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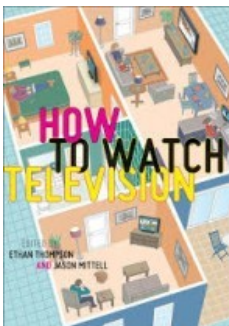
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LOVE IT. HATE IT. MISUNDERSTAND IT. TELEVISION by Toby Miller

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Television. So often derided or adored for its alleged properties of distraction or pleasure. Blamed by pediatricians for making children weigh more than is fashionable in evidence-based public policy. Criticized by some cultural critics for diverting the young, the middle-aged, the firm, and the infirm from attending to real matters of state or heart. Valorized by corporations as a guaranteed source of revenue. Admired by other cultural critics for its populist impulses.

That binary discourse continues to enchant participants from all backgrounds. They revel in arguments that go back centuries and are basically about how to govern societies and what to do about forms of life that invoke unruliness. Here's a primer.

Writing in the first century AD, Plutarch recounts the following story about Solon. Having enjoyed what later became known as a tragedy, Solon asked the play's author, Thespis, whether he was not ashamed to tell such lies in front of so many people. When Thespis replied that there was no harm in speaking or acting in this way in make-believe, Solon struck the ground angrily with his staff and exclaimed, "Yes, but if we allow ourselves to praise and honour make-believe like this, the next thing will be to find it creeping into our serious business."

Leaping forward to the 12th century, John of Salisbury warned of the negative impact of juggling, mime, and acting on 'unoccupied minds . . . pampered by the solace of some pleasure . . . to their greater harm.' And when printed books began to proliferate in the early 18th century, critics feared a return to the "barbarism" of the post-Roman Empire; true erudition would be overwhelmed by popular texts, just as it had been by war. When Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Man Werther* came out in 1774, its suiciding hero was deemed to have caused numerous mimetic deaths among readers, and the book was banned in many cities.

TV is, of course, just the latest victim/criminal of this discourse, because it is the entertainment *bodega* of the second half of the 20th century and since. The arguments remain the same. Only the names have changed to protect the ignorant.

Attempts to attack and defend television follow a tiresomely familiar trajectory. It rots your brain/it expresses popular desire. It depoliticizes viewers/it reflects the material struggles of audiences. The dance between these poles appears

unresolvable. Endless studies and claims are made on each side, with the refrains entirely predictable.

But television really does have a dire influence on the world. It's just that this impact is missed by the duelling cavaliers and roundheads of pro and con.

The negative effect of television is not to do with violence or education, and it's not answerable through a rhetoric of celebration grounded in populist fandom. The obsession with consciousness that colors communication, television, media, and cultural studies alongside psychology, education, medicine, sociology, and assorted odds and sods doesn't cut the mustard.

For the real damage done by TV is material.



In 2007, 207.5 million sets were sold around the globe, of which 56% were old-style, fat-screen TVs. The number for 2011 was 245.5 million, with a third being fat screens and the remainder the newer, leaner flat screens.

Like electronic production more generally, TV relies on exorbitant water use and carcinogens. Most color televisions historically use cathode-ray tubes (CRTs), which send electrons from cesium cathodes into high-voltage electrodes that project onto phosphorescent screens and emit radiation to illuminate phosphors.

CRTs are made of zinc, copper, cesium, cadmium, silver, and lead. Major environmental problem occur both when they are made and when they are thrown away, because their components seep into underground water, leaving a base history of heavy metals and toxic chemicals. This worsened with the 2009 transition to digital broadcasting in the US, when outdated analog sets, perhaps the hardest of all manufactures to recycle, were discarded.



Marketing for flat-screen televisions stresses consumer pleasure, and as the cost of sets drops, their uptake increases, with little regard for electricity consumption—up to 250 watts per hour.

Today's flat-screen high-definition darlings frequently use more electricity than their fat-screen analog predecessors, and emanate more heat, which can stimulate additional use of air conditioning in hot climates.

Do you read about, talk about, or worry about that question in your newspaper, garden, web site, or school? Not

much. And in your television studies class? Not at all.

Doesn't fit the binary. Doesn't address consciousness.

Just fits the truth of detritus, as per the nasty pictures accompanying this column.

For television studies to make a difference, it can no longer rely on the admittedly worthwhile tasks of textual analysis or audience studies. It needs to be prepared to investigate the material properties of its object of obsession.



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