

What Television Teaches About Sex

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In an odd little article that led off the May 22, 1982, *TV Guide*, Stephen Birmingham took on the Reverend Donald Wildmon and the Coalition for Better Television. In particular, he charged, their complaint that television promotes sex and "scorn for Christian values" is, at the least, misplaced. There is no sex on network television, said Birmingham. Oh, there may be some

"very oblique talk" of sexual matters, and sultry looks, double entendres, and "a good deal of off-camera adultery going on," but there is no "actual sex" anywhere in view. Moreover, whatever illicit carryings-on we nastily infer from those sultry looks are approached by the networks in "a tone of high moral indignation."

On *Dallas*, Birmingham noted, "J.R.

has not only slept with the departed Kristin, but also with a secretary, Lucy's sister-in-law Afton, his P.R. consultant Leslie Stewart, and a widow, Marilee Stone. His wife, or ex-wife, Sue Ellen, gets even by sleeping (or something) with Cliff . . . and, for good measure, with Dusty the rodeo rider." (Amazing what one can learn from sultry looks and some "very oblique" remarks.)



Parents and schools teach impulse control, but television says, "If you want it now, you should have it."

But do their sexual cavortings make J.R. and Sue Ellen happy? "Not at all!" said Birmingham. And so the moral is just what any good Christian or Hindu or Moslem would wish: "Adultery is wrong, wrong, wrong." If Rev. Wildmon is really concerned about sex on television, said Birmingham, he will have to look to local news coverage, for example, where "he can find all the offensive material he wants . . . right there in his hometown of Tupelo, Mississippi."

Either Birmingham was joking with us, in some subtle way I was unable to detect, or we have directed our efforts at sex education to the wrong age group. To say there is no sex on prime-time television because we have so far been spared full-color close-ups of on-camera intercourse is just plain silly. It is the equivalent of saying, as one network representative did, that the amputation scene in *Roots* was not "graphic violence"—since all we actually saw was one shot of an axe swinging down, then another shot of a severed leg.

The point is, of course, that the present concern about sex (and violence) on television does not center on questions about the number of scenes of "actual" intercourse, of shots of exposed female breasts and male behinds, of openhanded slaps, closed-fist punches, and gunshot wounds. These are trivial questions and they lead, ultimately, to trivial conclusions on the role of television in American life. While I dislike the righteousness of the self-appointed "moral majority" and disagree with both their political philosophy and some of their interpretations of contemporary culture, I believe their question to be significant. That question, as I understand it, is this: What attitudes toward sex and sexuality are promoted by commercial television, and how do those attitudes shape the values, expectations,

and lifestyles of the young? And, for that matter, of the rest of us?

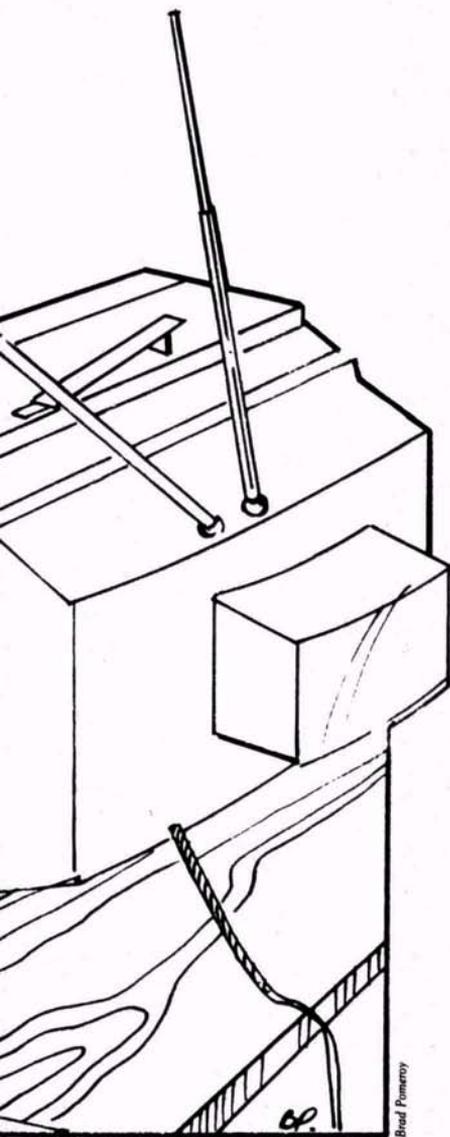
I believe this question can be addressed intelligently in two ways. The first, and perhaps the safer, is to examine the content of television—the images, plots, characterizations, and themes it presents, not only in programming but in commercials. (After all, the average American viewer—young and old—sees something like 1,000 commercials each week.) The second requires us to probe deeper, beyond the particular content of this or that program, this or that commercial, to the more subtle layer of unintentional "messages" television communicates through its structure.

Sex on TV

To be frank, there is not much new to say about the content of television and the sexual attitudes and values it promotes. Perhaps, however, there are a few points worth repeating. One of the most intriguing is that there is, as far as I can tell, no good sex on television. I mean the term "good sex," of course, not in the modern sense of a technically superb performance, but in the old-fashioned sense; that is, sex as a happy and healthy part of a psychologically intimate and caring—dare I say, loving?—relationship.

Sexual encounters on television have a variety of purposes, but the expression of love or even just plain, uncomplicated, joyful lust is not among them (save, perhaps, on such PBS offerings as *Brideshead Revisited* and some episodes of *Hill Street Blues*). Instead, sex is used either as an instrument for profit (watch almost any television commercial) or as

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Bread Pottery

a weapon—for self-aggrandizement, punishment, or revenge. (See, if you can bear it, almost any of the critical episodes on *Dallas*, or *Flamingo Road*, or *Falcon Crest*, or *Dynasty*, or *Knot's Landing*.)

I thought these distorted uses of sex were supposed to be a result of unhealthy sexual repression and that, as our culture moved toward the full and open acceptance of human sexuality in all its variations, the darker purposes for which sex has historically been used would inevitably decline. On television, alas, this does not seem to be the case. In fact, as our culture has become more open about sexuality and more liberal in its attitudes, television characters have become more, not less, preoccupied with sex—and with forms of sexual behavior farther and farther removed from those an older generation would have thought healthy and “culturally acceptable.” I am not referring here only to the milder distortions of sex as an instrument of power, profit, and punishment, but also to the increasing link, on television, between sex and violence (especially against women and children) and the current fascination with such

themes as incest, pre-adolescent prostitution, child molestation, and child pornography.

In the past year, I have seen on prime-time commercial television only three scenes in which an adult male and female made love in an apparently caring way. In the same period, I have seen more programs than I can count that took as their theme the rape or threatened rape of young boys, adult males, and adolescent girls; the seduction into prostitution or pornography of female and male children and adolescents; the sexual-mutilation murder of priests and nuns; and several varieties of incest in the nuclear family.

I have seen dozens of commercials in which adolescent girls and children of both sexes either allude to or enact what looks like sexual frenzy, to which they are apparently driven by the tightness of their jeans, and even more in which males demonstrate their achievement of success and power by walking off (or driving away) with women who serve as sexual doorprizes. Commercial-free cable television, incidentally, fails to bring much relief. A glance through the current *TV Guide* reveals that about 80 percent of the cable offerings are marked “Sexual situations; violence.”

Such content messages about sex are deeply disturbing, to be sure. But they are not nearly so revolutionary as the philosophy of impulse codified in the very structure of television. That philosophy strikes at the foundations of our sexual values and behavior, and it is all the more potent because it is largely hidden from view.

Teaching Impulse Control

The history of civilization is the history of the control of impulse. As even Freud, the great explorer of impulse, concluded, a certain amount of uncomfortable repression and frustration is necessary. It is the price we must pay to live with some modicum of safety and dignity among strangers. This view does not require us to regard our “base” needs and desires as inherently wicked and nasty; only to disapprove their uncontrolled and untransformed expression. In our own culture, as in many others, we teach impulse control largely by carving up the “natural” flow of time and space into symbolically distinct and “special” times and spaces, and by surrounding the gratification of needs with ritual language and behavior—most of which serve to defer gratification. Thus, the infant is taught that not all time is

eating time; the toddler, that elimination should take place only in certain spaces and at times that require notice and planning; the child, that food is not to be grabbed and gobbled but placed on a plate, managed with special instruments arranged in particular ways, surrounded by decorations of a certain kind, and accompanied by talk and behavior of a particular sort—all of which we call “table manners.”

As the child learns that different times and spaces have different meanings for behavior, she also comes to learn that certain things may be said and done within the family, others among friends, others in the presence of strangers. All of this learning, which we generally term “socialization,” is a process in which the child comes to regulate the expression of impulse and delay the satisfaction of needs according to cultural distinctions between different kinds of places, times, and persons. And almost all of it—this enormously complex process of becoming civilized—is learned informally, through observation and modeling, the enjoyment of rewards, and the suffering of adult disapproval for lapses in impulse control, internalized as the feeling of shame.

Because the learning of impulse control is informal and conducted at an age when the child is not competent to process rational explanations (even if adults could offer them), issues having to do with basic needs and their gratification come to be felt by the child (and later, the adult) as *moral* rather than pragmatic or technical. That is, the loss of control or the inappropriate expression of biological and emotional impulses is felt to be not just “bad for you” but bad *of* you: shameful, indecent, *wrong*. Unfortunately, because it is difficult for the young to distinguish between disapproval directed at the inappropriate *expression* of an impulse and disapproval of the impulse itself, shame frequently comes to be attached incorrectly to the body, or to its products and functions, or to the feelings of rage or pleasure the child experiences. This kind of shame is clearly disabling to the individual and disruptive of healthy adult relationships. Perhaps that is why the word *shame* has fallen into disfavor in recent years. But it is a mistake to confuse the two meanings of shame in regard to impulse control, or we shall lose whatever remaining hold we have on the process of civilization.

I do not mean to imply, in this overview of impulse, socialization, and



Brad Rowery

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civilization, that a particular set of cultural rules for the management of impulse is necessarily good or healthy, or even humane. Moreover, I would argue that when a society presents the young with conflicting messages about the management of impulse; erodes the traditional distinctions between the kinds of places, times, and relationships in which different needs may be safely gratified; reconceptualizes problems in impulse control as technical rather than moral issues; and abandons the concept of shame, serious problems in sexuality and violence are bound to result. This, I believe, is precisely the state of affairs we have arrived at in our own culture. And we have reached it, not wholly of course, but in significant part, through the medium of television.

I Need It Now

Like any complex learning environment, television teaches in two ways: through its explicit and implicit content messages—what it says about the world and what it shows of human relationships—and through the kinds of responses the medium itself permits and encourages. At both these "instructional levels," television presents a philosophy of impulse that is, in our culture at least, revolutionary. In a sentence, this philosophy asserts that whatever people want they deserve to have, and they deserve to have it *now*.

The clearest formulation of this principle appears in that most ubiquitous of television genres, the commercial. "Aren't you hungry for Burger King *now*?" one teases, at every hour of the day and night. "Here are your car keys!" "You *deserve* a break today," says another, "so get up and get away!" "You *need* this car," an ad for Datsun intones, and a sultry blonde in the front seat whispers, "I really *need* it" (linking the car to a clearly implied need of a different kind).

In the symbolic world of the commercial, those who wait between the experience of a need or want and its satisfaction are fools or bores. This point is communicated by the split screen and the elapsed time indicator. In one ad, for example, the modern equivalent of the foolish son frets and sighs over his empty plate, cooking his sausage the old fashioned way, while his technologically enlightened neighbor on the screen (the wise son of the parable) satisfies his hunger in seconds with precooked sausages. To drive home the point that impulse *deserves* immediate gratifica-

tion, the commercial ends with the foolish son snatching the sausage from the other's plate—a solution to frustration that meets with the apparent approval of all.

The glorification of impulse and instant gratification is reiterated more subtly in the very structure of the television commercial. More often than not, this takes the form of a mini-drama in which the protagonist experiences a want or need (girl wants to be kissed by date), encounters frustration (date turns away), is technologically enlightened (roommate gives her Scope), and achieves satisfaction (girl and date fly off to Hawaii)—all in the space of 10 to 20 seconds.

Embedded in these modern morality plays are a variety of lessons that, taken together, constitute a revolutionary epistemology—or theology. One of its fundamental premises, of course, is that the ungratified need is the major source of human suffering and is, therefore, evil. Another is that the source of evil, our "original sin," so to speak, is ignorance of the techniques or technologies that permit the immediate gratification of our needs. And a third is that redemption may be achieved, instantly, through the acquisition and application of the appropriate technology. A significant corollary to these principles is that there is no unpleasant consequence of impulse that technology cannot eliminate. Therefore, there is no reason to exercise restraint. Eat too much? Try Alka-Seltzer. Too much alcohol give you a headache? Take Anacin. Too much fun in the sun give you a sunburn? Tired eyes? Wrinkled skin? Dried out hair? Use Solarcaine, Visine, Oil of Olay, Clairol Instant Conditioner. And so on.

This philosophy of impulse is by no means confined to television; although it seems to find its most emphatic expression there and in television-related literature. One cannot leaf through *TV Guide*, for example, without coming across a dozen announcements of "technological breakthroughs" that permit one to achieve instant weight loss, instant muscle tone, instant beauty and health without the least sacrifice of one's pleasures. Now you can "eat whatever you like," one current ad promises, "pancakes, pastry or pizza, natural food or junk food . . . pasta and ice cream . . . as much as you like," and still lose weight. "With all that [cigarette] puffing," another warns, "your Vitamin C could be going up in smoke." The



solution? Take these specially formulated multivitamins.

The philosophy of impulse codified in television and television-related media does not arise, as some seem to suggest, from some devil-inspired conspiracy to corrupt traditional values. Nor is it an accidental by-product of the content of particular programs. Television presents this set of values because, more than any other mass medium, it is an integral part of the web of economic relationships that constitute the consumer society. Put simply, the high standard of living Americans have come to expect requires the constant stimulation of mass production. And mass production requires mass consumption, not only of existing products, but of an ever-increasing variety of new products. To maintain the required level of consumption, people must be persuaded that they need the goods produced, and need them *now*.

Advertising creates precisely the world view I have described. And commercial television delivers that world view, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, because its survival depends on advertising.

TV's Economic Realities

The economics of commercial television help to explain why, even at the structure level, the medium places impulse and its satisfaction at the apex of human priorities. Quite simply, no network can afford to risk the loss of its audience's attention, even for a moment. If some need of viewers—for visual stimulation, action, excitement, titillation, novelty—is not instantly met, a simple flick of the wrist may send them (and the revenues they represent) to another station.

The economic realities of television also help to explain, in part, how the medium erodes cultural distinctions between kinds of places, times, and relationships—a key factor in the learning of impulse control. One of the consequences of television's mandate to engage and hold attention is its relentless pursuit of novelty. In a medium that operates around the clock, conventional content is soon exhausted. To satisfy the demand for something new and different, television pushes deeper and deeper into realms of human experience once considered, if not taboo, at least intensely private. On the news, on talk shows and interview programs, in docudramas, soap operas, and commercials, no topic is too intimate for exposure to public view. How do the President and

his wife handle their sleeping arrangements? How does it feel to be raped? How do disabled persons obtain sexual gratification? How do women cope with menstrual problems, and men with hemorrhoids? As more and more of what used to be regarded as private goes public, the notion that *anything* is private begins to disappear. Social space becomes homogeneous and as it does, the idea that some language and behavior is appropriate for some places and not others loses its meaning.

So does the idea that different times have different meanings for social behavior. Incest is presented alongside beauty hints on morning talk shows, and the difficulties of menopause alongside the stock market report at dinner-time. Except for some early morning programming, the Sabbath is indistinguishable from any other day of the week. Were it not for sports, summer could be winter, and fall, spring. With the addition of cable and television recording technology, everything is accessible to everybody, at any time.

As it homogenizes time and space, television homogenizes personal relationships as well. Traditionally, we distinguish among strangers, acquaintances, and intimates according to the kinds of spaces, times, and information we share with them. But television is no respecter of such distinctions. Strangers reveal the most intimate details of their lives to millions of other strangers, at any hour of the day or night, in bedrooms, kitchens, even bathrooms, without the least regard for the sex, age, or background of their viewers.

As the Nielsen ratings of recent years indicate, there is very little difference in the program preference of adults and children; they are exposed to the same commercials with the same themes; increasingly, they watch at the same times. (According to recent figures, some two million children watch television between midnight and two a.m., every night of the year.) In this context, the notion that some things ought to be said only among adults or done only among intimates seems quaintly absurd.

New World View

My point is that, through its content and structure, television communicates potent messages about the management of impulse that are diametrically opposed to those that have provided the framework for socialization in Western culture for at least the past 500 years. It is this world view and this set of values, I believe, that so distresses the "moral

majority"—and many others of us less certain about our own righteousness and numbers. And we are right to be distressed. How can young people help but be confused about sexual impulses and their expression, when the messages they receive through the traditional institutions of society are so thoroughly contradicted by the messages they receive through a medium as engrossing and compelling as television? How can we help but be confused ourselves? Haven't many of us already internalized the view that since impulses are natural they must be good, and their repression evil? That shame, like sin, is an archaic and unhealthy concept? That the major reason for the control of impulse—indeed, the rationale for sex education in the first place—is the avoidance of unpleasant consequences like venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy? Haven't we come to believe that the withholding of information from the young—the maintenance of adult secrets—is unhealthy, and that a reluctance to discuss certain topics in public is a sign of a disordered personality? Have we not already accepted the view that children have the right to be treated as adults, and all adults as equals? But if so, what is our reason for regarding sexual relations between children, or between adults and children, or between consenting strangers, as somehow wrong? Why hedge about sexuality—as natural and healthy an impulse as eating—with special warnings and constraints? If our sole concern is fear of consequences, what answer shall we give to the argument that consequences can always be prevented or eliminated through technology—contraception, abortion, penicillin, and the like?

I do not know the answers to questions like these. I am certain only that they will be asked with increasing frequency and urgency in the years ahead, as the teachings of the television curriculum work themselves ever more deeply into the fabric of social values, attitudes, and behavior. At least, I devoutly *hope* such questions will trouble us. Like the restraint of impulse, confusion can be painful, but it is also a prerequisite to intellectual growth. At the least, it indicates an awareness of cultural contradictions and change. Far more frightening than our present distress is the possibility that we will learn the lessons of television so subtly, so painlessly, and so well that we shall one day soon stare at the teacher all unseeing, and wonder what all the fuss is about. □

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