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The Last Word: Reality into Fiction - 1984

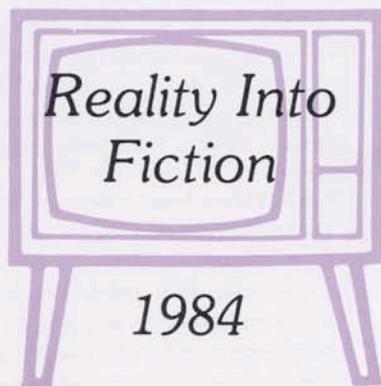
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What is life? Work followed by television. We dare not go out in the evenings, but why should we, when the whole of life is brought to our hearths?
Anthony Burgess, 1985

Television programming in the United States is transforming our society. Unaware of its incursions, Americans literally "buy into" dramatized patterns of behavior. From the evening news to advertising to prime-time drama like "Dynasty" or "Matt Houston" the distinctions between reality and fiction are blurred if not obliterated. Drama becomes reality; reality, e.g., the news, becomes drama. Contemporary American television posits a world view impacting on interpersonal interactions, family structure, cultural transmission, political decision-making, war and what it means "to know."

American adults watch some twenty-five hours of television a week; approximately half of these hours are classified as drama. In *The Age of Television* Martin Esslin points out that

today the average American is exposed to as much drama in a week as the most zealous theatre buff of the past century would have seen in several months!

Why do we spend so much time with this nonparticipatory medium? One answer may be that the technology is there, therefore it must be utilized. Another response may be (as Anthony Burgess suggests in 1985) "dullness following dullness." The situation may be a mixture of at least these two motivations. Technology is a new God-word; television (like the computer) is one of the deities.

If one accepts Esslin's premise (as I do) that all television is more or less drama,

certain consequences follow. First, one is so overwhelmed with a surfeit of drama that one tends to live in a permanent suspension of disbelief. This condition short circuits critical analysis of what one sees and hears. Second, the democratic potential of television is undermined. An uneducated "entranced" populace cannot think critically about issues necessary to its survival. Third, the citizenry becomes easy prey for the rhetorical visions offered by those persons who have power in the established order -- social, political and military. The loss of critical ability attending the permanent suspension of disbelief may lead to "group think" and the belief in American invulnerability and "rightness."

American television tends to be provincial. Unlike European television systems, we import little programming. International news is reported by Americans, from an American perspective. This can have, in addition to the confusion perpetrated by the fiction/reality dilemma discussed above, serious implications for our involvement in international events. More specifically, of late our national response to most international events tends to be "deploy the missiles and/or send in the troops," with little regard for the protests of the rest of the world community. This "holy war" mentality is then encouraged by holistic programming enveloping the nation in the creation and recreation of dramas of war, death and destruction. Let me give examples to illustrate this claim.

On November 20, 1983, some one-hundred million Americans clustered around television sets in homes across the country intent on a single program, the controversial "The Day After." This program, a docudrama (in Newspeak, not a "pure" drama nor a "pure" documentary but a confection composed of a bit of each, laced with a touch of propaganda) coincided with a week dedicated to programs commemorating John F. Kennedy and his presidency. As David S. Broder pointed out in the November 27th issue of *The Boston Globe*, we had and have a few other pressing problems, such as malnutrition and anemia in increasing numbers of women and children. Broder's point seems apt enough: the anguish we feel seems to be that which television "makes real" for us. How can real anemia and malnutrition compete with a fake nuclear holocaust? To give an idea of the "real" programming available during late October and November, the following is an incomplete list of some of the events Americans became privy to via the telly:

1. The American "peace-keeping" force in Beirut, plus numerous presidential messages justifying the peace-keeping force.
2. The United States invasion of Grenada, along with numerous presidential messages justifying the invasion in an effort to be a "good neighbor" and "restore democracy."
3. Not one, but two television documentaries on the Vietnam War. This new-style documentary form allows those who brought us the war initially to write, so to speak, its history for the post-literate generation.
4. The twentieth anniversary of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.
5. Near-war, death, terrorist acts and assassinations at home and abroad.
6. Worldwide demonstrations protesting the deployment of Pershing missiles to Europe.
7. The deployment of the missiles and the Soviet protest. The breakdown of the Geneva negotiations between the superpowers.
8. "The Day After," and countless commentaries on it.

The American audience, barely able to distinguish between fiction and reality and overwhelmed with war, death and devastation, could only trundle off to work each morning, hoping that better minds were minding the White House.

To be a democratic superpower is no easy task. Having elected this position, Americans -- and America -- must take responsible action. To do this requires an informed, educated citizenry. To achieve an informed citizenry should be an aim of television programming.

Passivity is seemingly encouraged in American classrooms and living rooms (countless empty vessels waiting to be filled). To do what is necessary, i.e., to think issues through, to institute dialogue, to chart some correction for the potentially disastrous international course we navigate, requires discipline and commitment.

Finally, the desire to critically assess issues and not succumb to the lure of forgetfulness in drama is essential. What is needed is not more preparations for war nor docudramas about war but more critical thought, dialogue and the courage to think.

If man is free to evaluate, he is also free to act on his evaluations. But he cannot evaluate without knowledge, and hence cannot act without it. Education consists in acquiring both the knowledge and the terms of evaluation. Hence we are not free not to acquire an education. It is the first condition of freedom.

Anthony Burgess, 1985

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