

Trivial TV

By Theodore Dalrymple

Twenty-seven years ago, a British newspaper discovered—I don't know how—that I hadn't watched television for twenty-five years. At the time, this seemed almost incredible, or at any rate very odd, as if I had just landed from Mars.



The newspaper contacted me and asked me whether I would be prepared to watch television for a time to report on its emanations. They would send me a television; and I agreed on one condition, namely that after a week they would take it away again. The newspaper kept to the promise.

The television duly arrived, and, with some difficulty, I turned it on (the controls had become a good deal more complex since I last watched).

The first program that I saw after all those years—it was in daytime—was one in which the production company had sought out a pathological family and exhibited it for a kind of mockery before a live audience. First came the mother, complaining that her daughters, aged 14 and 12, had run away from home to take drugs and become prostitutes—or sex workers, as we must now call them. The mother complained bitterly about them, the anxiety they caused her, the trouble they had always been.

Then the compere asked the audience to give a warm welcome to the two girls, who emerged from somewhere behind the scenes, tripping down a few stairs like Mary Poppins, and sat opposite their mother. The audience gave them a rapturous welcome, as if running away and becoming prostitutes were a fine accomplishment.

The two girls immediately started to scream accusations at their mother that she was a negligent drunk who had made life intolerable for them, for example by never feeding them properly. At this point, I managed to turn the apparatus off. I could quite see the fascination of this kind of voyeurism, that it might even be addictive. It would be easy to sink into the depths of one's sofa and pass one's days watching such scenes! O brave new world that has such people in it!

As is often the way, my first contact with a phenomenon soon led to others. Not far from the hospital in which I was working lived three sisters of whale-like proportions who had all had children by the same man. Their father with whom they lived was an alcoholic of less than charming manner. I have to admit that the insemination of one such woman seemed to me an improbably physical feat, let alone three, and was in a way admirable, or at least evidence of considerable determination.

A television company learned of this strange ménage and paid them a large sum to appear on yet another modern equivalent of a Victorian freak show. But the question of how the television company came to know of them in the first place occurred to

me, and was not answered until a little time afterward, when I met the daughter of a friend of mine whose first job in television was finding the most dysfunctional families or households possible. They were advertised for, and it was her job to sift them for their telegenic qualities, that is to say (in this context) for their deliberate ugliness, querulousness, vulgarity, coarseness, and utter shamelessness, indeed pride, in their dysfunctionality. There was no shortage of postulants.

The television had come just before the election that brought Mr. Blair to power in Britain. My wife and I saw him being interviewed, and we both thought it must be some very clever satirical impersonator rather than the man himself, insofar as there is a man himself where Mr. Blair is concerned, so fatuous and empty did he seem. No such person, surely, could be Prime Minister?

The few glimpses of so-called political debates that I have had on television since have not encouraged me to spend more of my time on them, important in a sense as they may be. (What is important is not necessarily good or worthwhile in any other sense.) I therefore had little difficulty in refraining from watching the "debate" between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Such debates are more like schoolyard quarrels than a disinterested search for truth, or even exhibitions of rhetorical skill.

From the reports that I have received from persons whose judgment I trust, it was a contest between well-rehearsed and smooth dishonesty about her past opinions on the one hand and disorganized, incoherent, rambling, irritable, and egomaniacal irrelevancies on the other. If the political class were Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy could with justification say to it, "Here's another fine mess you've got us into."

But of course the political class, while often regarded by citizens as a class apart completely from themselves, are not

like aliens of a science fiction film who have invaded Earth from outer space; they are a dialectical reflection of us. If they are shallow and mendacious it is because that is what we want or expect them to be, and probably are ourselves. No arguments difficult to grasp or uncomfortable in their implications, please! What we want are slogans: Yes we can, make America great again. Come over to Marlboro country.

To return briefly to the television program that I saw when I turned on the television all those years ago, it would not have been made if no one wanted to watch it. Whether the supply created the demand or the demand created the supply is a question that probably cannot be answered definitively, but the end result is the same: a general lowering of public taste.

This is curious. The Flynn effect is the supposed increase in the IQ of the population, brought about by social, medical, and nutritional improvements in the past century and a quarter. The average IQ remains at 100, but that is so because it is made so by statistical definition; actually, people are better at doing the tests than they were because they are more intelligent. Certainly, they spend much longer in education than they did.

This makes the downward spiral in the quality of public discourse all the more puzzling. The debate between Nixon and Kennedy was Plato by comparison with what we have now, albeit that Nixon's five o'clock shadow played some part in the public assessment of it. We are more intelligent and better educated than ever, but somehow public discourse becomes cruder, more stupid, more ill-tempered, less concerned with truth, as our cognitive level improves.

As my examination essay papers used, after putting forward a doubtful or ambiguous proposition, to order its examinees, "Discuss."

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