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I'm in a new world^[1]. I've left secure employment at the University of California for London and returned to the kind of life I led for a decade from my mid-20s, when I was a member of what [we now call the precariat/cognitariat](#).

But this isn't just about me. It's the first time since those days that I'm without a television. In my previous years of precariousness, two pressures—or were they preferences?—compelled me to live minus TV. Materially, I couldn't afford one. And ideologically, I regarded it as both a symbol and a means of blindsiding people through pleasurable distraction.

Then I discovered media and cultural studies and learnt that I wasn't supposed to believe such things. Why? I was told that the public was comprised of agile, skillful, unpredictable readers. The potential of soap opera, for example, to touch them deserved respect rather than condemnation.

Life with or without television became more confusing than my longstanding leftist functionalism would allow once I proceeded to consult the views of cultural sages who believed in active audiences. Doris Lessing regarded mystification by the *bourgeois* media as a virtual given for skeptical readers: 'Asked in a moment of repletion what they believe, their answers would have little to do with the garbage they have imbibed 'just for a laugh'' (1990: 18). [Stuart Hall said](#): 'I speak and talk to the radio and the TV all the time. I say, 'that is not true' and 'you are lying through your teeth' and 'that cannot be so'. I keep up a running dialogue'. Foucault noted '[o]n se plaint toujours que les médias bourrent la tête des gens. Il y a de la misanthropie dans cette idée. Je crois au contraire que les gens réagissent; plus on veut les convaincre, plus ils s'interrogent' [Some complain that the media brainwash people. This seems misanthropic to me. I believe that people resist; the more one tries to convince them, the more they ask questions]^[2] (2001: 925, 927).

In any event, when I encountered media and cultural studies, I discovered that my childhood enjoyment of TV (*Mister Ed*, *The Avengers*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *Not Only ... But Also*, *The Mavis Bramston Show*, *Match of the Day*, *Thierry la Fronde*, *At Last the 1948 Show*, *My Favorite Martian*, *The Big Match*, *Le*

chagrin et la pitié, The Addams Family, Flower Pot Men) was correct and my later denunciation of it not so.

So my perspective altered; but I still couldn't afford a set. So I taught television in universities without owning one. Eek. Guilty pleasures transformed into the *absence* of guilty pleasures, and an ensuing meta-guilt—guilt about the lack of conventional guilt. Then I got a 'proper' job and bought a television.

Now I'm back where I was twenty years ago, but for subtly distinct reasons.

I left LA for London a few days ago to move in with someone for the first time since *Seinfeld* became a hit. My *fiancée* Sara has a 7-year old son. She is opposed to having a television set in our new home, for aesthetic and parental reasons. She worries that TVs are eyesores that dominate small apartments. And her experience of having one was of watching programs she neither greatly enjoyed nor benefited from, simply because the device was there and easily used; she makes more discriminating decisions on what to watch now that she seeks TV programs out on-line. And since she began life without a television four years ago, her son sleeps better and engages more easily in conversation, play, reading, walking on the heath, and so on.

So for now at least, I'm neither teaching television nor living with it. This is all rather new for me, as it runs counter to both my experience of full-time employment and my intellectual-political line. It's stimulating me to think differently.



Richard Hoggart developed a sorrowful paradox a while back that is giving me pause: 'Liberty is the freedom to be abused and to be constantly urged to consume garbage' (1995: 61). And some of the [latest research](#) into the [impact of television viewing on the young](#) can easily arouse an awkward part of my cultural studies prof's lizard thinking: in quiet moments that must never be shared on the keynote circuit, I ask myself 'does TV rot your brain?'

Perhaps I've been guilty in the past of what Adorno called 'an ironic toleration' of television (1975: 16), ignoring Althusser's precept that the principal task of our beloved is 'cramming every 'citizen' with daily doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc' (1971: 154) and Virilio's criticism that television 'no longer has the task of informing or entertaining the mass of viewers, but of exposing and invading individuals' domestic space' (2000: 59).

Then again, I am equally haunted by Dallas Smythe's provocation from sixty years ago about TV's harshest critics, 'who are best qualified by virtue of the fact that "they wouldn't have a television set in the house"' (2004: 319).

So I'm more confused than ever. And you?

Toby Miller is 20% of a Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University. You can follow his misadventures at tobymiller.org and the 'culturalstudies' podcast on iTunes or as an application for your smartphone.

[1] Thanks to Sara Ayech for her help.

[2] Thanks to Dana Polan and Dominic Thomas for endorsing my translation of this sequence, which differs from the usual version.

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