone, but there's a reason he was so popular. That people saw these gangsters as responding to a very bad legal situation. And so the gangster becomes an image of the entrepreneur. And there's a very interesting variant of this that comes up in the *Scarface* movies and particularly the Brian De Palma remake with Al Pacino. In some ways, the *Scarface* story is the American Dream. It's the immigrant who comes to this country and faces all sorts of prejudice and all sorts of limits, and who makes something of himself and becomes powerful and makes a difference and matters.

Now, again, he does it through terrible acts and he kills a lot of people and he ultimately destroys himself. But this is also true of *The Godfather* movies. By the way, I think *Godfather I* and *II* are the greatest films ever made. And there we're coming awfully close to a Shakespearean level of quality. Those films are astounding. And when Coppola talks about the films, I don't think he understands how complex and profound they are. Maybe he just oversimplifies them when he talks about them.

But *The Godfather* is another great story of the American Dream and especially the immigrant dream. The first line of the first part is "I believe in America." And in many ways it tells the story of the American Dream, of an immigrant facing all sorts of obstacles, making something out of himself. Always limited by the fact that the system is geared against him.

By the way, I think this then appears in *Breaking Bad*, Vince Gilligan's series, which along with *Deadwood*, I would offer, as the two best written shows in the history of television. *Breaking Bad* is just extraordinary. I've had the honor and pleasure of meeting Vince Gilligan and talking to him at some length, and I want to say he's a brilliant artist. It's very interesting finally to meet one of these people and see he knows what he's doing.

KRISTOL: Is that right? I was going to ask. Sometimes you think, well, maybe they just have this instinct, you know.

CANTOR: Exactly, when you ask these people, they never tell you the truth. They frankly can't stand academics and they don't want to be bothered and they always deny it. But, you know, this was very interesting to realize that he knew exactly what he was doing. Though I'm going to dispute his own interpretation of the series.

Breaking Bad is the story of a man who's diagnosed with terminal cancer. And in an effort to get help for his family and especially his handicapped son, he goes into the crystal meth manufacturing business. And very terrible things happen. And it is the story of a man who destroys himself and his family in pursuit of this goal.

And Vince Gilligan will state that this is the story of a villain. I didn't have a chance to dispute this with him, but I don't think he realizes what he has is a tragic hero, and in many ways, a Shakespearean tragic hero in *Breaking Bad*.

You know, people have criticized me for taking this view and saying that there's anything heroic about Walt White in *Breaking Bad*. And people will say, "That sociopath? How could you defend that sociopath?" And I want to say: *Macbeth*. Macbeth does horrible things, as horrible as anything Walter White does pretty much, yet he's the hero of *Macbeth*. And Shakespeare's point is how can a basically good man end up that way? At the beginning of *Macbeth*, he's being praised by everybody for being the greatest military hero in Scotland. He defeated the rebels, and wonderful Macbeth. And it's a complicated story – I won't go into it. I've written an essay on it.

But what struck me – see, the thing that I realized about *Breaking Bad* is it's a superhero, super-villain story. That Walter White is Superman. By day, he's Clark Kent. He's Walter White, mild-mannered chemistry teacher in a semi-metropolitan high school. By night he's Heisenberg, drug king of the entire Southwest. And he's a great man in the sense that he produces better crystal meth than anybody. And he has lived an inconsequential life. He's accomplished nothing, even though we learn in his backstory that he had great talent as a scientist. And then suddenly he becomes someone who matters. It's like *Scarface*. Walter White started out as one form of the American Dream, Ward Cleaver, the suburban father and his family in the nice tract home.

He ends up as Scarface, which is a gangster and in many ways horrible. But the point is suddenly people are afraid of him. This is a guy who's lived his whole life as a milquetoast in fear of everything. And he comes to a point where he says, "I am the danger." And that's a Shakespearean moment. That's a moment when I feel he's claiming a kind of tragic hero status. Now, again, this is a very controversial argument. But I think it's the genius of the show that really this superhero structure – Walter White/Heisenberg – Clark Kent/Superman.

The tension between our ordinary morality, which says, you know, it's great to be a family man and to do all these decent things. And then, I'd say this Nietzschean perspective, kind of beyond good and evil perspective, that what matters is power. And, again, these are, I'm saying, tragic heroes because they become destructive. But they become destructive because they had a potential that was being thwarted. Again, I won't go into the issue of Prohibition here with regard to it. But there's a reason why villains are interesting and why gangsters are interesting.

And in a certain sense, they perform a cathartic role in our culture. We are forced, most of us, to play by the rules and to do what we're told to do and to follow the government's rules even when they're counterproductive and, quite frankly, destructive. And there's a reason why we sympathize with the people who stand up to that. By the way, this is the whole logic of the Western in American history.

IV: The Cowboy Western (45:47 – 56:26)

KRISTOL: I know nothing about popular culture to speak of, but I was a big fan when I was younger of Robert Warshaw, the film and cultural critic of the 40s and 50s, who wrote two great essays back to back, "The Gangster Movie," which makes similar points, I would say, to what you just made, especially about the cathartic effect of it and the way in which there's a superficially happy ending where morality is vindicated. The gangster is killed. But at some level, the gangster is more impressive person than the voices of law and order.

CANTOR: Yeah, as is the Shakespearean tragic hero. I mean, everyone's rejoicing when Macbeth is killed. But the people that are left are midgets compared to the stature of this great man. By the way, that's the experience at the end of most Shakespearean tragedies. Hamlet does some pretty gruesome things and yet he's a hero, but a tragic hero.

KRISTOL: And "The Westerns," his other great essay, I think, which talks about that as kind of a particular American myth, again, which sort of –. Talk about the Western, if you would. Are you a fan of the Western movies?

CANTOR: Oh, yes, and this is why in *Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*, I write about *Deadwood*. I write about *Have Gun – Will Travel*. In studying the Western, I finally saw that it's the archetype of all American popular culture. By the way, *Breaking Bad* is a Western. It occurs in the Southwest. It's essentially about gunslingers. The logic of the Western is you're on the frontier. Very often there's no government, certainly no federal government, no state government. Westerns often take place in territories. At most, there's a municipal government.

KRISTOL: Or ineffective government.

CANTOR: Yeah, or ineffective government or even evil corrupt government. And so the Western hero is above all self-reliant. And he has to protect himself and his family. I write about John Ford's *The Searchers* in my book. That's a classic Western, and again a hero who many people now regard as a villain, because, again, he does terrible things. He's a nasty, nasty man, but he's in a nasty, nasty environment and he has to do terrible things. And everybody wants to be protected by him.

Now it's interesting, Westerns – well, I finally figured out that *The Walking Dead* is a Western, not to keep going back to that. But I would just say one of my great moments of recognition. I was watching the show *The Talking Dead*, which appears right after it. It's a kind of talk show that appears after each episode.

And they were talking about the little kid, Carl, on the show. And one of the commentators called him Wyatt Twerp because he wears a cowboy hat and has learned to use a gun. And I suddenly realized, this is a Western. That the zombies are what used to be the Indians in Westerns. You can't do that anymore. It's politically incorrect. But these nameless faceless people that can be killed without any sense of conscience is the way, unfortunately, Indians used to be portrayed, to some extent even in John Ford's Westerns. And I noticed that the iconic shot was Rick Grimes riding on a horse into Atlanta. And it was like riding into Dodge City.

And so I realized the logic of American popular culture is really born in the West and this notion of the frontier. And what happens to people when they are left on their own? And Westerns divide up just the way I was saying *World War Z* and *The Walking Dead* divide up. Some Westerns suggest that the absence of government means anarchy, that it's very Hobbesian. It's a war of all against all. And that you need Leviathan. You need the man on the horse, the *caudillo*. You need this authority figure who will bring order to the West.

Again, I have a chapter on *Have Gun – Will Travel* in *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*. And I loved that show as a child, and it holds up very well dramatically. It's amazing how much of a story they were able to tell in 24 minutes. But I found the politics of it distasteful when I sat down to study it. And it really – this was the story of a gunfighter, a hired gun named Paladin who operated out of San Francisco. And I realized it was the California/Hollywood view of America, of everything in between the coasts. That in episode after episode, any town Paladin went to was corrupt, it was run by corrupt businessmen, it was by a corrupt sheriff, it was prejudiced, it couldn't take care of itself.

And Mr. Paladin would come from his opera and his fine dining in San Francisco and solve the problems of these ordinary, unwashed people in the middle of the country. And it's amazing how consistent that plot is.

Whereas *Deadwood*, for example, really celebrates the ability of people to organize themselves. For example, there's a great dialogue in it between Seth Bullock, the main hero, the Timothy Oliphant character, and the Wild Bill Hickok character, where they're hoping to get statehood. And Wild Bill Hickok is saying "That's what we need. We can solve our problems if we just become a state." And Seth Bullock says, "I'll settle for property rights." And it's amazing, it's pure Locke instead of Hobbes. It's "Just give us secure property rights and we can straighten this whole thing out." And a great deal of the show develops how they grew property rights in this ungoverned community.

And there's a wonderful book called *The Not So Wild, Wild West* that documents this, that people develop property rights in the absence of government because that was what was fundamental to them.

So I like to say there are Hobbesian Westerns and there are Lockean Westerns. There are Westerns that assume that people are just hopeless when left to themselves, that they have to come under some kind of dictatorship.

There were moments like that in *The Walking Dead*, by the way, called the Rick-tatorship, when Rick Grimes had to take over briefly. But it was more like the old Roman notion of the dictator, temporarily empowered to solve the problem. And then, as I say, there are many Westerns – I think largely the John Ford Westerns, for example – that show, “The barn burned down, Let’s get together and build a new barn.” Again, that’s Tocqueville.

KRISTOL: And *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, where the politician is the – turns out to be a fraud.

CANTOR: Yes, yeah.

KRISTOL: The somewhat disreputable character is the real hero.

CANTOR: Yes, that’s a perfect example because that show has a deep nostalgia for an earlier age, and, of course, it was brilliant that John Ford was able to use John Wayne in it, an aging John Wayne to represent an aging ideal. And it showed that once men like John Wayne cleared out the West and made it safe, they became dinosaurs and people wanted to get rid of them and build a whole new myth.

Again, Ford – most people recognize now that he was a great artist and one of the greatest directors ever. Orson Welles when asked who are the three greatest directors, said, “John Ford, John Ford, and John Ford.” By the way, John Ford’s cinematography is a huge influence on *Breaking Bad*. That shows that it has something of a Western aspect. But his films are about the tragic paradox of the West, that it ultimately had no room for the people who built it. And, again, Ethan in *The Searchers* is a Shakespearean tragic hero. You know, that film is awfully close to Shakespeare. It has a few moments of sentimentality and maybe a little too much humor at times. But Shakespeare has comic relief, too. But that’s a film of enormous stature and Wayne gives a Shakespearean portrait as Ethan in that.

So basically I feel that I came to this view very empirically and gradually that the Western supplies the logic of American popular culture. And it’s repeated in the gangster movie. It’s now repeated in the zombie narratives. That all these stories are about the deep problematic character of American culture: the tension between liberty and authority. This is a country founded in the name of liberty, but it’s constantly raised these issues of “Does liberty become anarchy? And how much authority do we need? And above all, at what level should the authority be exercised?”

Again, I’ll say this for the Western, you see it in *Deadwood*, you see it in John Ford, the old notion of this country as a federalist order, that the main authority should be on a local level where it’s close to the people. That’s a great theme in *Deadwood*, it’s a great theme in *The Simpsons*, by the way, to start another story. But versus the notion we want central authority at the federal level to control everything.

And by the way, this dynamic has worked itself out in the reaction to popular culture. That is, so much of the negative reaction to the popular culture has come from elites, which think it’s anarchy and reflects the worst disorganizing principles of the common people. It is the idea that common people can’t be left to their own culture. They need to be educated from above. They need PBS. They need an edifying culture. And anything that comes up from their ranks out of the commercial world, that’s got to be awful. And I’ve been trying to take the side of the American common people and to suggest their culture is not that dismaying. In fact, it’s amazingly vibrant.

V: *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* (56:26 – 1:10:31)

KRISTOL: We’ve spoken about sort of various aspects of modern culture is in a way reflections of classical tragedy or Shakespearean tragedy. But you also mentioned *The Simpsons*, which makes me think about comedy. There are some great examples of comedy in popular culture. I don’t know if *The Simpsons* is the greatest. You’ve written on *The Simpsons*.

CANTOR: Well, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld* – I don't know which one is greater. But, yes, I think it's one of the great strengths of popular culture. Again, you can go all the way back to Classical Greece and Aristophanes desperately wanted to be popular. He was, but didn't win as often as he wanted to in the comedy contest. But Shakespeare, of course, was the greatest comedy writer of all time. In addition to writing these tragedies, he has an incredible comic touch. And I think we can be very proud of the level of comedy in popular culture.

The Simpsons is particularly dear to me because the first essay I wrote on popular culture was about *The Simpsons*. I won't say it went viral, but it's been translated into Spanish and Russian and Australian. And it's been reprinted about six or seven times. It appears – I love this fact – in college textbooks for expository writing. So I definitely touched a nerve there. And that was –

KRISTOL: And at that time, did you get interested in *The Simpsons* just because you happened to watch them or was there like an academic reason why you –

CANTOR: Well, no, no. In fact, I'm happy to say that I was watching *The Simpsons* already when it was just shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show*. And I was very excited when it became a half-hour show on Fox. And by the seventh or eighth episode, I decided this was great. It was the one about Bart as an Albanian exchange student, and I suddenly realized if there's a comedy making jokes in Albanian, this definitely is on a higher level. I didn't know then that the show was being written largely by Harvard graduates. But I did start lecturing on *The Simpsons*. I gave a paper on it at the American Political Science Association. Tracy Strong was good enough to republish it in the journal he was editing, *Political Theory*. And that's really where my career as a popular culture expert began to take off.

And I reacted against the – at that time – very severe, conservative criticism of the show that Bart was too anti-authority and Homer was a terrible father and that this show was a travesty on the American family, even to the point where the first President Bush made a joke about it. That we needed families more like the Waltons than the Simpsons. And never trade jokes with a TV series because a couple of weeks later they had – “yeah, the country's now more like the Waltons. We're in a Depression.”

But it seemed to me people, and especially conservatives, had gotten the show completely wrong. Yes, it's equal-opportunity satire and they maybe satirize Republicans more than Democrats, but they do satirize Democrats too over the years. And the show really in context was a great defense of the nuclear family. That in fact television had been moving away from the centrality of the nuclear family that so dominated television in the 1950s, the Nelsons, the Andersons, the Cleavers. And you start having the 70s, 80s, all these experimental family relationships, *My Two Dads*, or whatever.

And here was *The Simpsons* going back to the father, the mother, and the 2.4 children – the typical American pattern. And the key thing about Homer was that he was there. I called it the worst-case defense of the nuclear family. What it showed is even though Homer Simpson in so many respects is not the ideal father, he is there, cares about his family, works hard to support them, even sometimes taking on two jobs. And that the show suggested the value of the nuclear family.

Now, in many ways the show is making fun of *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. And yet, in a strange way, by parodying those shows, it reaffirmed the values that they represented. And as I began to think about the show, I realized the same went for the small town aspect of the show. That Springfield has a corrupt mayor, incidentally with a Kennedy accent. The school is badly run. And yet, it has many of the classic virtues of the American small town, precisely by virtue of its smallness. The people do know each other. Mayor Quimby is a crook, but he's their crook and they know he's a crook. And generally speaking, when outside forces come to town, they would make things worse.

And in fact, the show has been highly critical of the federal government along the way. It's made fun of the FBI when it tries to get involved in the town; the IRS, they make fun of. And so in many ways, the show ends up celebrating traditional American values. And, again, along the lines of what I was saying about a Western, it was celebrating the smallness of Springfield.

Now, the interesting thing that I saw that went along with that, the other side of it is the celebration of the global in the show. And in a way what I found most interesting about the show is it tends to be negative about the national. It makes fun of U.S. presidents. But at one and the same time it shows how Springfield is local with all the virtues and problems of a small town. But also it's an amazing show for the 90s of reflecting this new globalization of America. That, for example, the local convenience store is run by Apu Nahasapeemahetepilon, a Pakistani immigrant. They have channel Ocho on the television for the Spanish speakers. It turns out there are interesting episodes about immigration.

And the flipside of that is the Simpsons travel all over the world in the course of the series— they go to Japan, they go to Australia, they go to France, and so on. And really, I don't think, without programmatically setting out to portray this, the show really does reflect the globalization of America that was occurring in the 1990s.

By the way, *The X Files* showed the dark and sinister side of the globalization of America. Fox really pioneered these two great shows that have made modern television.

KRISTOL: Was Fox particularly— was there something distinctive about Fox that made them the network that was —

CANTOR: Well, yes. They were the network of last resort. That is people don't realize that Fox was the first to successfully challenge the big three networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. You have to say that now so that people growing up now wouldn't know how much they dominated television, largely because of government intervention for three decades. And Fox came along and challenged this. And Rupert Murdoch, whom I believe you know, realized he had to do something different. And according to the accounts I read, he was the one who, as we say in the trade, green-lighted both *The Simpsons* and *The X Files*.

And I have to say, I would have green-lighted *The Simpsons* having been a fan of it already. I hate to say this, but I thought *The X Files* was the stupidest thing I'd ever seen. The first few episodes I watched I didn't realize how great it was going to become. But Murdoch saw the potential there. And Fox had nothing to lose. And this had been the problem in TV programming, especially since the 1960s, when then-Chairman of the FCC Newt Minow thrust upon the networks the responsibility for programming. The programming became very conservative in the bad sense that networks didn't want to take chances and they started using the same formulas again and again. *Beverly Hillbillies* works, send a poor family into a big city, let's do *Green Acres*, send a rich family into the country.

Through a combination of good judgment and to some extent luck, Fox really challenged these formulas and proved they could be a success with that. And *The Simpsons* was a great example of that.

KRISTOL: *Seinfeld*, I guess, was the other most famous, maybe, comedy show of modern television.

CANTOR: Yeah, and there's a show I just cannot stop watching it. I've seen many of the episodes maybe eight times by now and they're still funny. And the amazing thing I realized about that is it's basically *Waiting for Godot*. You can look at some of the dialogue in *Waiting for Godot* and George and Jerry could be saying the same thing. And that whole show about nothing thing. It really was the Beckettian formula for the show, transposing it into a contemporary setting, which in some ways emphasized the meaninglessness of it all even more.

And one of the ironies of the show is — well, it's actually true of *Waiting for Godot* as well. Beckett wanted to expose the meaninglessness of the lives of these characters, Vladimir and Estragon. But in fact, we really like them. We see that they're friends, that for all the emptiness of their lives, they do have each other. And it's very interesting because *Waiting for Godot* grows out of Laurel and Hardy. Here is to me a fascinating example of this intersection between so-called high and low culture. Laurel and Hardy become *Waiting for Godot*, which then become *Seinfeld*.

KRISTOL: Is that literally true that Laurel and Hardy — I mean, Beckett knew —

CANTOR: Beckett loved Laurel and Hardy. There's a line in his novel *Watt*, where someone looks at a tree and says, "Oh hardy laurel." And that's his little tribute. And if you look at Estragon and Vladimir, they have the same characteristics of Laurel and Hardy. One's thin, one's fat. I could go into the details but I'm not supposed to talk about Samuel Beckett here. But I will say his *Waiting for Godot* grows out of Laurel and Hardy and then gets transformed into *Seinfeld*. And, of course, again, Beckett is trying to show the meaninglessness of these lives of these characters. But we grow to love them— they're lovable to us.

Now in *Seinfeld*, people fell in love with the characters. And again, because for all their problems, they have each other. The last episode was so outrageous for the public because it tried to sum it all up how wretched all the characters were.

Now, the interesting thing is now we have *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David is basically the genius behind *Seinfeld* along with Jerry Seinfeld. But then when he was given his own series, it's like a nasty *Seinfeld*. Larry David was largely the model for George and several of the things that happened with George happened in Larry David's own life.

And it's like in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* he's saying, "Didn't you get the point? I can't stand these characters because I can't stand myself." And then *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is a huge success and it's absolutely brilliant. And whatever few lines *Seinfeld* didn't cross, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* did cross. And, by the way, it's fascinating that *Seinfeld* illustrates the point that actually Jerry Seinfeld has made comments on recently. One of the problems with American comedy, well, comedy in general, is that comedy always has to violate taboos. It has to cross the line. It has to speak the unspeakable. And over time, as you break the taboos, there's no shock value anymore.

And so, for example, for a long time telling the slightest off-color joke got big laughs until the entire culture became off-color. So *Seinfeld* was the first show I know of that understood that political correctness was the new frontier of comedy. That although we claim now not to have taboos, we do have a new set of taboos. So that sex is no longer taboo, but sexism is taboo. And so *Seinfeld*, a lot of the episodes were great because they crossed those lines of political correctness. The famous episode that depended upon someone thinking that George and Jerry were a gay couple. That famous tagline, "Not that there's anything wrong with that."

It's interesting that Jerry Seinfeld just recently made comments about how outrageous the lines of political correctness have become. You have Chris Rock making the same criticism – so both Chris Rock and Seinfeld say they won't appear on college campuses anymore because they can't tell jokes. You know, it's always amazing when people say, "Oh, well, that joke's offensive." I want to say, "What part of the concept of comedy did you not understand? Comedy is offensive." And *Seinfeld* drew so strongly on that. And, by the way *South Park* also is a great comedy for just those reasons.

VI: Conservatives and Popular Culture (1:10:31 – 1:27:51)

KRISTOL: So politically conservatives should appreciate these comedies for at least – they may be a little subversive of some things conservatives would like to see a little more earnestly looked up to, I suppose, or revered. But they do subvert the liberal political practice that's so dominant, right?

CANTOR: Yeah, I have to say. This is honestly a retrospective justification of my movement into this area. But I have to say in retrospect, I feel I did do something useful in opening up the discussion of popular culture to conservatives and libertarians. That is, I had the credentials to do it. I was a Shakespeare scholar of some note and so I could do this. I like to say, you know, Nixon went to China; I went to *Gilligan's Island*. And I kind of emboldened a lot of people. And now it's quite routine in the conservative press and the libertarian press to take popular culture seriously.

I felt that both conservatives and libertarians were missing a very important opportunity and, above all, were abandoning popular culture to the Left. For decades, all serious analytic criticism of popular culture

came from the Left. And it was all this Marxist analysis, largely how horrible popular culture is, that it creates false consciousness, that it reconciles people to the horrible life under capitalism and so on. And I disagreed with the analysis. I disagreed with the very perspective of the analysis, which always held popular culture at a distance as something inferior. And these critics from their Olympian heights would tell you what it's really about.

It's really funny to read Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* about Donald Duck, about how Donald Duck supports capitalism in a stupid way. I don't think they could – I can barely understand Donald Duck. And these two German émigrés, I don't think they knew a word Donald Duck was saying. And, as I say, they approached it as anthropologists. They had no idea what this stuff was and they were looking at it and they came up with this crazy theory about it.

But what I saw was that conservatism and libertarianism were hurting their cause with young people by holding popular culture at arm's length as if it was beneath their contempt, let alone their academic analysis. And I could see increasingly in dealing with my students that it really helped even when I was lecturing on Shakespeare or on Greek tragedy to refer to *The Godfather* as a revenge drama or to horror movies and so on. And I sensed, you know, we've got to start taking this material seriously, if for no other reason than to be able to speak to our young students in their own terms.

And beyond that, the leftwing approach to popular culture saw it as one last indictment of capitalism. That is by the 1980s, the Left had lost the economic argument. It was no longer possible to maintain that socialism was a superior system economically. So you began to get the Left migrating to cultural critique and saying, "Okay, capitalism produces all these goods. But those goods just debase our sensibility. And look at how debasing these movies and television are." And, again, I admit there's an awful lot of garbage on movies and television, but there's an awful lot of garbage in books and dramas as well. And the point is to see that all culture is a kind of pyramid. In all cases, the high achievements are created on a very broad base of garbage.

It's very Darwinian in a way or a form of spontaneous order. People act as if we could predict in advance what the great art is going to be and plan it out. But, in fact, it's just a hit-or-miss business. And you have to try 100 movies to get one great one, 100 TV shows to get one great one. And that's the nice thing about the marketplace is that it allows that to happen as it happens in all areas.

And so I think it was very wrong, particularly of conservatives, to view popular culture with disdain and not realize that all great culture rests on a – well, not all – a substantial portion of great culture rests on a base of popular culture, a broader base in which you've got to play out the opportunities--for every stupid cartoon that's ever been produced, finally, you get a *Simpsons* and then a *South Park*. And so just from the point of view of you can't defend the marketplace and then attack popular culture, which is another manifestation of the marketplace and works in similar ways.

KRISTOL: And do you think sitting here in the summer of 2015, are you pessimistic, optimistic? Is it getting better? Is it still getting better? Is it getting worse? Has it peaked, sort of the quality of popular culture, the interesting insights of the Westerns, the gangster movies, the zombie series?

CANTOR: Oh, I think it's doing fine and, you know, people often ask me to make predictions about popular culture. And I say, "I'm a professor because I can't make good predictions. If I could tell you what the next thing in popular culture is, I could go off and make millions of dollars." But that's not the talent I have. That's the talent Chris Carter of *The X Files* has, Vince Gilligan of *The X Files* and *Breaking Bad* has, David Milch has. And even they do terrible things. For every *Deadwood* from David Milch, there's been a *John from Cincinnati*, which I and his mother may have been the only people in America to like. And even I thought it was crazy.

So it's in the very nature of popular culture to be unpredictable. What you can say over time is that artists will gravitate to new media. New media will come along. I do not know much about video games. I've never played them. It seems to me in the logic of world history, that's the next new medium. I keep

waiting for the Shakespeare of the video game to come up. I'd be happy enough with the Vince Gilligan of the video game to come up. But I don't know the medium.

Some people do tell me it's already happened and that this is an artistic medium. Certainly when so much money is pouring into the medium, it's going to attract people with talent. Predictions have been laughable over time. There is, again, almost nobody who foresaw what the movie was going to be when the Lumière brothers first started showing that train moving into the station. Nobody foresaw *Godfather I* and *II*. Again, this book by Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, is very interesting. It first came out in 1915. He made some astounding predictions. He looked at the actor/director Sessue Hayakawa, and said, "He should make a *Chūshingura* movie." He didn't know that a Japanese silent had already been made in 1906 of that story, but he didn't know that some great story was going to be made. Actually, he also said something of the *Ieyasu* clan. He didn't know that Kurosawa was going to make this great film, *Kagemusha*.

But on the other hand, he made some unbelievably stupid predictions like again, he was totally convinced that silent movies were the only possibility. He said, "We have to have the audience discussing it during the film. This silence in the theater room is silly." So, again, I have actually gone back and it's very interesting, with television and with movies, we can see the immediate reception. And it's fascinating to see how few people realize what the possibilities were.

Now we have a little echo of this in Plato, that the origins of drama are shrouded in mystery, maybe 50, 60, 70 years before Aeschylus, you know, the first dramas we have, drama started. But we can see in Plato the typical reaction, and people forget that Plato had Socrates in *The Republic* severely criticize Greek tragedy and not bad Greek tragedy, but Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. And here is this new medium, it's fascinating in *The Republic* Socrates explains very patiently the difference between a narrated epic and an acted-out drama, as if this was still something weird to people. What is this tragedy thing?

And by the way, the word tragedy in Greek is "goat song." That's what tragedy means in Ancient Greek. I have a problem when I say to people, "Well, you know, even Greek tragedy had low origins." If I say to them "Even Greek goat song had low origins," they can kind of see what I'm talking about. No one knows quite why it's called "goat song." It may be because if you won the big prize, you got a goat. It may be because of the satyr, of course: half-man, half-goat. But in any case, judging by Plato we can see that 100 years after – more than 100 years after people are still wondering about this new medium and Plato's making the criticism of Greek tragedy, which we now hold up as this absolute ideal of Greek culture—he's making the same criticism that has been made of television or any new medium when it comes along. He says it has too much sex in it, there's too much violence in it, and the ordinary people mistake it for reality. They can't tell the difference between what they see on the stage and what's real.

Now, there's some truth to that. And it's especially true when a new medium comes along. People are shocked by the novelty of the medium. It's said that when the Lumière Brothers projected that train on a screen in Paris, people drew back in fear that the train was going to run them over. A new medium has a kind of power that it loses when people get used to it. And people are afraid initially of that power. But it's the same story.

Plato does not have Socrates predict that someday Sophocles will be taught in universities or that we can learn deep philosophical meaning out of *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *Oedipus at Colonus*. So I always refrain from making predictions. And, indeed, I wrote a brief essay called "The Unpredictability of Culture," but I hope to expand it in my next book. And just what's fascinating with movies and television is we can see it happen. We can see – I was amazed that you can find the first book written on motion pictures in America, 1915, Vachel Lindsay.

By the way, it's amazing – he says, "It's terrible that all these films are starting to come out of Hollywood. It's such a superficial place. The films will be superficial." And he wanted to move the movie industry, I think, to Santa Fe. Didn't happen. Poor Vachel. And, again, with television we can watch the process.

You know, would we had more contemporary reactions to Shakespeare. Now, again, people picked up very quickly again, by 1598, a guy named Francis Meres, was comparing Shakespeare favorably to Terence and Plautus and Seneca, the great Roman dramatists and people realized his genius. But on the other hand, you had mass movements from the Puritans to shut the theater down as immoral. And by 1642 they managed to shut the theater down. And in some ways, England has never recovered from that act of prohibition that interrupted the continuity of the English dramatic tradition.

Again, I think right now what's happening on television is very exciting. People are always telling me, "You got to watch this. You got to watch that." And I say to them, "There's too much good stuff to watch on television now." Now, again, there's always a lot of garbage along with that. You cannot sit down and predict what's going to work.

The problem with criticism is it's always done ex post facto and retrospectively. And we can say, "Oh, yeah, Shakespeare is great." We've had 400 years to see that. I have to say that one of my motivations in writing on this stuff is I want to see: can I figure out what's great now? And I'm sure I've made some mistakes. I'll stick by *Deadwood*. But, for example, I think *The X Files* is one of the greatest shows on television.

And a lot of people, especially at the time of 9/11 – Andrew Stuttaford, whom I believe writes for –

KRISTOL: *National Review*.

CANTOR: You know, wrote this essay about how 9/11 has made *The X Files* irrelevant. "It's so 90s," he said. "It's as dated as Monica Lewinsky's dress and Kato Kaelin. It'll be totally forgotten." You know, it's coming back to Fox in January. It never went away. People have remained committed to it. I found it actually amazing that Stuttaford was claiming *The X Files* was made irrelevant by 9/11 when the spinoff of *The X Files*, *The Lone Gunmen*, which the pilot appeared in March 2001. It was about a terrorist plot to fly a Boeing airliner into the World Trade Center. The only difference was the plane was flying from Washington to Boston, rather than the reverse. The FBI actually interviewed Frank Spotnitz and Chris Carter and Vince Gilligan about this. And indeed they had no idea. But at times when people were saying, "Oh, how could we have prevented 9/11? It was unimaginable." *The X Files* had already imagined it.

I have an essay on this in my book called "*The X Files* and 9/11." And I thought, you know, the show was quite – it was dealing with the issue of global terrorism when it really was not on people's radar yet--and in very serious and insightful ways.

And, again, I have an essay in the latest book that traces its lineage, how many shows – *Invasion*, *Surface*, *Threshold*, *Fringe*, *The Event*, *V* – developed out of *The X Files*. Which set in many ways new technical standards for how to produce a TV show. I think Chris Carr deserves a lot of credit. He set the goal of having the quality of a movie in each TV episode. And he, in many ways, succeeded in that even on the technical level. So I can't wait till January to see what Scully and Mulder are doing.

KRISTOL: Well, that's a good note, an optimistic note. Some of these conversations were a little bit depressed about the future of the West. But both it sounds to me in terms of quality and in terms of the actual teaching of much of the successful popular culture and high quality popular culture of the day, we should be a little more optimistic.

CANTOR: Yeah, and I think America could be proud of its popular culture. It need not be ashamed of it. It measures up to the culture of any other period. There's an optical illusion – when we look back at Shakespeare's day, we see only Shakespeare's work. We don't see – I always like to cite a play by a man named Robert Daborne, called *A Christian Turned Turk*. If you want to see how bad Elizabethan theater could be, *A Christian Turned Turk* is a good way of seeing it.

KRISTOL: It's an intriguing title.

CANTOR: It's an intriguing title and a very weird play, but it –

KRISTOL: Not Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Not Shakespeare. And we forget that for every great Shakespeare play, there were dozens of bad plays. Or, for example, the estimate is that there was some 40,000 novels in the Victorian period. We remember, maybe, 100 of them and maybe 50 of them are great.

I, being a professor, have read some of these nameless novels, including the original mummy novel, the first mummy novel, which I read because I'm interested in mummies, too. And it was unspeakably bad. I mean, worse than anything that's on television today. I mean, a narrative where the author couldn't tell how to get from one event to another.

So we really shouldn't be too hard on our culture because it's got a lot of junk in it. That's the nature of culture. Great works built on a pyramid of garbage.

KRISTOL: And on that note, Paul, thank you for being with me today.

CANTOR: It's my pleasure.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]