



Tune In, Turn On:

DEFENDING TV BY MANUEL MENDOZA

"TELEVISION IS DRUGS"—BUMPER STICKER OUTSIDE
PAPYRUS BOOKS IN MANHATTAN

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hortly after moving to New York in 1997, I found myself at a hipster gathering in Soho. Artsy types had come together at the home of film archivist Rick Prelinger for an evening of post-modern irony: Prelinger was screening cautionary—and therefore unintentionally funny—instructional films from the 1950s. Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink.

Among the guests was a young man who identified himself as a filmmaker. When I told him what I did—write about TV—the look that came over his face was a combination of horror and disgust. He didn't own a TV, he said, hardly watched any. How could I spend my career taking such dreck seriously?

So what was he working on, I wondered aloud. "A TV pilot," he said.

"EIGHT HOURS A DAY, THAT'S ALL WE ASK."—SLOGAN
FROM ABC'S "TV IS GOOD" MARKETING CAMPAIGN

"IT'S ONLY TV."—COMMON EXCUSE
USED BY TV'S DEFENDERS TO DENY ITS INFLUENCE

"I WATCH TV, SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO."—MY MOTTO

I must be in the right business. Somebody has to process, report on and analyze these disreputable images and sounds emanating from the magic box's dozens of frequencies. And the more that elites like my Soho-friend-in-denial choose to live in a fantasy world where they can, say, make television or "just watch the news" and not be implicated in it, the more work there is for me to do.

See, I'm a hardened channel-surfer, a fearless man of my tube-tied time. Understanding the self-references on *Seinfeld* is an essential part of, to paraphrase the Buddhists, being in the now.

Who needs boring books you actually have to concentrate on, the cinema (where you have to pay \$8 to listen to people chew) or the thee-ah-tah (where you have to pay \$60 to listen to cats sing) when I can sit at home on my double-wide chaise lounge (on my ass) and catch Mark McGwire's latest home run or *The McLaughlin Group* or a dirty movie on cable or C-SPAN's boring series on books...or little snippets of each of them in any order I choose, or randomly.

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There is so much rich material on television, material that speaks to our present circumstances in ways ugly and beautiful that unlike the elites who long for a mythical past in which everyone read the great novels and debated the great plays (or at least everyone who was white and wealthy), I am content to use my three remote controls and on-screen programming guide to glide over and through everything from ancient sitcom reruns to Bergman films to the *World's Wildest Police Chases* to a six-and-half-hour documentary about the travails of a farm family.

Sometimes I even watch one program from start to finish and sometimes it feels like an artistic, aesthetic, uplifting experience. Some people say we're in "the second golden age of television." (The first one came in the 1950s, when Shakespeare and other high art was regularly adapted for the small screen.)

In a culture where the differences between high and low art have collapsed—like it or not (and I do)—TV serves a social function that both falls

outside traditional artistic concerns and is contained by them. I would argue that this social function rendered by artistic means calls for a separate aesthetic for television, one based on several factors unique to the medium, especially its reflection of and commentary on the contemporary social concerns of its audience.

Better than most films, plays or novels, the best programs on TV—usually one-hour dramas like *The X-Files*, *Homicide: Life on The Street*, *The Practice* and *Ally McBeal* but occasionally culturally deft half-hour comedies such as *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Seinfeld*—deal head-on with the perplexing issues our time, including, ironically enough, the conglomerization/corporatization that TV is an integral part of.

This responsiveness, especially compared to the other communication and entertainment mediums, is due to TV's quick turnaround time from conception to production to dissemination. As a result, TV is more readily able to reflect the lives and up-to-the-minute concerns, interests and obsessions of the vox populi.

While mainstream commercial TV is rarely as subtle or as complex as say, the late Polish filmmaker Krzysztof Kieslowski's brilliant, profound 10-hour series of films for Polish TV, *The Decalogue*, it is also responsible for many of the stylistic milestones of the past decade. From the textured urban drama of *Hill Street Blues* to the quick cuts on MTV, TV has become the basis for artistic expression in all the other mediums.

In short, television is the most highly traded cultural currency of our age.

Usually, such influence is used as a blow against TV: Its development into a pervasive force in Western society bears the brunt of the blame for diminished attention spans and a drop-off in the reading of deeper, supposedly more important texts. TV is also charged with lowering the common denominator in the arts, turning everything from artistic expression to public discourse into saleable entertainment, while almost single-handedly collapsing the differences between high culture and the more "vulgar," popular forms.

Television is not a threat to our
culture. It is our culture.

But if TV holds that much sway across the cultural board, it must be more brilliant, profound and important because of it. The critics shouldn't be allowed to have it both ways.

At the same time, when it comes to the integrity of those other mediums, television also comes through, playing a crucial role in spreading the high-art gospel. For non-elites living outside the high-culture centers on the coasts, TV has always served as a connection to classical music, theater and art films. Before I had the opportunity to see a Broadway play, I had seen Gary Sinise and John Malkovich in Sam Shepard's *True West*. It was shown on TV.

Elites also discount TV's impact as a communal information source linking millions of ordinary people to the political and social events that have shaped the century, including the assassination of President Kennedy, the violent confrontation outside the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, the moon landing, even programs such as *Roots* and *All in the Family*, which have done more to create awareness and understanding of our country's racial history than all the sociology textbooks put together.

And if it wasn't for TV, the documentary would be all but a dead form. As opposed to the handful of nonfiction films that are theatrically released annually, TV shows dozens every week. Many of the best are on

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PBS, which I'm sure the elites would say doesn't count. Like watching the news, they believe watching public television doesn't really count as watching TV.

But the opposite is true: the most corrupted aspect of TV is the one that elites who work outside of the TV have done the most to corrupt—journalism.

"FOR THE SHOWDOWN WITH IRAQ, STAY TUNED TO CNN."—FEBRUARY 1998
PROMOTIONAL AD DURING THE CRISIS OVER U.N. INSPECTIONS

"A GRITTY AND GUTSY PERFORMANCE."—TED KOPPEL
EVALUATING PRESIDENT CLINTON'S 1998 STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

Money and power. Bill and Monica. Sam and Diane (Donaldson and Sawyer, not Malone and Chambers).

TV journalism—an unspoken conspiracy between our degraded political culture and our eager-for-ratings media culture—is the one area of TV which is indefensible.

I don't need to run down the entire history, but starting with the manipulative use of political commercials in the 1960s, right up through the O.J. Simpson coverage and President Clinton's televised grand-jury testimony, TV "journalists" and political operatives have fed off of each other's self-interests and, inadvertently or not, undermined both the political process and all forms of reportage, including the work of venerated print outlets. Because when it comes to a big story like the Monica Lewinsky scandal, even *The New York Times* behaves like a tabloid.

The blame falls on increased competition, the growth of all-news cable channels and, especially, the corporatization of the news media by conglomerates like General Electric, Disney and Westinghouse. It's no coincidence that you've seen very little coverage of Disney by ABC News since the mouse bought the network or that ABC News hound Diane Sawyer is married to film director Mike Nichols. They move in the same circles and that can't be good for journalism.

In other words, much of our public discourse has been reduced by TV journalism to its entertainment elements, both distracting us from serious discussion of public issues and engulfing us in that distraction.

Ironically, the opposite is often true in the more overt "commercial entertainment" areas of television: Continuing series such as *M*A*S*H*,

Roseanne, *Picket Fences*, et al. use TV's very commerciality—akin to what happened with films during the classic Hollywood studio era—to create socially relevant scenarios that often subvert their commercial underpinnings.

How is this done? Ironically, with money. For without the revenues from advertising, the television networks would not be able to afford to pay studios and producers and actors and camera operators and best boys to make programs with high production values.

Why is a product of Twentieth Century Fox's film division inherently superior to a product of Twentieth Century Fox Television?

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Free from the news business' insidious conceit that it simply reports events and doesn't create and shape them, fictional TV is better equipped to use mass entertainment's cash flow for artistic ends. For TV is no exception in the long history of artists spending the man's money to create insightful works the man doesn't necessarily approve of (but doesn't mind paying for as long as those ad dollars keep rolling in).

At the same time, in the chicken-or-the-egg argument over TV and commercialism, remember that capitalism came first. TV did not invent it, and its influence on expression cuts across all of the arts.

Yet only TV is attacked with Marshall McLuhan's oft-repeated, now outdated aphorism, "The medium is the message." In other words, TV is thought to be inherently different and inferior as an art form.

Movies may be discussed at different intellectual levels or even in different languages, but both everyday movie critics and film academicians are concerned with which films are relevant, which are aesthetically pleas-

ing. Unlike television programs, films, plays and books are never dismissed as a group.

Only TV elicits the kind of reaction that could produce a serious book called *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.

The problem with those arguments is that they don't take several factors into account, including that films, books and increasingly the theater are controlled by the same large conglomerates. Why is a product of Twentieth Century Fox's film division inherently superior to a product of Twentieth Century Fox Television?

Films, which have reached a low ebb in recent years, are now generally more commercial, predictable and escapist than TV. *Armageddon* is the model, not the exception. And when movies look for source material, they are increasingly turning to television shows. Such remakes have become a film staple, some of them well-made, others laughable.

Yet even as the number of companies who control the entertainment media shrinks, pluralism thrives. As I finish this article, my computer sitting next to my 20-inch Sony TV on my desk, I have more choices than my ancestors ever dreamed of, and television is both one of the causes and one of the products of those increased options.

To write it off as irrelevant or evil is to do the opposite of what the elites who criticize TV out of ignorance say we should do: Pay more attention to our culture. But heeding that cry requires a descent from the ivory tower and into the complicated muck of 157 channels.

Because even if "nothing's on," something's up. Television is not a threat to our culture. It is our culture.

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