

## COMMENTARY

TELEVISION AND THE TRUTH. Any new invention must bring with it the possibility of harm, and our own time has seen evidence enough of early hopes betrayed—the discovery that might have been a blessing so easily become a curse. And the Christian in particular will hesitate to join the utopian chorus, for he has the melancholy conviction of man's wounded state and of the tragic gulf that lies between a growth in knowledge and the necessary wisdom to turn its use to good. Yet an initial scepticism that springs from a sense of man's mortality and of the relative beatitude which is all that he can know this side of eternity must not become a negative rejection of created good. Especially is this true of a new medium such as television which has as yet to reveal the full extent of its power. Rather, in the words of Pope Pius XII, must Christian opinion welcome 'this wonderful medium offered by science to humanity' while recognizing at once that it is 'a medium both precious and dangerous, on account of the profound influence which it is bound to exercise on the public and private life of the nations'. (Letter to the Bishops of Italy, 1 January, 1954.)

It is a positive appreciation of the good that television can achieve, and the determination to work for its fulfilment, that should mark a Christian opinion. That television can be abused is plainly true, but a censorious insistence on its dangers can overshadow a constructive hope for its potentialities for good. That is why the establishment of valid standards of criticism is an urgent need. Whatever may be hoped for from government regulation, there will remain the constant work of critical vigilance which must start from a serious understanding of what the medium itself implies.

The social effects of television are potentially so huge—and already in this country and America the habits of family life have been profoundly modified by it—that the critic may be tempted to concentrate his attention on them. But there is more than an advantage of method in first considering the cause, in analysing the fabric of a medium so intimate in its impact, so universal in its appeal. For it is this dual quality inherent in television that creates its special difficulties and its unique opportunities. In this

issue of BLACKFRIARS special emphasis is laid on critical standards in the hope that an adult scrutiny of what television can properly achieve may increasingly influence its use. A merely negative insistence on minimal moral standards, which in some countries has seemed to characterize a Christian attitude to the cinema, can betray the critic's proper function, which means more than to insist on an extrinsic regard for the proprieties. The capacity of television to engage the speaker and the programme as a whole in a direct 'dialogue' with the viewer in his home is a new quality which must be stimulated. For its use of visual images is an extension, however much intensified, of the process that governs the very possibility of human knowledge and indeed of the mode of divine revelation itself. St Thomas, commenting on the use of metaphors in Sacred Scripture, points out that it is natural for man to come to the knowledge of spiritual things through sensible images, for all his knowledge has its beginnings in what his senses apprehend. It is a right regard for this basic element in human knowing which in particular should govern the use of television for religious purposes. For television is not an alternative to religion (it is not indeed an alternative to anything at all), but rather a new means for its interpretation.

While it is obviously true that programmes of religious inspiration will need to use immense discretion in order to avoid the merely spectacular and the insidious tendency to create a bromide substitute for thought and will, yet television in general is no less in need of robust criteria to prevent its abuse. It may seem a far cry from the programmes we know, the endless parlour games and vapid plays, to speak of high principles and canons of aesthetic judgment. And the great bulk of television output will have no other ambition than to provide for the insatiable appetite for 'light entertainment'. But much can be done, and especially by those who have any responsibility for the education of children, to encourage the growth of discrimination. When the novelty is over, and when a measure of competition provides alternative programmes, opportunity will come. And it is of the greatest importance that it should be prepared for. The role of the Christian critic in this is fundamental, for the influence that he brings to bear on public opinion can only be effective if he respects the medium he discusses, if—that is to say—he insists that vulgarity and the irresponsible exploitation of the cheap and nasty are not

only morally objectionable but destructive of the special genius of television itself. For, as the Pope remarked, television of its nature is addressed to the small group and above all to the family, and 'it is impossible not to be horrified at the thought that through the medium of television it may be possible for the atmosphere poisoned by materialism, fatuity and hedonism, which is too often breathed in so many cinemas, to penetrate within the very walls of the home.'

It is a matter for gratitude that in this country we have been spared the indiscriminate crudities of American commercial television. And the advent of a competitive television corporation, to some extent dependent on advertising revenue, does not seem likely to lower the standard of programmes. But it would be foolish to be complacent, to suppose that a literal regard for the rubrics of what is morally permissible is synonymous with a Christian understanding of what entertainment and information are for. The cinema provides plentiful evidence that the triumph of virtue may satisfy a decency code while extolling all that is most artificial and materialistic in our contemporary society. That is why, in its very beginnings, the responsible criticism of television should be positive and informed, aware of what is technically and aesthetically sound as well as of what is socially and morally deplorable. And in television, which of its nature reaches into the essential structure of society and will increasingly be organized to influence it, art and prudence cannot afford to be divorced.