

TV in modern life

Lambasting television is easy. The only difficult thing, indeed, must be for the critics to produce fresh variants on the bitter, derisive comments which seem all that can be found to describe the offerings of man's latest marvel. The same things were said about the films thirty years ago (those same films, by the way, now being hailed by the U-mob as aesthetic masterpieces); and, as with films, one fact brushes aside all the invective. In America families look at television for an average of five and a half hours a day, and in Britain for over half that time. Television, whatever they say about it, has become established as part of modern social life.

Obviously that does not justify its banality. It is quite true that most television programmes are stupid, noisy, mediocre and pointless, and they have become more so since "commercial" television began in this country. But why single out television? Are not most radio programmes stupid, clamorous, mediocre and pointless, too? And most films, novels, papers and plays? Bad as television may be, it has only followed the illuminated trails blazed by every other form of mass entertainment.

In fact, much of the sneering and jeering at television is not really aimed at television at all, but at the working class. Mr Maurice Richardson, commenting on the *Backward Child's*—i.e., commercial television's—*Birthday* in the *Observer* a few weeks ago made merry with phrases like "slobbering cretin" and "the Ad-mass". Smart, easy stuff this; it would be equally easy, if less smart, for Mr Richardson to observe the U-mob lapping up stuff just as poor and twice as nasty as television in practically any West End theatre or cabaret.

Television is the passive entertainment *par excellence*. Indeed, if there is anything it emphasises about present-day society, it is this: the second-handedness of almost everything. The football spectator is often condemned as a passive watcher, getting satisfaction by proxy from the deeds of others, but he appears an active participant against the television-watcher—at least wrapping-up, going out of doors, meeting other men, arguing and letting off steam, while the viewer is as wholly non-participant as is possible to be.

That is only the least part of it, however. The awful, meretricious mimicry which a universal visual medium breeds has to be seen to be believed: unending imitations of imitations, until imitation is an end in itself. It applies to the artistes of course, but they are only the focal point of the pattern. See the amateur talent contests—*Find the Singer*, *Opportunity Knocks*, and so on. The dreadful thing is not that the competitors can't sing. They aren't trying to. They compete only in effectively copying the looks, gestures and antics of the stereotyped professionals.

It is this, the standardization, the depreciating of originality, and the acceptance of prototypes for practically everything, that makes television set the seal on the trends of the last quarter-century's popular entertainment. The man in the armchair is the least noxious of its end-products. What matters much more is the man wearing other people's looks, copying other people's tricks, living by other people's judgements, and thinking other people's thoughts.

The differences between BBC television and "commercial" resolve themselves into the latter's flamboyance—like comparing the *Telegraph* with the *Daily Mirror*. Thus ATV's news-readers are engaging and breezy, the BBC's staid; the BBC children's hour is carefully "improving", while ATV gives them gunplay and thunder. There is one other vital distinction, however. On ATV they give things away; on BBC they don't. The give-away programmes are on every evening. The prizes (modest in comparison with the American ones) include £2 a week for a year, two jackpots which rise to £1000, and television sets *ad lib*.

The give-away programme is a reiteration of one of capitalism's oldest myths: that if you can't climb the tree, there are always windfalls. The excitement of the thought is heaped on for the viewers. "How does it feel to win £1000? Viewers may be able to tell tonight, if the Treasure Trail reaches its thrilling climax", says the *TV Times* advertisement of *Double Your Money. The 64,000 Question*, in which the eventual prize is £3000, is positively ghoulish—the contestant in a glass box, macabre music, close-ups of the audience in dramatic lighting to squeeze out the last vicarious thrill.

What are the social effects of all this? The most obvious one is a loss of sociability: people go out less and welcome callers less. A few years ago there was a good deal of inviting-in to watch the television, but that has fallen off as television ownership has spread. Other forms of entertainment and recreation have lost accordingly. More beer-drinking is done at home and less in the pubs; cinemas, which kept their end up until last year, are now reporting a serious decline. And round this writer's way the local vicar circularized houses last Christmas, to apologize if his carol-singers disturbed the viewers.

With this increased insularity, more attention has probably been paid to homes themselves, in the way of decorating, furnishing, and so on. At first glance that may seem a good thing, but in fact it means acceptance of the individualizing and atomizing of society that has been going on for the last hundred years—the division of labour carried to the point where each man hardly knows his neighbour. Indeed, going back to the television programmes, one of their most remarkable features is the almost hypnotic appeal of seeing other people revealed: in their occupations, in loss of dignity, or, most incredible of all, in the guise of the Man Who Eats Razor Blades, or the Woman Who Got Stuck in the Bath.

The ownership of a television set means far more than mere entertainment, however. It holds implications of prestige, of status shown by conspicuous consumption. Seven or eight years ago the mere fact of owning one was enough; the man who said: "I watched a good play last night" was saying unmistakably: "I've got a television". That has passed, and nowadays it isn't worth having an outdoor aerial. Prestige today involves having a better, brighter and (above all) bigger set: one with a seventeen- or twenty-inch screen, where you can get both programmes and don't have to turn out the light.

It is funny—and sad—this business of "living standards". One would imagine that having a good standard of living could mean only one thing: having plenty of good food, being adequately housed and clothed, having no debts to worry about, and being able to please one's self. Well, it doesn't. It connotes, in fact, not living at all, but possessing. The standard is seen as the rung one has reached on the acquisitive ladder.

The lowest rung, below which there isn't a standard at all, is the radio-set. Above it, roughly in ascending order, come the nine-inch television, the washing machine, the refrigerator, holidays abroad, the mortgage-bought house, the big television set, and, indisputably top, the motor-car.

There are endless other things, of course—clothing, children's schooling, the sounds which come out of the radiogram; they have to be endless or the game might stop, and it can't. The common conception is that for people to be getting any or all of these things means more and more money is, by the grace of industrial civilization, being pumped into working-class homes.

That can be tested. According to the *London and Cambridge Economic Service* wages currently are 176 per cent above their 1938 level. Prices are given as 154 per cent above 1938. In other words, wages in relation to prices (and that is the only way wages *can* be assessed) are just 8 per cent more than what they were in 1938. In concrete terms, at today's prices a man with £7 10s a week is eleven shillings better off than he was before the war.

Where *does* the money for the television sets come from, then? Most are bought on hire-purchase or credit sale. The instalments can be anything from fifteen shillings a week upwards; in the case of a credit sale, when payment must be completed in nine months, they can be as high as three pounds a week. There are two answers. The first is earnings over and above wages—overtime and production bonuses; the second, that more wives go to work than ever before. Caüter and Downham's investigation in Derby found that:

"The explanation of the ability of the lower-paid worker to buy a television set is suggested by the family size analysis. In fact, two-thirds of the owner-families where the chief wage-earner received £7 10s a week or less had more than one wage-earner in the family." (*The Communication of Ideas*, 1954).

The truth, then, is that television sets, like the other working-class "luxuries" are paid for by men working longer hours, their wives going to work, and both of them going without other things. It may be a pity that sacrifices are made in such a cause, but that is a different matter. Perhaps a final word may be said about the economic aspect of it. It is a mistake to think that all this—expensive means of amusement coming into ordinary homes—is a modern wonder. Before television or radio, literally every working-class home had a piano. The price of a piano thirty-five years ago was anything between thirty and seventy pounds; it was, in fact, a far greater luxury.

Don't write off television as another machine-age monstrosity. Potentially, it can do a lot for man; as an instrument of communication, information and amusement. Its failings are not inherent in the cathode-ray tube, but are in reality the failings of social life displayed in three dimensions on a small screen. An American critic described television as a device by which a man may sit in one room and observe the nonsense going on in another. As was said at the beginning, that sort of lambasting is easy and it misses the point—which is that the real nonsense is going on in the room where the man is sitting.

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