Shadows on Glass: Reading Television

by JOHN GILLESPIE

Few would disagree with Malcolm Muggeridge's opinion that 'the media in general and TV in particular, and BBC television especially, are incomparably the greatest single influence in our society today, exerted at all social, economic and cultural levels.'[1] From Einstein to Hammerstein, Cube roots to Cupitt, Karl Marx to Groucho Marx, Shakespeare to Shakin' Stevens, all human life seems to be there. Television, indeed, is all-pervasive. How could it be otherwise when we watch it, on average, 3 hours 10 minutes a day, in other words almost one full day a week? Television watching, which claims more of our time than eating, food preparation or sport, is our most popular leisure activity. More than 95% of our homes have at least one TV set and more than one in five have a video-cassette recorder. We programme our lives, or our VCRs, to suit its schedules, we revere its stars and we let its advertisements tell us what to do and what to buy. Moreover, as the electronic revolution progresses, it is likely that TV will become even more prominent than it is at present. The growing interest in teletext and the development of interactive services will encourage us to use our sets in conjunction with computer terminals and data bases to provide ourselves with all kinds of useful services until we finally become the truly 'wired society'. Cable television, when it eventually arrives, will give us a far wider range of choice of viewing (in the USA there are as many as 50 channels available in some places) than at present, even though quality is likely to be sacrificed for the sake of quantity. Direct broadcasting by satellite will enable us, among other things, to see programmes from other countries and encourage us to improve our knowledge of foreign languages.

Clearly there are many positive aspects to the widespread use of television. Raw information can be sent more simply and easily. The housebound are able to keep in touch with the outside world more readily. We can take advantage of the enhanced opportunities for education, not just by watching Open University programmes, but also the various documentaries and series that are screened. We can learn about disasters in the Third World, such as the present terrible famine in North-East Africa and be encouraged to do what we can to help. We can watch Alex Higgins play snooker, keep up to date with the state of play in the Test Match or follow the dramatisation of classical works of literature such as *Barchester Towers, Pickwick Papers* or *Anna of the Five Towns*. Well entertained and well informed, we can easily feel ourselves to be living in a global village—only a remote control button away from New Delhi, New Caledonia, Newfoundland or Newtownards.

The Problem with Television

However, many Christians who recognise the centrality of TV in their lives are uneasy. They are embarrassed by their dependence on it and the problems it seems to cause. They worry and protest about the content of programmes—bad language, overt sexuality, the glorification of violence—they are concerned about what they should and should not view (and whether they should view it on a Sunday). They are anxious about the influence of TV on their children. They regret the fact that TV kills conversation and lessens the quality of family life. They deplore the inadequacy of most religious broadcasting, with its sceptical documentaries and its play-it-safe hymn-singing programmes. They are uneasy about consumer values projected by slickly produced advertisements, and they feel guilty at spending a lot more time in front of their screens than they do in worship, prayer, Bible study or helping their neighbours. But most of the time their concern merely focusses on the content of certain programmes and the social effects of watching TV in general. As a result they fail to see that its influence on us is more fundamental than they realise.

Television and Secularisation

Television's influence on us is fundamental and threatening because of its power to bend our minds without our being aware of it. It is no exaggeration to say that television sets the agenda for what our society is thinking. That is partly because it is a mass medium. Everyone knows its concerns and, as a result, many people seem to be thinking about the same things—the outcome of the Miners' strike, the famine in Ethiopia, the women of Greenham Common or whatever. But TV does not just set the agenda for society, it is also able, because of its privileged position, to form a consensus or orthodoxy of values and beliefs. And so, since our society is a secular one, it has become the main transmitter of secular values, part of the secularisation process that has made our society, both in its understanding of the world and in its day-to-day activity, a post-Christian one—one which does not mix God or religion with the important business of living. The world of television is the world of space and time, of the here and now. Christianity is not seen to be true. For instance events are not considered to be unfolding as parts of God's plan and the idea that sin might actually be the cause of many of our moral and political ills is given no credence whatsoever. It is not that these values are always transmitted in obvious ways, as in series such as *The Ascent of Man*, *Life on Earth* or *The Sea of Faith*. In fact television has been shown to be ineffective as an opinion-former if it makes a direct assault on moral, political or religious beliefs. Rather it transmits a hidden curriculum of secular humanist values. Within that secular consensus, although it often appears to be neutral, objective and fair, its programmes constantly convey various moral, social and political messages—and we rarely notice.

Television itself, as an invention, emphasises human achievement and ingenuity and is, therefore, a powerful symbol of the process of modernisation, of a world which does not need God as an hypothesis, and where each succeeding scientific discovery or technological innovation further reinforces the illusion that man is increasingly in control of his destiny. In such a secularised context, the plausibility of Christian belief in the supernatural is undermined, if not destroyed. Indeed, as far as religious belief is concerned, British television is thoroughly pluralistic; for political and other reasons, it allows diverse groups to put forward their beliefs in their own way. Such pluralism is double-edged. Its evenhandedness suggests neutrality and yet that very neutrality automatically undermines any credibility religion might attain, and forms part of the monolithic secularist orthodoxy which prevails in our society. Os Guinness's comments on secularisation are particularly apt: 'the slow subtle but all-powerful shaping of culture has all the advantages of a complete philosophical revolution with none of the disadvantages of intellectual sweat.'[2]

Television then, despite its façade of evenhandedness, is an agency of social conformity. Not only is this true of the lifestyle of the consumer society advocated by the commercial breaks and the not-so-subtle messages of the soap operas, and of the portrayal of 'normality' and official reality through news programmes (for example during the Falklands war), but also in the area of beliefs and values. Most Christians seem to be insufficiently aware of this, straining at the gnats of swearwords and bare bosoms, and swallowing the camels of secularism. The worldliness we fret about is merely the symptom of the worldliness of secularism which is so skilfully conveyed by the medium of TV and against which we need to be on our guard.

Television in Action

As we consider how television affects us as viewers it will become clear that keeping up our guard is not easy. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, television is a medium which depends on intimacy. We watch it in our own homes, when we are at our most relaxed and our least critical.

Second, it puts a premium on immediacy. We are given the immediate experience of many things which are not normally within our grasp. The excitement of the visual images to which we are constantly exposed has an entrancing effect and keeps us watching this constantly changing world. Because of television's attraction, we are easily distracted from family, from friends and from spiritual concerns. A turn of the switch or the press of a button and our appetitie for excitement and variety of experience can be satisfied.

Third, our experience, although enriched, is experience at a distance. Our appreciation of a bomb explosion, for example, seen on television, does not compare with what we would expereince were we close to such an event ourselves. Our knowledge is depersonalised and our feelings, to an extent, dehumanised.

Fourth, television encourages us to be passive, to let the programmes wash over us, to be passively excited by the new opiate of the people.

Fifth, by spreading excitement through its striking images and by encouraging intimacy and passivity, television is biased in its essence against understanding. It does not require us to think in a logical, disciplined, linear manner. Instead, it relies on a kind of visual logic. It is partly for that reason and partly because of its ephemeral nature, that it affects our emotions more than our minds. It is well known, from various research studies, that we do not retain detailed information from news bulletins, just a few general, mainly visual impressions.

Sixth, television is a medium that inevitably encourages us to live in a fantasy world, an intimate exciting world of heightened emotion and vicarious experience. As in Pascal's concept of *divertissement*, television becomes a method of keeping our minds busy and thus diverted from thinking about the big questions of life.

Lastly, because of its strongly visual character and its programming techniques, television encourages us to think that seeing is believing. Just because we have seen something on the screen we are encouraged to think that it is true and real. The very opposite, in fact, is closer to the truth.

Now some may object that they are not so easily fooled by television as I am suggesting. They will maintain that they are aware of the ways in which television operates and will prove it by pointing out how people make fun of *Dallas*, *Crossroads* or *Family Fortunes*. They will make the observation that the striking members of the NUM are far from convinced that the presentation of television news is objective and fair. But whether this scepticism about television is due to a middle-class sense of superiority or to a partisan working-class distrust of politicians and the establishment, it appears to be strictly selective. It does not indicate, for example, an awareness of the way television structures its message or manufactures its myths. Even when such scepticism is rife, therefore, the messages of secularism still go out and the essentially pagan world-view of our society still reigns supreme. Superficial criticism of this kind is no proof against the mystification of the messages of television.

Television and Reality

1. The Role of the Producer

It is because television encourages us to think that seeing is believing that we pick up all sorts of messages without being aware of it. We usually forget that there is a producer, that news programmes, documentaries, plays, even live programmes have to be edited. In other words we forget that what we see and hear is not reality as it truly is, but reality as it is refracted through the eyes of the producer. We forget that there is a cutting room and that what is kept or cut is kept or cut for certain reasons. Malcolm Muggeridge goes so far as to say that 'Not only *can* the camera lie, it always lies'[3] and stresses the faking possibilities of the cutting room, particularly

for news, which he calls the 'Unholy Grail, the ultimate fantasy on which the whole structure of the media is founded.'[4]

But even if we do not go so far as to accuse television of being totally bogus, it is clear that, in documentaries for instance, the role of the producer is crucial. It makes a difference how a programme is structured—whether the report assumes a neutral position presenting both sides of a controversy or whether it chooses to support one particular point of view. It makes a difference whether we see the reporter or not, for he lends authenticity to the report, especially if he is well known. It also makes a difference who is interviewed during a dispute. Are all points of view represented? Are the questions hostile, information-seeking or sympathetic? How are the interviews woven into the documentary? And if there are no interviews, why is that the case? All these devices and more are at a producer's disposal if he wants to convey a certain impression. It is relatively easy for him in reporting a political dispute to present the material in the interests of one side or the other.

2. The Role of Visual Signs

Once again some will maintain that they are aware of the ways in which producers select and organise their material and therefore influence the direction of a report or documentary. However, even if we concede that this is true for a substantial minority of viewers, which I doubt, it is unlikely that they can maintain that they are aware of the extent to which the producer's power rests not only in his capacity to arrange the material of his programmes, but also in his capacity to control what we actually see.

Seeing is not believing. We fall into the trap of thinking that it is, because television helps us to see what we want to see or expect to see. The visual signs of television, which are arranged, like the other elements at his disposal, by the producer, form a social language which we need to learn to read. Clearly, it is not a language alien to the concerns or values of society. On the contrary, it is an especially strong concentration of them in visual form. One is tempted to say that every picture or image tells a story, but, in fact, that is not quite true. If we see a shot of an unfamiliar building, or a photograph of a missing person on the screen, we know that we are dealing with a realistic visual sign, a sign which is what it appears to be. It may be given a further meaning by its position in a programme or by the remarks of a commentator, but that is another matter. However, many of the visual signs we see are already determined by cultural or conventional meanings. For example a sequence showing a car being driven at high speed may be merely descriptive, but if that car is the General Lee, it will connote values of freedom, virility, youthful rebellion against authority and the delights of living in dear old Dixie. Similarly the sight of serried ranks of guardsmen marching down Horse Guards' Parade during the Trooping of the Colour will signify loyalty to the crown, military discipline, the importance of tradition and ceremonial, and a certain sense of nationhood.

Recent structuralist theories, formulated by Roland Barthes among others, have used the term 'myth' to describe the shared cultural meanings on which television draws so constantly. A myth is a cultural convention which helps us to understand what we see in terms of the values of our society. It is a means of bringing what we see under the control of appropriate cultural values, and, in our society, that means ultimately secular values. Myths are not, therefore, untrue, but are a means of understanding the world. Television makes use of these visual myths and their presuppositions and also helps them to change and develop through use, as they constantly do. There is a dialectical interaction between the producer's use of visual signs as myths for his own purposes and the availability of myths to use. He is unable to depart entirely from the myths of society, for myths only make sense because of our collective cultural consciousness. Individual myths can, of course, be grouped together into sets of myths, or mythologies, for example in *Dallas*, which portrays the mythology of success, South Fork style. These mythologies are informed by common principles about the nature of reality and are ideological in character. There is, for example, in Bob Goudzwaard's terms, an 'Ideology of material prosperity'[5]—an ideology which is portrayed on our screens day in and day out in a whole series of interconnecting myths produced by our consumer society. Such objects can even become idols which we worship because of what they do for us, idols which receive our constant devotion.

It is these myths, mythologies and ideologies which remain when the detailed information conveyed by television is forgotten. It is because their effect is strongly visual, with the important addition of sound effects, that we are usually unaware of the extent to which these hidden persuaders reach us with their messages. And it is the total effect, rather than individual myths or programmes, that is important. Unless we become more aware of the way in which these processes operate, we are likely to become more and more influenced by the values of secular humanism.

Reading Television

As Christians, we need to learn how to read the audio-visual language of television so as to become aware of the ways in which its material is structured and to subject it to critical scrutiny. In other words we need to begin the process of demythologising television, to begin considering all kinds of programmes to see whether they are gradually conforming us to the secular humanist consensus through the subconsciously persuasive force of their myths. We must learn to look at television *with* our eyes, rather than merely *through* them. That is, after all, the biblical message regarding our involvement with society. We are told to 'take every thought captive to obey Christ' (2 co. 10.5 RSV); we are not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12.2). Indeed it is only if we begin to use our minds as Christians should, that we will be

able to avoid the dangers which watching television presents. That will obviously mean devoting a considerable amount of mental energy to watching it carefully, but it is essential that we do so. It will also mean learning to switch it off more readily than we do.

Some may object that looking for myths and mythologies is far too abstract and intellectual a task and not something that could be expected of everyone. Yet the same people would see nothing wrong with suggesing that we choose what we read carefully and that we read it critically. In any event I am not suggesting that we all become television critics, just that we all become critical of television. The problem is that it will be some time before many of us will be able to read the structures and audio-visual signs of the language of television quickly and easily so that we will be aware of all the message it is conveying. However it is a perfectly feasible undertaking. And it would be excellent if more Christians would consider taking their reading of television a little further and writing a few reviews or analyses of programmes or series for both Christians and unbelievers alike. A detailed analysis, for example of the myths of *Dallas*, *Coronation Street*, *Panorama* and *The Price is Right* would be very valuable. It is only by increasing our teleliteracy that we will be able to ensure that we are obeying Paul's command:

'Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things'. (Phil. 4.8, RSV).

NOTES

1. Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media*, (London, 1977), p. 23
2. Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (London, 1983), p. 40.
3. Muggeridge, p. 30.
4. Muggeridge, p. 33.
5. Bob Goudzwaard, *Idols of our Time*, (Downers Grove, 1984), passim.