

Television and Society

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O, it is excellent
To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.
—Isabella, *Measure for Measure* II. ii. 108-110

Virtually every inquiry into the nature of television begins with the words “television and,” in which the “and” virtually always seems implicitly to mean something like “and its harmful and/or deleterious consequences on.” This typically leads to a discussion in which those who support this implication spew forth a more or less irrational indictment of the violence (and sometimes the sex) on television and the allegedly asocial, antisocial, or even criminal behavior that it provokes.

This is not a new problem. In Plato's *Phaedrus* (274b9-275b4), Socrates tells the story of the invention of writing by the Egyptian god Theuth. When he presented his invention to Thamus, the reigning pharaoh, Theuth declared that it would radically increase human memory and wisdom. Thamus's reply is startling. After claiming that Theuth as an inventor (analogous to a parent) is prejudiced in favor of his own progeny, so that he fails to see the destructive impact that such a technological instrument would have, Thamus claims that writing will turn humans into passive dependents on things outside themselves, and—contrary to its inventor's expectations—it will produce rather rote memorizing than true memory and rather dilettantism than genuine wisdom. As a result, humans will become “hard to be with,” i.e., arrogant and aggressive, and the true excellences of humans will be drained away. In addition, in Plato's *Gorgias*, the art of rhetoric, an ancient medium of mass persuasion and entertainment (and as such an ancient equivalent to television), is condemned because those who fall under its spell, particularly the young, are corrupted and harm those around them. Furthermore, in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates condemns Homer's epics because they present countless examples of inappropriate (immoral, we would say) behavior which humans would be prone to imitate to their own psychic detriment and to the detriment of the city (society, we would say) as a whole. Typical of such alleged Homeric excess is the following speech of Achilles over the dying Hektor (whose windpipe has been severed, although his vocal cords remain intact so that he may reply to this):

Hektor, since surely when you killed Patroklos, your heart told you that you were safe, and since I was far off, you thought nothing of me, [you] innocent; for a far bigger champion for him was left, and it was I, the one who has dissolved your strength; dogs and vultures will hideously tear you apart for food,...you dog.... For somehow I wish that my fury and spirit would drive me to hack your flesh off and eat it raw for what you have done.¹

¹*Iliad* XXII. 331-333, 334-336, 345, 346-347, tr. R. Lattimore, adapted RZ.

The ancient Greek bloodhounds on the scent of gratuitous acts of violence made the same complaints about such passages as this (and there are many such in Homer) as current moralists do about television. However, as Socrates well knew, external influences only influence a soul that is susceptible to influence, a soul that has not been trained properly, a soul that has not had proper psychagogy (soul-leading) in the form of pedagogy (child-leading).

Current research on the effects of television, as shoddy as most of it is methodologically, would tend to support this at least negatively in the sense that no causal link has been established between television and behavior, and occasionally positively insofar as it has been able to suggest that family modeling has a much greater effect on the behavior and learning of children than either watching television or parental pronouncements (as opposed to parental example) or other external pressures.² In other words, "Television programming is not a monolithic fear stimulus...the 'body count' was much less critical to fright reactions than was the suspense of a scene and the child's ability to identify with the television characters and their setting."³

Of course, scapegoating television as a prime source of society's ills is convenient insofar as it allows us to deflect our attention as parents or teachers or citizens from ourselves as the decisive contributing factor to those same ills. "I find it incredibly irresponsible and ultimately ludicrous to suggest that television is somehow responsible for problems that we've faced...for centuries.... We miss the mark when we ask the film and television industries to do what we cannot do ourselves. Our problems were not brought on by *The Rifleman*. And if we cannot teach our children the difference between fiction and reality, then those problems lie with us."⁴ In other words, here as elsewhere, we should not forget that "The fault...is not in our stars [or in our television], / But in ourselves, that we are" what we are (*Julius Caesar* I. ii. 138-139).

In general, new media of mass communication have always been ripe for scapegoating by mindless puritan moralists. Those who today rail against the evils of television would have railed thirty years ago against the evils of computers, forty years ago against those of rock 'n' roll, seventy years ago against movies, eighty years ago against radio, three hundred years ago against the theater in England, five hundred years ago against the printing of books, and six thousand years ago against writing. Clearly, one lesson that we should have learned from history (a lesson already stated in the *Gorgias*) is that we cannot condemn the tool simply because some of those who use it might misuse it. And as long as battles over a medium are fought on the ground of

²Cf. Alan C. Purves, *Reading and Literature: American achievement in international perspective* (IEA cross-national study, NCTE Research Report No. 20, Urbana, 1981).

³Palmer, Hockett, and Dean, "The Television Family and Children's Fright Reactions," in *Journal of Family Issues*, 4 (2), special issue on television and the family, June 1983, 280. In this connection, it might be worth adding that violence in, say, weekend cartoons is far less a threat to children than insidiously harmful programming such as *Sesame Street*: "*Sesame Street*, for example, the most popular program in public television history has a technical events ratio equal to and sometimes larger than its commercial competition. [¶] It is not well enough appreciated...that *Sesame Street* was conceived, designed, and executed from its inception by ex-advertising people. [Thanks to their] using every technique they learned in advertising...their show has been found more 'interesting' than any public TV program that preceded it. This 'interest' is based on...the same techniques used in advertising." [J. Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (NY, Morrow, 1978), 310.]

⁴Avery Brooks, aka Commander Benjamin Sisko, DS 9, *TV Guide*, 42 (3), #2129, January 15, 1994, 14.

use and consequences rather than on the ground of the nature of the medium, such battles will lead us to “condemn the sex and violence in the Bible or Shakespeare as much as anything found in the most blatant rip-off.”⁵ Therefore, as long as discussions of a medium do not focus on the nature of the medium, discussants are no better than gunslingers who shoot first and ask questions later. The following is typical of such media gunslingers:

As...an American citizen, I feel duty-bound to speak out against a dangerous trend which is manifesting itself in the field of...television entertainment. In the face of the Nation’s terrifying juvenile crime wave, we are threatened with a flood of...television presentations which flaunt indecency and applaud lawlessness.... Regrettably...there are some unscrupulous individuals who value money above morals, and [who] glorify violence, glamorize corruption, and picture criminals as heroes for youth to idolize.... [Media] trash mills, which persist in exalting violence and immorality, spew out...poison which is destroying the impressionable minds of youth.

Are these the words of a speaker heard recently at our school? They could be, but they are not. Rather they are the words of the once venerated, now clay-footed J. Edgar Hoover in his introductory statement to the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* of May 1, 1958. Let those who wish to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Mr. Hoover do so, but some of us would rather stand mind-to-mind with Edward R. Murrow, the paradigmatic television journalist who made the following statement five and a half months after Mr. Hoover made his:

This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance, and indifference. This weapon of television could be useful.⁶

Let those who excoriate television, then, recall that while television did not cause the Crusades or the Inquisition or slavery or the assassination of Lincoln or World War I, television did contribute to the downfall of McCarthyism and the effectiveness of the civil rights movement and the end of the Viet Nam War and the end of the Cold War and the freeing of Nelson Mandela. It is far less true to say that we are what we watch than to say that we watch what we are, for good or for ill. Let us only endeavor to see that it is more for good than for ill.

⁵Wayne Booth, “The Company We Keep,” *Daedalus* 111 (4), Fall 1982, 51.

⁶Address to the Radio and Television News Directors’ Association Convention, Chicago, Illinois, October 15, 1958.