

The Golden Age of Television

By Greg Lam

The first thing I think we should tell you is that we love you. I mean, completely and totally. We love your foibles, your oddities, your strangeness. We're not exactly sure what any of it means, your world, but we can't get enough of it.

We didn't know what to make of you at first. I mean, yes we had theorized that given the sheer number of suns there are in the universe, there would be other worlds that could support life. And with the existence of life as a given, it would follow that some of the life on other worlds would evolve the same features that we had: tool making, language, civilization. We had decided that sentient life was not only possible but probable. Still, given the distances between stars, between worlds, we also figured that there wasn't a way to communicate with other worlds, let alone travel there. We resigned ourselves to that fact, and went along with our lives.

The first signal was caught by accident. It was a farming unit communicating with its base that had an odd interference pattern in its signals. The unit was brought to a repair station where a mechanic adjusted the receiver. The exact moment of the first reception is now celebrated in our world, commemorated every year in joyous remembrance. It was the moment that everything changed.

We only had sound at first, a shaky, staticky flow of words and music, all in a strange language. The signal was refined until the sound became clear, and it was obvious that we were eavesdropping on an alien race. The signal was analyzed by our scientists and by what we would come to call our linguists. Eventually, they figured out that there was additional information packed into the signals besides sound. After a good long time of

working at it, they managed to make the signal form images, and thus was born television on our world.

* * * * *

We never imagined it before. We never imagined anything like you. Having nothing to compare ourselves with, we never knew how little we used our imagination. We had never thought of fiction. I suppose the idea just didn't occur to us to make up stories of things that didn't occur. We didn't know at the time that that was what you were doing, but eventually we figured it out.

The physical differences between us is what we first noticed. Just imagine. All these strange new creatures. All these strange, new things. Beings who walked on two feet. Bilateral symmetry. A single row of teeth instead of grinding plates. Tufts of hair. Clothing. Skin without scales. But it didn't take that long to get used to your outward appearance. The social differences is what took a lot longer to digest.

The first thing we ever saw from your planet was later identified as an episode of "I Love Lucy". The shock of it all must have been incredible, different shades of gray which congealed into moving forms. A strange sort of magic. It was overwhelming for them, being the only being on our planet to possess this knowledge. For a terrible moment, they considered destroying the unit altogether, but eventually he showed it to the world.

The news of the discovery spread quickly throughout the world, and then to our two lunar outposts. The receiving equipment was simple enough to build, and soon enough "Earth-watching" became the one of the top industries in our world, not only financially but culturally as well.

* * * * *

It took us time to sort things out. Once we got used to one aspect of your kind, another oddity would present its head, sending our scholars into another frenzy of debate.

The different colors of humans were a shock. We were actually impressed with the varieties of human appearances *before* we realized there were whole different sub-races in the human species. Our scientists currently list 18 different human species. And that was only after we finally settled the five years of debate caused by your "Mr. Ed" program and downgraded horses off of the sentient creatures list.

Cartoons and newscasts gave us a real headache because they were relatively rare. The sight of cartoon versions of yourselves was no more or less odd than "real" footage. What were their purpose? What was this need that you have for abstraction? Why did you pretend on the one hand and then inform on the other? And how could you possibly tell the difference? If what was coming out of these broadcasts had remained stable, even for a period of weeks, then we could have come up with a solid hypothesis for its purposes, but the ground kept shifting underneath us, changing radically from one hour to the next.. Perhaps it was this variety that kept us interested. We couldn't wait to find out what happened next.

* * * * *

Your signals mushroomed after some decades, and they changed. We started seeing sprinkles of color, which closed some debates ("Was this world entirely gray, or did their means of capturing it omit color?") while opening others ("Are the variations in skin color permanent, or perhaps a signal of metamorphosis?"). All the while, the inevitable question boiled away among our thinkers and leaders. Could we contact them? Should we? Using our fastest technology, a message sent to your world would take thousands of years to reach. Could we talk to you? And if we did, what would we have to say?

* * * * *

We don't know how it ended.

Well, we're still trying to piece it together. The last day of broadcasting was a tangle of confused images, being repeated over and over. Something about an old man in a suit

having his picture taken. Something about an airplane. Something about a large ship in the middle of the ocean. These images just repeated over and over on every single channel, something we had never seen before. We were just getting used to your sports shows and your cooking shows and now this. Then there was a lot of static, and then nothing else.

* * * * *

There are plenty of theories about you. Here's mine. Where our people evolved from the mindless, it was a small band who figured out the secret of communication. They stayed in one place for generations, and when their intellect allowed them to grow larger as a group, they spread across the globe, one bit at a time, until the entire world was settled. And when we finished settling the world, we started on our moons. All the while, we remembered our origin, that at one point we were all in the same band. I believe that you either never had that or forgot about it. Maybe different bands of your kind developed at the same time, or maybe you weren't able to record your history as well as we had. How else can you explain the phenomena of looking at another human and seeing an enemy?

Some have suggested that your fictions, your make-believe was a desperate attempt to connect to an *other*. Our world doesn't have conflict, but it doesn't have fiction either. We have to assume that there's a connection there. The other question we ask ourselves all the time is which world is better off? Ours, bereft of imagination but living peacefully and dully, or yours, full of energy and passion and suffering. Even now we don't agree on the answer to that. Personally, I prefer this arrangement. We enjoy your travails but we're not caught up in your storm winds. We don't suffer the consequences of being you.

Of course, if your storytelling was an attempt to make peace with your others, then we can only assume that in the end, it wasn't enough.

* * * * *

There's a saying we've heard from your world, that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery". Some of us have tried to create like you. It's invariably dry and lifeless in

comparison to your vibrant creations. We're not sure what is missing, but we can tell that it's not the same. We keep trying to create like you, to fill this void that's left in our lives, of discovering the new and unique. Maybe someday we'll get the hang of it.

We haven't seen a new show in years. We keep looking for anything, a blip, a speck, but nothing has come up. People on our world now tend to walk outside at night, and take a glance at the cluster of stars where your signal originated from. Some of us have decided to try and send you a signal of our own. We've recorded our words, our feelings and our images and are beaming them back to you in the hopes that perhaps some of you have survived, and maybe by the time it reaches you your civilization will have been rebuilt. It may take centuries before we figure out what happened to you. Meanwhile, we watch the archive of the shows we've recorded and wonder about your fate. We watch the skies for signal.

We hope for the best for your world, but we fear that all that's left are the reruns.

The End