

Talking Back to the Tube

BY BRETT R. DEWEY

Most television advertisements unrelentingly encourage us to buy, buy, buy. We can respond to TV's seductive values not only with the "off" button, but by putting the TV in its place and actively talking back to the tube.

K*ill your television* exhorts Ned's Atomic Dustbin in a song about a young girl starved for the attention her father gives only to the small screen. What we need, these alternative British rockers sing, is "an intermission" for people to reconnect with one another; it would be "soap for sore eyes." In an echo of the societal estrangement felt by their young listeners, the band dissents from the promiscuous marketing and ravenous profit-taking by media conglomerates. The sentiment helped them sell 300,000 albums (even dissenters from television's charm, it seems, want a piece of the media pie that they decry). Their song is a powerful protest against the society-wide addiction to television watching. Churches need to enter this protest too.

Let me confess, I love television. I watch it for news, nap to its noise, and set my children before it when I need respite from household chaos. Through its best programs I connect with wider human experience and disconnect from life's pageant of trials. Yet I also realize that viewing TV wisely and resisting its barrage of consumerist values is part of caring for my family and myself. So, you see, I'm a TV addict on the way to recovery.

MOVING BEYOND TELECID

Advertisements go hand-in-hand with television in our society, where network broadcasting is a free public service supported by private advertising revenue. Network television's survival depends on selling ads that convince us to consume. These ads are TV's most devious claim on our lives, for most—even when they are clever and funny—unrelentingly encourage us to buy, buy, buy.

This Hour Has 22 Minutes, the satirical Canadian comedy show, borrows

its name from the fact that commercial breaks legally swallow up twenty-two minutes of each hour's programming. Yet marketing infiltrates the rest with "placements" that embed consumer items in prominent and positive places through the fabric of the broadcast. Ad agencies, noting the tremendous boost news coverage of O. J. Simpson's dramatic flight from authorities in a Ford Bronco gave to the automaker and the SUV market, now pitch products on the sly in most storylines. Even the once-imagined haven from advertising, the Public Broadcasting System, lures corporate and local business dollars with the "underwriting" guise. PBS claims its children's cartoons, such as *Arthur*, promote healthy behavior, but such behavior is best rewarded with a tasty box of 100% pure fruit juice. Perhaps "this hour has 60 minutes" more accurately describes this marketing blitzkrieg.

A former and repentant advertising executive, Jerry Mander, famously blasts the small screen in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*:

Television encourages separation: people from community, people from each other, people from themselves, creating more buying units and discouraging organized opposition to the system. It creates a surrogate community: itself. It becomes everyone's intimate advisor, teacher and guide to appropriate behavior and awareness. Thereby, it becomes its own feedback system, furthering its own growth and accelerating the transformation of everything and everyone into artificial form.¹

Unrelenting in his critique of television and advertising strategists, Mander urges us to "kill our television" before it kills our communities, families, and selves. It creates zombies open to the whims of incoming images "that are recorded in memory whether you think about them or not. They pour into you like fluid into a container. You are the container. The television is the pourer." With dim hope in human capacity to resist television's seduction, he adds, "the viewer is little more than a vessel of reception, and television itself is less a communications or educational medium...than an instrument that plants images in the unconscious realms of the mind."² If we killed the tube, it would be self-defense.

Surely Mander goes too far, because whatever is wrong with television is partly our fault as viewers; we cannot blame everything on the programmers and their advertising partners. That's why the solution to television's advertising seduction is not 'telecide,' as Ned's Atomic Dustbin and Mander advise. To the extent we are the problem with television, we also hold the solution to its seduction. We ought not be zombies open to unfiltered images and strategies, but sifters of television's claims on our lives with the aid of Christian wisdom.

PUTTING TV IN ITS PLACE...

Reorganizing the space in our homes is a good way to start our protest

of the unfiltered images television bombards us with. How we order our space is an important, often unconscious aspect of our lives.

In my home we call the family room the "TV room," and this expression is the first sign that something has gone wrong. We've put the television in the middle of the widest wall, with our cushy couch and all the chairs in the room arranged for a good view. Everything points to the television. Even our olive wood Jesus from the Holy Land, beckoning the "least of these" to come to him, gazes toward the tube.

From our kitchen simply lean and peep to catch a glimpse of the strategically placed tube, and even in the dining room, once the holy of holies for family gatherings, the chairs can be turned for viewing. From three rooms we've made the television accessible; but as I see now, we've made relationships with each other more inaccessible. We've not oriented the sofas and chairs to encourage conversations among us. Our family room has become a place for isolated togetherness.

Our living space can be more family friendly. We can rearrange the furniture, limit the number of television sets to one, and shut it into a cabinet. There is a time, after all, to banish the television from sight.

...AND TALKING BACK

A colleague shares the story that from the time his daughter was young, he and his wife talked back to their TV. When the parade of consumerist messages entered their home they exposed and made fun of them, debunking their exaggerated claims out loud. By her teen years their daughter had written them off as typically weird parents, until one day she made a shocking discovery at a friend's house. Returning home she announced, "They talk back to their TV too!" Apparently her parents were not the only "weird" ones!

Talking back to the tube is a form of active viewing that can help us resist deviant images and remain alert to the blurring between television show and ad. It can be fun, as well as prophetic, to expose malformed values of culture! We can be satirical without being cynical. For instance, families might create pigeonholes for the consumerist values they see. When an ad celebrates fame as the highest goal of life, call it "celebrity sophistry." When the thin and pretty, or muscular and handsome, become the model for human flourishing, expose the "beautiful people syndrome." "God so loves the pretty" gets our response "God so loved the world."

Younger children need extra assistance in responding to ads, for "children five and younger often can't distinguish between commercials and regular programming, and many children as old as nine or ten can't readily explain the purpose of advertising." Parents can watch TV with their kids and make a game of spotting ads: encourage children to say "Commercial!" each time a new one is shown, and talk with them about each one.³

Oddly enough, television itself has offered a hilariously profound

model of talking back in *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, or “MST3K” to aficionados, with its send-ups of America’s fascination with bad science fiction movies. On the show, a man trapped on a spaceship traveling endlessly through the outer darkness is forced to watch really, *really* dreadful movies. To endure the pain of it all, he creates robots to talk with as they watch the films. We view the movies over the shoulders of the man and his robots (seeing only their silhouettes on the bottom of the screen) and overhear their uproarious wisecracks. “Hey! That’s the same crocodile that belly-flopped in the last movie!” quips one in reference to the hokey stock Africa footage of *The Leech Woman*, in which a one-hundred-forty-year-old woman lures unsuspecting scientists to Africa to find the fountain of youth. In another MST3K episode, a B-movie character falls through the sky as a robot supplements the dialogue, “He-e-elp, I’m falling at a 60-degree angle defying the laws of physics!”

MST3K’s amusement and power come in stepping back from the culturally-laden characters and symbols in old B movies, then poking gentle fun at them and the audiences who once consumed their dreariness. (Perhaps in the future an MST3K-like program will find humor in *our* current viewing fare!) The show critiques our passive viewing of dismal programming, and shows how talking back to the small screen can be a lot of fun. In a similar way, the Gospel enables us step back from the characters and symbols laden with consumerist values on television today.

Television isn’t all bad. We can watch it within a space that does not give the small screen primary attention, and talk back to the parade of images that try to shape our allegiances to brand and style. Then our TV rooms will be family rooms again, where we stand together against consumerist values that compete for our loyalty. We will not be passive receptacles of its images, but can discern when to talk back to the tube and when to just turn it off.

NOTES

1 Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1978), 133.

2 *Ibid.*, 204.

3 Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), 60.



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