

Reconsidering Television

Revolution in Everyday Life

CrimethInc.

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A Look Behind the ‘Scenes’: Inside the Mind of a Serial Killer

Everyone knows how insipid and inane most television programs are. It’s clear to anyone who spends an hour in front of prime time that the sitcoms, news, and commercials alike are deliberately designed to appeal to lowest common denominator levels of taste, intelligence, and attention span in the intended viewers. It has been a cliché for generations now that television is “mindless entertainment.” However, most people don’t really see this as any objection to watching television. It’s not too hard to come to associate inanity and irrelevance with entertainment, to come to assume that “being entertained” means giving your critical and creative faculties a rest — how tiresome it is to be critical and creative, anyway! And in a society that seems intent on taking nothing seriously outside of the “professional world” of production, exchange of goods and services, and accumulation of wealth (witness our general disinterest in everything from Dante to date rape), it seems only natural that we spend our leisure time in the least constructive manner possible.

But the negative effects of watching too much television are much more complicated than they appear to be at first glance.

Our dependence upon television and other manifestations of the homogenized “mass media” to keep us entertained and (such as it is!) informed has economic, social, and, most importantly, personal ramifications for all of us. For our relationship with this media is one of spectator to spectacle, and life itself is less fulfilling for those who watch than it is for those who act.

This spectator/spectacle relationship is revealed by the godlike status of “stars” and other public figures in our society. The media depend partly upon the glamorization, even deification, of “personalities” such as Tom Cruise, Ice Cube or Nancy Reagan for the material they collectively use to keep us watching. Certainly these people are not that much different from or more exciting than the rest of us — and the fact that so many of them can move from one role to another (from model to rock star, from rock star to actor, from actor to president of the United States) without anyone batting an eye is proof that it is their mere status as public figures, not their unusual talents in a given field, that make them “newsworthy.” So much useless information about these individuals is spewed at us daily that one can’t help but eventually pay attention... soon you know more about Madonna’s new boyfriend than you know about your own neighbors. Perhaps you even begin to live vicariously through Madonna, as the media presents her as the personification of “feminine” charm and danger, as living a life vastly more interesting than your own.

Even worse, we soon know even more about fictional characters than we do about real people. Listen to people in their casual conversation and you’ll hear how much time they waste talking about television shows, old movies, and comic book characters. When we could be making better plans for our own lives or getting to know each other better, we instead spend our time exchanging useless information the media has pumped into our heads. And of course the more time we spend wondering who will be Rolling Stone’s “band of the year” next, the less time we have to make more of our own lives.

There's a reason that things are this way.

When television companies, movie producers, and their ilk convince us that entertaining, exciting life is not something that exists all around us every day but instead can only be found in the lives of celebrities, or in movies, they get to sell life itself back to us.

That is, when you spend your spare time watching television rather than traveling or falling in love or playing soccer, you come to believe that the most excitement you can have is in watching a travel show, a soap opera, or a sports game on television. And the more you watch these things on television, the more you forget that you could actually be out doing these things yourself rather than just watching them. You'd be surprised how much more exciting it is to actually make music yourself than to watch MTV — how much more fulfilling it is to make love yourself than to watch some strangers in a pornographic movie — how much more exhilarating it is to actually struggle against an obstacle yourself than to just watch an adventure movie. But the less often you leave the television set to actually do these things, the more empty your actual life is, and the more you need the television shows to make up for the lack of any real excitement in your life.

And that's where the media moguls come in. They're happy to provide you with a substitute life — at a price. Sure they'll sell you second-rate sex and violence, vicarious excitement and affection... but you have to pay for it on pay-per-view or cable television, you have to pay to buy the television sets and the movie tickets and the computer modems, you have to buy the latest fashion or music magazine. Above all you have to listen to their commercials on the radio, read them in the magazines, or watch them in between television shows. These commercials are carefully engineered to get you to spend your money on the products being advertised... and when you do spend your money on them, you'll need to work harder and longer at your job to make more money. In fact chances are that your job isn't too rewarding to you either, and rather than making you feel so alive that you don't need television anymore your job probably makes watching television seem thrilling by comparison. Similarly, you may feel so exhausted when you finish work for the day that you don't have the energy to do anything but turn on the television... and you may even come to associate doing things with working, and thus with being exhausted and dissatisfied, and watching things with being "off the clock" and feeling "free." So you find yourself seeking meaning in life from watching the Superbowl rather than working on your own game.

And this would be hilarious if it wasn't so tragic: as likely than not, the job you put all your effort into has something to do with the media or marketing industry. Maybe you work at an advertising agency, or a television station, or for some business that makes and markets a product that is completely useless to humanity — but that everyone buys because it is so heavily advertised. Coca Cola is a good example. So while you're getting burned out and missing out on real life, on visceral, intense, unmediated experience, just so you can buy a cheap substitute for it, you're supporting the same system that is wasting your time until you die. And make no mistake about it, you are going to die — do you want to look back on a life of watching and talking about the Cosby Show, or a life of pain and pleasure, romance and struggle, love and hate?

Are you satisfied to watch other people do what you could be doing yourself, if you didn't waste so much time watching, didn't spend so much time working at a job you hate to buy things you don't need... to pay for more watching?

The solution is simple, if you want it: it's easy to turn off your television set and go outside. Stop caring what Elvis' daughter is doing, and start caring what your friends or enemies are doing, what your lover or stepmother is doing. Walk out of your office cell-block into the sunshine and learn to do without those fancy clothes or brand new stereo so that you will be free to live a life of challenge and excitement, a life filled with new experiences — a life where you are the master of your own fate rather than just a victim of a dull job and a few sharp advertising campaigns. Surely if you used all that energy that you waste selling shoes or programming computers for your employer, you could find a rewarding way to earn enough money yourself to more than survive... or, better yet, you could work with others towards a world in which survival does not depend upon money.

Act now or forever hold your peace; don't talk about how bored you are, or how much you hate your job, or how amazingly meaningless your life seems (when and if you ever actually stop to think clearly about it) if you're not willing to try to set yourself free.

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