

Scientists Have Much To Answer For.

Scientists gave us the atom bomb, but they also gave us Television, and it is not yet certain which is going to destroy civilized life as we know it. First, the bomb threatens our cities and our bodies, but what is Television doing to our hearts and minds? We just haven't used the bomb as much. Someone with heartbreaking patience and a computer announced the other day that the average person by the time he or she is 16 has witnessed 18,000 murders or death by violence—right in his or her own home!

So it might seem like good news that the commercial networks are losing their audience, and with it their financial base. But they are reaching for more control, they take fewer risks, their programs grow more infantile, violent and shallow. They lobby Washington to deregulate their activities, so they will have no limits at all on their exploitation of the public airwaves.

The Cable and Pay-TV services after fumbling about with some expensive experiments in programming—like CBS' multi-million-dollar failure with its cultural channel—are beginning to turn into big business. Two years ago, in the first year after the Writers Guild strike that gave Writers royalties on programs made for Pay-TV, the total amount of royalties paid to writers was about 46,000 dollars. Last year it was over 856,000 dollars, a 1700 percent increase in one year. The pace of change is swift, but we are talking business changes, not artistic progress.

For the sad news is that the new areas opening up are being filled by the same people who failed at the networks, and they are being filled with the same kind of mindless junk, spiced with a little more sex and violence, and the same witless sentimentality that numbed the commercial networks' audience.

They are like Governor Ferguson of Texas who ran on a simple and appealing slogan: now it's just one damn thing after another; with me it'll be one damn thing all the time.

For that person who has seen death and dismemberment 18,000 times is, by now, all of us. Death by violence is a fact of normal life. This avalanche of images of violence fictional and real, anaesthetizes the heart. Not very long ago—in 1968—in a movie that in part was meant to carry home the horror of war, to express outrage at the slaughter of innocents in the service of political movements, the poet who wrote the book, and the movie makers who made the movie created a scene in which the hero (Dr. Zhivago) and his regiment are attacked by enemy troops, whom they slaughter with machine guns. Zhivago then discovers that all the bodies are of little children who had been armed and thrown into battle by the Czarist Generals. It was a dramatic surprise that stunned us. One felt the horror and pity beating in the hearts of everyone in the theater. But that audience is now numbed with the repeated vision on television night after night of real Palestinian and Salvadoran children carrying real machine guns. It is not possible to evoke the same moral outrage, to make the audience think in that way—ever again. Perhaps this is one reason our fictional films and Television have become so bloody. The artists blindly reach for extremes ever more outré to outdo reality.

We expect our writers and artists to do more than reflect the way we are; they are expected to improve and lead as well as to entertain. This is anathema to business interests: to lead is to urge to action; to teach and lead is to propagandize. The business interest is to entertain.

We wait in vain for this brave new medium to produce some bold new idea. To invent itself as something new. Or produce a new idea of ourselves. But Drama—and Television fiction is Drama—is not a medium for new ideas. A new idea, a revolutionary idea is by its nature a challenge to established ideas. To perform for an audience a drama that challenges the audience's ideas and feelings in any fundamental way that says to the audience that they are wrong and have to change the way they think and feel—is to cultivate a failure to communicate.

A new idea must be argued by Philosophers and Writers, advocated by Politicians and Reformers, debated by the Public until it gains common currency. Often for centuries. Then it can be dealt with in Drama, which is in the present tense, and is not intellectual, but is a current of present feeling.

Arthur Miller once wrote that Drama reveals to the audience what is already known, but heretofore unrecognized. Without that common ground of shared values and feeling there is no basis for Theater. The TV Writer works with these feelings he shares with his audience—he can lead, he can show new ways of experiencing these feelings, but he cannot convert.

Television may not be destined to introduce new ideas. But it is where we transact the common business of our hearts. Sitting in the dark in our separate living rooms we see therefore a writer's reflection of what we feel and believe.

It is a chilling vision. If this is true we are murder, mayhem, rape and pillage, betrayal. We are car chases. We are leeringly lustful and sentimental, but seldom loving. We are bigots lovable and not so lovable. We are sitcoms. We are gong shows. Sometimes we are the McNeil Lehrer Report. Whenever we aspire to wit, elegance, or redeeming social value we seem to be British, except when we are British and Benny Hill. Then we are back to leeringly lustful. These are the easy things to evoke in us all. That is the reason Plato, in his ideal Republic, would not allow the leaders of the Republic to go to the Theater, where bad deeds by evil men are depicted. He feared that our leaders would enjoy the performance, and that might cause them to enjoy those evil and destructive emotions in their own hearts. But then, Plato also believed the natural order of things was for a man to be one thing, and an actor, he pointed out, is at least two, himself and the role he plays. He said in an ideal Republic actors should never be allowed to hold office. But then we know what happened to Greece.

Back to us—sitting in the dark, wallowing in the worst of our common nature. The writer of this pleasurable swill has our full attention. For it is clear that we enjoy our baser selves. Witness the movie critics, awash in tripe, silly sentimentality, comic book junk who have thrown in the towel. They now celebrate the junk for its junkiness: George Lucas' comic strip dramatics is made a standard of cinematic classicness; Spielberg's silly sentimentality is a standard by which everyone else's sentiment is judged, but since he has no sense of shame, nobody else comes close and he remains the model. "Grade B Movie" used to be both a joke and a definition of adolescent feelings and understandings. Now it is praise, an ambition for filmmakers. Any wit or real feeling, anything that an educated person over 17 might get interested in is industriously eliminated from the script. And since anyone interested in the life that has been eliminated from these movies stays home, the Executives point out to us that the movie audience is under 17, and that's who they make the movies for. But they manufactured that audience by boring the adults out of the theaters. But I wander.

There we were in the dark with our TV, enjoying our baser selves. The businessman was happy, knowing we were having his message imprinted in our soul, from whence it would spring as an unconscious urge to buy, on our next trip to a supermarket. The actors were being at least two people, and being paid enough for three.

Somewhere the writer had a choice to make. To evoke and exploit the easy worst, or to exercise the more difficult and private properties of the heart. This is a risky thing to do. It requires strength of character to dig into one's own secret soul and expose whatever is there to public view.

I have taken enough cracks at actors to say that in this respect they deserve our respect. To stand before an audience or a camera and dare to expose their souls naked to the audience, to abandon themselves to a performance, is to take the greatest risk of all. If the actor fails, he fails in public, naked on Mount Everest, everyone can see, and the audience's rejection is total. They reject his body and his hair and his teeth and his sex along with his feeling and soul. The writer can tell herself they didn't like the script, the doctor gets to bury his mistakes, and an architect (as Frank Lloyd Wright said) can always plant vines. But an actor is up there with his pants down and no place to hide. It is why they grow difficult and get crazy. There was a very rich young man, a scion of Eastern wealth who coveted a career as an actor, in fact he wanted to be a star. He moved to Hollywood, he hung around with the rich and famous, slept with movie stars, but never got anyone interested in giving him a part—though they were always glad to go to his parties. For his thirtieth birthday he thought how time was passing, life was short, and what was all his money for? He gave himself a present. He hired the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, and with all the greatest talent he could surround himself with, he presented his own production of Hamlet, with himself as Hamlet and his friends playing the other roles. There were Warren, and Bob, and Barbra playing Ophelia, though she toyed with the idea of the mother; Marlon phoned in the voice of the ghost, Clint and Woody were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and it required great tact to explain to Mister "T" why he couldn't play Polonius. Opening night the performance got ten minutes into the play before the first giggle swept through the audience and became wave after wave of derisive hilarity. They howled and hooted. The rich young man stopped the performance. With admirable courage and dignity he stood at the footlights and the audience got quiet. "I don't understand you people", he said. "I didn't write this shit."

Back to the TV set, still casting its sepulchral glow upon us, the writer wrestling with his spirit.

He wasn't paid to do more than entertain; in fact his or her effort to do more is thought of as vaguely subversive of the commercial purpose. We don't want programs that are more memorable than the commercial, do we?

But it is the strength and the curse and the joy of the human race that obstacles and problems are viewed by a lot of us as challenges. This makes Olympics and Wimbledons and great art. The writer for TV who takes the chance to dig into his soul, to write of love, trust, honor, duty, decency, loyalty and fidelity, and generosity of spirit is tackling stuff that is hard not just because he is vulnerable, but because we tend to defend these areas of ourselves, as private and secret. We of the audience tend to resist this invasion of an area of our soul that is our private domain.

Men are far more easily led to boast of their vices than of their good qualities. A confession is easier to get than a testimony of what a man likes in himself. We rest more easily with a movie about Hell's Angels tearing up a town; to call a man a boy scout is an insult. The good man or woman tends to be an object of ridicule, easy to sneer at and honored more often in the sanctimonious sentimentality of

right-wing self-righteousness than otherwise. It takes courage to risk drama about these protected and defended feelings. These are the wells of poetry. And it is too easy to laugh the poet into embarrassed silence.

Humanitas rewards the writers who take this chance. I love the irony, and point it out every year at this time, that while the Emmy award for commercial popularity is purely symbolic, the Humanitas, given for intangible and poetic and moral reasons, is a whole lot of money. Applaud these men and women—they honor us with their courage to expose our highest feelings, by leading instead of following, by giving more than they were paid for, by daring to take the high dive. I am honored to be here to help honor them. To all the nominees—I Thank You.