

Does Television Really Matter?

By LAWRENCE STENHOUSE

Principal Lecturer in Education, Jordanhill College

Does bad — or for that matter, good — television matter?

There are many of the providers of television who are ready to diminish their responsibility for bad programmes, by arguing that it does not. At the National Union of Teachers' conference last year on "Popular Culture and Personal Responsibility" this point of view was expressed by those who handle mass media of all kinds. The argument was that the effects of television were transient and trivial, and that "mass communication acts usually as an agent of reinforcement of existing predispositions and not as an agent of change". And teachers at the conference appeared to find this argument difficult to meet except with protest.

A conviction that all mass communication matters intensely, based, I think, on a solid foundation of evidence, prompts me to argue that the onus of proof lies, not on those who think that television is influential, but on those who deny this influence.

To mount this argument it is necessary to borrow from sociology the concept of culture. Culture is that which man learns from living in society. Most importantly it consists of values, understandings, meanings. Values are the accepted objectives which people strive for: kindness, love, material luxury, power. Understandings are the ways in which people interpret experiences and things in relation to these values: their feelings about helping a neighbour in illness, their disposition to treat a loved person as an object of considerate care or selfish possession, the glow they get from an expensive meal or a new fur coat, the responsibility or freedom from responsibility which they feel when they acquire power. Meanings are the ways in which these values and understandings cluster in symbols — words or pictures — giving them a definition more potent than dictionaries offer, a definition which embodies emotions and attitudes. Meanings of this sort invest most of the words we use: friend, tree, neighbour, marriage, cottage, Cadillac, drain-pipe, trousers, ultimatum, conference. Each conveys not merely a descriptive meaning, but an emotional meaning and a sense of potential significance, of what they might lead to or be used for. Pictures, too, embody meanings. The glint of steel shafts in an engine room, the glow of copper and brass in firelight, a man and a girl smoking a cigarette together, a mother welcoming her children home from school, feet in close-up climbing a sordid stair. Painters, film-makers, television producers make such meanings.

Advertisers now call these meanings "images". A soap, a beer, a motor car, a political party, raises an image in the mind of the public. It is not just a soap, but a soap that is good for children, a soap that is a beauty treatment, a soap which impresses visitors with your social status. Marmalades marshal themselves into a hierarchy from the aristocracy of the thick and bitter to the proletariat of the jellied and sweet. Experiments, which advertising agencies are not quick to publish, have shown that such images can be changed by campaigns on television and in newspapers.

This might not be very important. It may not matter very much which soap or which marmalade we buy. Some would be cynical enough to suggest that it does not matter fundamentally which party we vote for. But the most serious result of such campaigns is not the effect they intend, but the effects which are unintentional.

The man who wants to sell a shoe must put it on a foot. He must clothe the woman who owns the foot. He must prop the foot up conspicuously on the running

board of a car. For background, he must provide a large half-timbered house. To fill in the space above the bonnet of the car he must place an elegant man on a polo pony. To complete the conversation piece he must add a girl on a scooter (and another pair of his shoes). He finds himself selling not merely shoes but scooters and polo ponies, that kind of girl in that kind of clothes, that kind of man, that kind of house and that kind of car. In sum total he is probably selling an organised and systematic snobbery. This may be good or it may be bad. What I am concerned to argue is that it is important. The evidence that television influences the meanings and understandings that cluster round soap and shoes, suggests also an influence on a much wider range of meanings.

Of course, "mass communication acts usually as an agent of reinforcement of existing predispositions" but this means that it is an "agent of change". All the change which is represented by civilisation depends upon the elaboration or refinement of existing predispositions and of the stressing of one at the expense of another. Mercy is a refinement of existing predispositions, and so is cruelty. Each can be elaborated. One can be developed rather than the other.

The claim that this is so is not new. It is the suggestion that it might not be so, a suggestion quite commonly put forward today, which is really novel. For years we have been teaching people to read, not merely because we thought it necessary for the practical affairs of life, but because we thought that it opened to them a world of literature which would enrich their understanding of life. This is the faith on which all our teaching of literature and history and art appreciation rests. If the experience derived from books and pictures — and film and television — is of no importance to the quality of living, we might just as well read horror comics in school as read Shakespeare. And, after all, *Romeo and Juliet* is only entertainment.

Despite the well-established faith in the importance of artistic experience for life, it is worth examining the problem of meanings in culture more closely. In just what degree do they influence our living?

Culture is at once the product of human social interaction and the medium of this interaction. This is most easily seen if we take, as a simple and crude example, language in its least subtle form. The foundation of social action is communication between individuals. It is notoriously difficult to build a tower if none of the workmen share a language. Hence the story of the tower of Babel. Social life depends upon a store of agreed and shared meanings; but it is obvious also that these meanings are created in social life. Language is a human invention. And it is always changing, always being recreated and reinterpreted.

In the simplest societies this reinterpretation takes place as people talk together. Men round a fire talk of a shepherd's care for his sheep in tender and admiring tones and a meaning and understanding of the Good Shepherd is reached. This meaning makes Plato describe a shepherd as an example of one who exercises power for the good of his flock, and inspires the metaphor of a psalmist. At this point, a new dimension in language and meaning has been opened up. For Plato and the psalmist have enriched the understanding of a word, not in conversation, but in the self-conscious practice of the art of literature. They have claimed the privilege and responsibility of a wider audience than their own personal circle.

It is the part of the artist — and of the scientist with his “evolution” and “repression” — to enrich and elaborate the meanings that are embodied in a culture. And it is a recognition of this responsibility which defines integrity in facing an audience. The artist, he who communicates, creates a universe of discourse, a climate of conversation, a basis for understanding; and for the “cultured” this deepens and enriches, or alternatively impoverishes, the experience of life. Good art enriches, bad art impoverishes.

The history of sex relations is the history of tales of chivalry, of Chaucer and Shakespeare, Lovelace and restoration comedy, Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre*, *Major Barbara* and *Mrs Dalloway*, Mary Pickford and Brigitte Bardot. All art affects life.

Throughout the greater part of history only the few, the élite, have enjoyed to the full a culture enriched by art. Such a culture was that of the 18th century gentlemen and literary figures. A common experience of classical and English literature, of history and of the science of the day, allowed them to communicate with one another sensitively and significantly. Gray sowed classical echoes in his *Elegy*, evoked with confidence the meanings which clustered round Milton, Cromwell, and Hampden, manipulated the moping owls and lowing herds whose significance had been defined by the work of earlier poets. His audience understood. And this common understanding shaped their opinions about life, deepened their discussions over coffee, enriched their private and solitary reflections in their study armchairs.

A separate culture, fed by the narrower but sufficiently deep experience of the authorised version and *Pilgrim's Progress*, united a lower social class and equally affected action and aspiration.

Groups within society are distinguished from one another by their different store of understandings, and they experience life differently as a consequence. To one, “fabulous women” evokes the stories of ancient Greece, to another, the stories of modern Hollywood. To

one, "Bristol Milk" is a sherry used in context as a symbol for a middle-brow prosperity that is neither Cream nor Dry, to another, it is just milk. To one, Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* is a revelation, to another, an evocation of a familiar and half-loved, half-hated experience. To one, a colonel is a symbol of respectability, to another, of peppery temper, to another, of intransigent conservatism, to yet another, of "the nobs".

As people become more and more exposed to television and to literature, more and more of such meanings become based on a vicarious experience. As television broadens experience, it also defines it.

One schoolboy writes: "You cannot blame soldiers for their attitude towards women, they had not seen a woman for a probable year or two". Another: "I should like to be a junior executive. I would have a sports car and a flat where I could entertain my girl friends". Values, understandings, meanings. Meanings of words which are potent for thought and action: Japanese, teenager, star, businessman, navy cut, black lace, twin set, Russian, scoutmaster, broker, shop steward, mink coat, schoolmarm; the list is endless.

There is surely a strong case for believing that all communication affects the quality of living. That is why art — and television among the arts — is so serious a matter. There will, of course, always be bad television, and there will always be good television. What matters is the relative influence of each.

And it may be that it matters more in television than in most arts. In a complex society like ours with many cultural groups, television provides the great common denominator which is the most important basis of co-operation across social boundaries. When a professor visits a class of educationally sub-normal non-readers, he looks at the television set in the corner of the classroom and starts from there. It is a start his 19th century predecessor could not have made at all, and it is no small responsibility to have set the tone of such momentous conversations.