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Pulling the Plug:
Why the Blue Glow of a Television Makes Me Blue

I grew up in Bombay, India, and was about twelve years old when television first came to that city. Thus, I didn't grow up with the medium that played such an important and formative role in the lives of most of my fellow American writers. I remember my shocked reaction a few years ago, when an American friend, in describing her childhood to me, said, "My mother used television as a babysitter." She may as well have told me that her mother used television to assassinate world leaders. I had grown up in a culture where, thanks to living in an extended family with aunts and uncles, I never once had even a human babysitter, let alone an electronic one.

But for many years after coming to this country, I had an uneasy feeling that I was missing out on something, some essential understanding of the American zeitgeist by not being an avid television watcher. After all, studies indicate that the average American viewer watches between three to four hours of television daily.

That feeling reached its climax in the mid-1980s when I was a reporter on a small daily newspaper in Ohio. About six of us were having lunch together one day when my

colleagues started discussing a wedding they were attending. In great detail, they exchanged notes on how the bride looked, what she wore and other physical details about the wedding and their reactions to it. I began to feel more and more isolated—it seemed as if I was the only one at the table who didn't know the bride and groom and had not been invited to this wedding. I was marvelling at my colleagues' insensitivity to the fact that I was the only one excluded from this shared experience when something someone said made me realize that they were not discussing a real wedding at all. They were discussing a wedding on the popular TV show, *Thirtysomething*.

The experience was yet another reminder of how seriously Americans take their television—and how someone refuses to participate in this cultural bonding experience at their own risk.

The other lesson about the power of television came from my students. Years after leaving that small newspaper on the banks of Lake Erie, I found myself teaching an Introduction to Journalism class at a state university. Many of my students were the sons and daughters of small farmers and factory workers; many were the first in their families to go to college. And unfortunately, with a few notable exceptions, most of them were poor writers—many were struggling with the basic elements of grammar, not to mention grappling with how to write a story in the Inverted Pyramid form or write a perfect lead. I was getting increasingly frustrated with the quality of work they were turning in.

Then, in the fifth week of classes, I had to teach them interviewing techniques. I decided to have them do some role-playing—one student would be the interviewer while the other was the interviewee. And in front of my incredulous eyes, my little pumpkins turned into Cinderellas. They were amazing—they asked wonderful, provocative

questions, listened intently and sympathetically and then followed up with more good questions. Those who were being interviewed answered those questions with wit and intelligence. I could not believe that the same students who could barely string a written sentence together, had such self-confidence and strong interviewing skills.

Of course, I had to ask. I ran after one of my students after class and basically asked, "How come all of you are so brilliant at this?" I'll never forget her answer. She looked over her shoulder and tossed out, "You forget, we're the Oprah generation. We may not know how to read and write but we know how to talk."

As someone who now teaches journalism, creative writing and literature, I have grudgingly come to realise the importance of staying up with pop-cultural references. To that extent, I have made feeble, half-hearted attempts to watch more television. But a funny thing happens on the way to *Buffy the Vampire* or *Survivor*—I find myself, when I do turn on the TV, flipping to CNN or some other news channel. Or, I find myself watching a show like West Wing, which probably has limited appeal to the typical undergraduate. Because I find most of what I'm watching on TV to be so puerile or soul-deadening that apart from some desultory name-dropping references, I don't see what I gain that would help me become a smarter, more empathetic teacher. And frankly, if all I'm trying to do is keep up with my students' cultural references, I do as well reading about the shows in the *Times*, as I do watching them.

But here, I must draw a distinction between using TV primarily as a tool of information as opposed to a tool for entertainment—no matter how blurry those distinctions have become in recent years. It is the use of TV as entertainment that I am addressing in this article. Television's history as a method of dispensing valuable

information into the political arena is slightly more distinguished, as my colleague Davis Schneiderman alludes to, although even that reality is slightly more complicated. Yes, as Schneiderman points out, the telecast of Mayor Daly's cops beating up student protestors in Chicago may have marked an end to Humphrey's presidential aspirations. And television's role in mobilizing against the Vietnam war has been cited so often as to have devolved into cliché. But much has changed in the forty intervening years, most notably the corporate domination of the networks. Take the mass global protests against George Bush's Iraqi adventure. How much of that did one catch on the CBS or NBC Evening News? I would submit that I learned more about the protests from reading the *Times* than from watching the evening news. Yes, television still retains one vital function—to act as a kind of national living room or a chapel, during times of crisis, such as the September 11 attacks or the explosion of the Challenger. But the communal feelings that this mass experience engenders are so visceral and emotional, that I wonder if they result in a serious national purpose. Does repeatedly watching the two towers come down or the space shuttle explode, deaden us to the exquisite horror of the moment? Or worse, does it inflame our nationalistic sensibilities to a point where no serious political discourse is possible? After watching footage of those planes go into the towers on that fateful day, I didn't watch television for several weeks. The most basic reason was that I was, in those days, cableless and to be cableless in America, alas, is to live a kind of fuzzy, snowy life. But I also didn't want to watch those horrific pictures over and over again, didn't want my emotions manipulated by the mass media. In those dark days, I wanted to think, read, argue and go for long walks trying to make sense of the world. I didn't want my love for

this country to be cheapened by the jingoistic clamour of Fox News; I didn't want to allow someone to exploit my grief and horror for cheap political gain.

To proponents of the power of television to affect social or political change, I ask: Can we think of a contemporary example of that power? Did watching the fast-and-furious ballot recounting change the outcome of that election? Did it propel millions of Americans to mobilize in the streets? Can the censored, sanitized images of the Iraqi war that most American television stations air begin to capture the truth about the carnage and horror of that war? How much time does the evening news spend on talking about the unravelling of environmental policy, of civil liberties, that this country has been experiencing for the last four years? Given the reality that television has been co-opted by the multinationals who own the stations and the loud, foul-mouthed, no-nothing talk show hosts who seem to consider politics to be a carnival or a mud wrestling match, rather than a serious profession that affects people's lives—given this reality, isn't the appropriate response to pull the plug and tune out?

As for television as entertainment—which is really what I think we are mostly talking about here—I can think of a hundred ways to be entertained rather than sitting comatose in front of the idiot box—watching paint dry, watching water boil and reading magazines in a dentist's office, being some of them.

Seriously though, I realise that part of this resistance is also a byproduct of my childhood. I love movies as much as I hate television—the small box has never held my attention the way the big silver screen can. In this, I am a typical Bombayite of my generation. Growing up in a movie-obsessed family in a movie-obsessed city, watching both Hollywood and Bollywood movies seemed as natural as breathing air. Watching

movies engenders in me a generous, larger-than-life, communal feeling—a feeling that links me to my fellow human beings, that brings me in contact with humanity. I still remember that marvellous feeling of going to the movies one Christmas Day about ten years ago. I had thought I and my friends would be the only ones there; to my surprise the theatre was packed. I remember looking around and feeling something akin to love—here we all were, transplants, misfits, escaping the cloying tentacles of family to form our own community, no matter how transient. Was I sentimentalizing the experience? Of course I was. It doesn't matter—the fact is, watching television in my living room has never elicited that warm, communal feeling in me.

Films also help me in teaching the art of writing to my students. I've noticed that in my creative writing classes, the writing process becomes much more clear to my students if I talk about it in movie terms—the summary as an aerial shot; the scene as a closeup. I talk to them about foreground and background and how in the movies, editing is the most creative part of movie making—that is, what's left on the editor's cutting floor is as important as what's on the screen. I see their eyes light up at this—somehow this translates the act of writing into a form that's easier for them to understand.

As for reading—in my mind, that darkly intimate experience is so beyond anything that television can offer that I can't even consider them to be substitutes for each other. Each day comes with its finite number of hours and I find myself able to engage with the world in a much more meaningful way through the magic of books than the fantasy illusion of television. There are, after all, different layers and levels of the world that we can select to engage in, and I prefer to spend my time in a world that is timeless and universal and soul-enhancing. Only literature provides me with that, and

even among the hippest, most media-savvy and pop-culture-immersed of my students, I find that the way they respond to a novel by Toni Morrison or a short story by Alice Munroe, say—the light that comes into their eyes, the emotional connections that they make to those characters—is different from and deeper than the way they respond to the latest television show.

I do not believe that it is mandatory to immerse oneself in all existing media. Rather, I think that the glory of being alive in the twenty-first century is that you get to be selective and exercise your judgment as to what you participate in. I honestly don't believe that my pulling the plug on the television set has made me a poorer writer or teacher. I am fairly well-informed; I consider myself an engaged citizen of the world. Like most serious writers, I'd like to believe that my writing is more concerned with the timeless topics—that is, the basic movements of the human heart—that remain true through the decades and even the centuries. Yes, there may be a kind of immediacy and hipness that peppering your work with pop-cultural references may confer upon you, but that's not what I'm trying to do with my writing. Nor is it what I'm trying to teach my students to do with their own work. Instead, I tell them to become experts on human behaviour and psychology—to walk through the world with their eyes wide open, to be deep and compassionate listeners, to take risks in their own lives, to love and to live large. In other words, to have a love affair with the world, to be in love with human quirks and contradictions. Ultimately, I think these are more productive ways to train for a career in writing than to sit alone in your living room before the blue haze of the idiot box.