Television As An Image of Culture

David Hoppe

Modern television programming can be viewed by its audience in a culturally symbolic context. Taken this way, all of television — commercial networks, independents, public broadcasting — is of a piece: the series, the commericials, news, sports, public service spots are all one big show that runs from beginning to end of every broadcast day, the various channels providing parallel facets, mild gradations on a common theme — the theme being America. If you watch television this way you may find that it swings beyond the merely absurd into — given the various realities of our actual lives — the realms of the bizarre, even the frightening. Modern television can be viewed as bizarre because the presentations of situations are so lacking in subtlety and ambiguity; frightening because of the social control being exerted. Many of the symbols being broadcast avoid the grey areas of our behavior, encourage the mute solutions of aggression and deny the efficacy of sustained attention and unassuming reflection. These symbols are frightening because of the obstructions they present to wisdom and the way they create the illusion of quick resolution. In a complex world of profoundly differing cultures the quick answers are downright dangerous.

David Hoppe is the Audio Visual Librarian at the Michigan City Public Library. He was educated at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota and received the MLS from the University of Minnesota. He has developed materials for young adults with reading problems, written two books of poetry and a children's book.

This symbolic cultural information, disturbing as it can be, is nevertheless imperative in its way. It has much to tell us about where we find ourselves as a people. It also makes it possible to discover what's happening in our society as easily in a cop show, sitcom or soap opera as in what is billed and presented as "The News." Perhaps more.

First, we must keep the ubiquitous and presently limited nature of television broadcasting in mind. In 1972, 95.8% of all U.S. households had at least one TV set.[1] Thus, we can say that virtually all Americans have access to this particular electronic medium. A TV set in the house is something practically every American, regardless of age, race, sex or economic background, has in common. Yet, television programming is presently generated by a comparatively miniscule fraction of this population. These specialized professionals actually determine what we will or will not see. In recent years Fred Silverman has dominated this stereotype. Silverman served as the Program Director for CBS, ABC and NBC within a ten year span, and greatly influenced the programming of all three major networks. In his job at NBC he was also in charge of news programming. Given the narrow kind of professional clubbiness that the Silverman case represents, one can ask, I think quite legitimately, whether television, as we know it, genuinely represents the incredibly broad viewing audience it serves or, rather, whether it manipulates it.

This issue of manipulation also pertains to the way the technology of television works. In his book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Gerry Mander describes how TV images are conveyed:

> When you are watching television and believe you are looking at pictures, you are actually looking at the phosphorescent glow of three thousand tiny dots. There is no picture there.
>
> These dots seem to be lit constantly, but in fact they are not. All the dots go off 30 times per second, creating what is called the flicker effect of television. . .What you perceive as a picture is actually an image that never exists in any given moment but rather is constructed over time. Your perception of it as an image depends upon your brain's ability to gather in all the lit dots, collect the image they make on your retina in sequence, and form a picture. . .a television image gains its existence *only* once you've put it together inside your head. . .As you watch television you do not "see" any of this fancy construction work happening. It is taking place at a rate faster than the nerve pathways between your retina and the portion of your brain that "sees" can process them.[2]

We can process sequential images at about ten times per second. Television sends its sequential images at 30 times per second. Mander goes on to say that it is this disparity in processing speeds that made subliminal advertising possible. Images were placed in the dot se-

quence at a speed faster than conscious sight allowed. Thus, advertisers can produce more images than the eye can process.[3]

While watching television, the audience is bombarded by a stream of images that enter their consciousness at a speed so fast they cannot discriminate among them or make conscious decisions concerning which to accept and which to reject. They are passive receptors. Ultimately, the only real choice audiences have is either to continue watching those stream of images, piling them indiscriminately in their memory banks, or else turn the set off.

Given television's ability to control, to manipulate, it is important to view the role models presented and to discover what social ends these models serve. An examination of women's roles can be especially revealing here due to the fact that over the past ten years a significant number of women in our society have been making a conscious effort to define and often restructure their roles. These efforts have had a dramatic impact on our nation's social life. Has this impact been reflected on television?

I would say that yes, it has. But while women's changing roles over the past decade have been reflected they have not truly been represented. TV, as we know it, is an advertiser's, or sponsor's medium. The shows that we watch are designed not to englighten or emotionally move us so much as they are to hook us into keeping the set on long enough to absorb the commercials that keep the whole operation running. Without sponsors, the networks could not afford to produce programs. Therefore, programs are tailored to fit sponsor's needs.

The advertiser's livelihood is based upon the ability to identify social trends and then define those trends in terms of images. Thus, advertiser's know that more women are working, that more women are entering the professional and management positions, that women generally have more money to spend and are in positions to consume a greater variety of goods. Television advertising and the programs that complement it — from spots for Harvey's Bristol Creme (it's okay for affluent women to call up affluent men) to innocuous sitcoms like "Rhoda" (his and her careers may lead to separation but such are the hard knocks of life in the marketplace) do indeed reflect, or more accurately, exploit women's social evolutionary trend. Through the production of female images and role models, television helps control women within U.S. culture. Susan Sontag, in her meditation *On Photography*, points out:

> The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.[4]

Modern television does not give its viewers the freedom of choice. The genuine dilemmas of people trying to orient themselves in a world in which traditional roles have become ambiguous and hazy are hardly ever actually represented. The genuine drama of people trying to adjust to a changing world without sacrificing too much of what they consider their personal integrity is rarely shown. Instead we are told how we can spend our money and are shown the kinds of environments we should want.

Television can lead a person to think and act and even dream a certain way on the acceptance of a television society which places a premium on aggression and interpersonal competition. It can also be used as a source of information about the image of culture which one small control group is able to project into the homes of America, and as a learning experience concerning the powers of media.

Notes

1. Haley, Mary Jean. "World Television," *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Winter 1977/78, 36.
2. Mander, Jerry. *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. N.Y.: William Morrow & Co. 1977.
3. *Ibid.* 41.
4. Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Girous 1977, 157.