

## WHERE THE TELEVISION CRITIC COMES IN

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**E**XCUSES that television is still only in the experimental stage are platitudinous but inevitable. Television criticism too is still forcedly exploratory, critics being of their nature parasites unable to advance beyond the medium which provides their material.

Television criticism hitherto stems from two sources: radio criticism and film criticism. To both the radio critic and the film critic television is, at present anyway, a more cumbersome, unwieldy, more realistic medium, more concerned with what it presents than how it presents it. Enjoying neither the incorporeal detachment of radio, nor the manoeuvrability of celluloid, it lacks the fluidity and flexibility of both radio and cinema. Until now, too, it falls far short of the purely visual achievements of the cinema, so that programmes of any visual appeal at all stand out in lonely splendour in the viewer's memory: the Coronation of course (among its many other and more important achievements) was one, the St Denis High Mass another; but an otherwise often tedious and heavily criticized programme, Lime Grove's Elizabethan evening, was also a pleasure to the eye as few TV programmes are.

Television in fact overlaps at many points with radio (not always to the disadvantage of 'steam' radio); at others it complements the cinema (by now it should be clear that each is going to need the other). More important for the critic is to determine where television differs from the other mechanised media of communication; what its own properties are. And here it is too early to overlook the existence of a mystery in TV which is probably not yet adequately analysed: the mystery of its potent fascination, the mystery which gives an actual telecast so much greater depth than its telerecording. Mechanical techniques may possibly have more importance to the future of TV than they have had in the cinema, where in fifty years of extraordinary mechanical progress, only one invention, the sound-track, has effected any major change in artistic technique.

The most valuable definition of the twin pillars of television that I have heard was made by Jean-Pierre Chartier, editor of the

French Dominican publication *Radio-Ciné-Télévision*, at the recent International Catholic Conference on television held in Paris. M. Chartier divided the essential substance of TV output into two gifts: spectacle and personal witness or testimony ('témoignage'); the ringside seat and the entertainment of a visitor in the intimacy of the viewer's home.

A leading TV actor confirmed this division when he spoke of his consciousness of playing at once to the biggest audience in the world—to an audience of millions—and to the smallest—to two or three, or even one person alone, in their own room. If we accept this as a horizontal division, I would add a vertical division into reportage—that is mainly Outside Broadcasts—and original productions. Any given item may be considered under one, two, or three of these four headings.

As so often, the Coronation, which has probably had a more powerful influence on television development all over the world than any other single telecast, provides the most comprehensive and exact example. It was supremely spectacular in every sense, benefiting by the most superb of natural, or at least real, settings. At the same time, the Queen in her own person provided the most vivid and moving personal witness. It was a stupendous piece of reportage, marvellously contrived, of an unrepeatable occasion. Yet it was as carefully rehearsed as a studio production.

Plays, whether written for television, re-produced or visited in their theatres, are always spectacles, though the television actor must learn to rely on TV's facilities for personal witness—a strong element this, in the brilliant success of the television production of Mauriac's difficult play, *Asmodée*, as in Barbara Burnham's experimental production, *Happiness My Goal*, and a few by others who have followed her in this technique of using single close-ups against a black background. But the spectacles may be either reportage from the theatre or original studio productions.

By the same process, we see that televised Mass must of course be a spectacle—and it is significant that the French have been quick to learn the immense advantage of old stone (as we saw it in the High Mass televised from St Denis for the Anglo-French week, at Westminster in the Coronation, or as we see it in innumerable 'English Cathedrals' programmes) over studio settings or un-mellowed modern walls—but that it must equally offer important personal witness—in close-ups of the priest, in the sermon, in

the department of the congregation. Similarly the Mass may be straight reportage—Mass in Leeds Cathedral, or like the Benediction service from Spanish Place—or a combination of reportage with studio Mass, like one I attended in Paris.

Of these important corner-stones of television production perhaps the most neglected in England is the vital one of personal witness. We see flashes of it in *Press Conference*, where the whole success of the programme depends on a just balance between the personalities of the pressmen and that of the celebrity being interviewed, and in Jeanne Heal's admirable evening series evolved out of women's programmes where we appreciate a like balance between her own warm, sympathetic personality, and those of the hard cases she interviews; or in the play of real intelligences in that gay study-game, *Animal, Vegetable and Mineral*, whose success is one of the satisfactory surprises of British television. There was a hint of the value of personal witness in the very factor criticized of *International Survey*, the series tragically terminated by Chester Wilmot's death. For it was the creation of confidence by the commentators, Wilmot and Alan Bullock, which compelled the viewer's trust in their facts; as it is the close presence of their personalities which made great TV comedians out of Norman Wisdom and Richard Hearn.

But we not only have no Bishop Sheen in British television; there is no effort to build up any comparable figure—in any field whatever—to this American prelate who, by a blend of performance as 'ham' as that of any barnstorming circus barker, with personal witness of intense sincerity and intellectual solidity, has developed a streamlined mission-talk technique into one of the major attractions in American television.

What does all this mean to the would-be television critic? It means first of all that he is on constantly shifting ground. We not only have to make up our own rules as we go along. That is true of films, radio, or any other new medium. TV is so new, so big and so half-baked that we are all, even the lowly breed of critics included, discovering it as we go along. To the critic this means a complete readjustment of his rules to every new programme. Bad as the majority of films are, artistically and morally, there have now been quite enough first-rate films to enable critics to establish a just standard. No such stability is yet in sight for television. Critics—especially those who have been film critics

—suddenly find all familiar ground cut from under their feet. Admonished for years to be either critics of strictly aesthetic values, or judges of box-office form, they find themselves faced with a medium that has as yet no formulated aesthetic standards and without even a box-office test to apply. Accustomed to confine their attention to form rather than content, they are now called upon for moral and social judgment on a fantastically wide variety of questions no more essentially connected with television than was a dead man with the newspaper which puts his murder on the front page.

This brings the critic up forcibly against the primary question whether TV is a new medium of communication at all, or only a bigger and better instrument for the circulation of existing communication. The status of the TV critic of course depends on the answer to this. As long as it remains not proven he must go on hoping that he is being in at the birth of a new art; but his work is none the easier.

Because British TV up to now emphasizes reportage over original creation—at least in quality if not in quantity—the critic is continually faced with the question ‘what’ instead of ‘how’, or even whether the second-hand material he is compelled to judge was worth televising at all. The critic thus has to decide whether *In the News* is just an amusing spectacle of politician-baiting or the most persuasive tool for the denigration of party-politics that could be devised; whether the fashion for vicarious parlour-games is harmless infantilism or a more subversive sapping of the last vestiges of initiative. When TV conducts a *Special Enquiry* into ‘Illiteracy’ he will feel called on—if he is not yet a log—for a judgment on the programme’s progressive prejudices on the whole existing system of education; may be moved to wonder whether TV itself will or will not be a prime agent in a relapse into illiteracy.

When the critic turns to so-called original studio productions he flounders in vain after some basis for aesthetic judgment. He may find a play produced by Miss Burnham, Mr Barry, Mr Cartier, or a documentary (halfway house between reportage and creation) by Miss Doncaster to challenge him. But more probably he may find a *Garrison Theatre*, *Music Hall*, or the kind of tired farce you would expect from a drama department compelled to turn out three plays a week.

Studio creations, on the whole, lag behind the reportage (whether outside broadcast or reconstruction). This, like the fatal belief that any light entertainment is better than none, is a sop to popular taste, or to what the TV planners believe is popular taste—for people hardly ever really 'know what they like'; they only know what they don't like. The B.B.C. has always pretended to bow to the wishes of the greatest number, as befitting a democratic monopoly. Fortunately we need look no further than the Third Programme for evidence that practice proves more enlightened than this principle of head-counting. Thus on television too we get an occasional *Arrow to the Heart* or *Person to Person* interview by Ed Murrow and borrowed from America to put critics on their mettle and remind them to remain on the alert for such signs of what TV can, should, and may one day be doing.

Time is another element which offers unusual difficulties to the television critic—the radio critic has long appreciated the difficulty of criticizing a programme which is dead and probably forgotten before his notice appears in print. This is a difficulty however which may harass the critic into a greater readiness to generalize, to apply criticism of an individual programme to the formulation of principles which is so badly needed.

For I believe the critic has an important role to play in the development of this new phenomenon. Children, we are told, watch TV hypnotized, regardless of what they are seeing, without discrimination or judgment; and many grown-ups too. Critics have to take the lead in helping to form this judgment. They have to be links between producer and public, ever vigilant to watch where the former is going and to help the latter to follow or turn off, as the case may be.

The very new-begun-ness of the medium may make its producers more inclined to heed the comments of serious critics lest even they might be helpful. Similarly the very condition of television as an article of household furniture gives the critic both a new responsibility and perhaps a new entry in the wake of Mr Harding, Miss Malcolm and the weather men. The critic must now pronounce not only upon an entertainment which his readers will only see if they take the positive action of buying a ticket and going out to look, but one which—if they own a set—they presumably will see unless something warns them to

the active negative action of turning it off. Responsible critics then must accept the responsibility of gauging the influence of certain factors, features or figures. Critics with any sense of human values, too, will recognize the need for vigilance against a certain mechanized bureaucratic paternalism far more firmly rooted, it seems, in American television than in British. It is an assumption of TV omnipotence, the logical consequence of such acts of faith as 'I read it in print' or 'I heard it on the B.B.C.'. We dial TIM on the telephone for the time; factories have their pay-slips checked by an 'electronic brain'. None of these machines, however useful, can have quite the insidious force of information dispensed by the omniscient eye at home, accompanied by the soothing tones of Mr Hobley or the sweet smile of Sylvia Peters.

Television critics have indeed to be 'all things to all men'. At the same time they have always to be on the alert for material to strengthen their own critical apparatus as applied to the new medium.

Catholic critics will be beset by all the same difficulties as other television critics and find them intensified. The Catholic TV critic has to undertake the same efforts to achieve mastery of the medium, the same perpetual readjustment to shifting ground for even less certain return or rather for the certain frustration of an only minimal return in the form of Catholic programmes to which teleculture (if the expression may be forgiven) can be devoted.

The Catholic critic does have the benefit of bringing to TV, as he does to films, his own stable Catholic principles and values. But where in the cinema he has to beware of divorcing these from aesthetic appreciation, in television there is a constant dualism. Viewing conditions invite a certain censorial attitude usually deplored in critics. The Catholic critic, any Christian critic, must be on guard against the wild distortion of values TV may bring into viewers' homes, in the form of sadism, false history, science, teaching, or politics, or vulgar entertainment. So he must be a watchdog at the base. At the same time he must be out in front, leading the field in hunting out the trail to the proper uses of TV, following every clue to its essential mystery. The Catholic critic faces always the paradox that the doctrine of art for art's sake is untenable by a Christian, but that nothing is achieved in the field of art without working as if it were true. Our best television

critic tells us that there never can be a specific art of television. But we have to go on in the hope that there may be. The critic of any mass medium must, as Mr James Monahan admitted, admirably defining the function of the film critic on the Home Service, write for the enlightened minority of people who care to see the standard of films rise. Not because the majority do not matter. On the contrary because only such an enlightened minority can leaven opinion towards elevating instead of debasing the medium.

The Catholic critic has still more reason to address, and to aim at an enlightened Christian minority. His task is not, as it might seem, one of divided loyalties, of serving God and Mammon. It is one of integrating his loyalties so that he works for the perfection of the medium, working to make television a precious, not a deadly, instrument fit to be used in the service of God.

Critics of goodwill hope that the coming of commercial competition may help to improve standards in television. They welcome the prospect that it will give television performers and writers a better chance of a living wage. But they cannot repress a fear that it may only accentuate the present disproportion between too many hours devouring too little talent.