"Television: The Cyclops That Eats Books"

by Larry Woiwode, Best-Selling Author

Once out of school, nearly 60 percent of all adult Americans have never read a single book, and most of the rest read only one book a year."
Stephen King (who has a certain clever skill) to pulp fiction. These are really forms of verbal TV—literature that is so superficial that those who read it can revel in the same sensations they experience when they are watching TV.

Even more importantly, the growing influence of television has, Kerman says, changed people’s habits and values and affected their assumptions about the world. The sort of reflective, critical and value-laden thinking encouraged by books has been rendered obsolete. In this context, we would do well to recall Edith Hamilton’s summary of the Trojan Wars. Odysseus and his crew have found as Odysseus is on his way home from the Trojan Wars. Odysseus and the Cyclops named Polyphemus, the encounter between the mythic adventurer and itsistic Edith Hamilton’s summary of the Greek myth, predated man.

Here is a passage from the well known classicist Edith Hamilton’s summary of the encounter between the mythic adventurer Odysseus and the Cyclops named Polyphemus, as Odysseus is on his way home from the Trojan Wars. Odysseus and his crew have found Polyphemus’s cave:

"At last he came, hideous and huge, tall as a great mountain crag. Driving his flock before him he entered and closed the cave’s mouth with a ponderous slab of stone. Then looking around he caught sight of the strangers, and cried out in a dreadful booming voice, ‘Who are you who enter unhindered the house of Polyphemus? Traders or thieving pirates?’ They were terror-stricken at the sight and sound of him, but Odysseus made shift to answer, and firmly too: ‘Shipwrecked warriors from Troy are we, and your supplicants, under the protection of Zeus, the supplicants’ god.’ But Polyphemus roared out that he cared not for Zeus. He was bigger than any god and feared none of them. With that, he stretched out his mighty arms and in each great hand seized one of the men and dashed his brains out on the ground. Slowly he feasted off them to the last shred, and then, satisfied, stretched himself out across the cavern and slept. He was safe from attack. None but he could roll back the huge stone before the door, and if the horrified men had been able to summon courage and strength enough to kill him they would have been imprisoned there forever."

To discover their fate, read the book, preferably Robert Fitzgerald’s masterful translation, if you don’t know Greek. What I find particularly appropriate about this myth as it applies today is that, first, the Cyclops imprisons these men in darkness, and that, second, he beats their brains out before he devours them. It doesn’t take much imagination to apply this to the effects of TV on us and our children.

**TV’s Effect on Learning**

Quite literally, TV affects the way people think. In Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (1978), Jerry Mander quotes from the Emery Report, prepared by the Center for Continuing.

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Education at the Australian National University, Canberra, that when we watch television, "our usual processes of thinking and discernment are semi-functional at best." The study also argues "...that while television appears to have the potential to provide useful information to viewers—and is celebrated for its educational function—the technology of television and the inherent nature of the viewing experience actually inhibit learning as we usually think of it." And its final judgment is: "The evidence is that television not only destroys the capacity of the viewer to attend, it also, by taking over a complex of direct and indirect neural pathways, decreases vigilance—the general state of arousal which prepares the organism for action should its attention be drawn to a specific stimulus."

We have all experienced this last reaction: "Dad, it’s time to—"

"Go on, get out of here!"

"But Dad, Mom just fell down the—"

"Leave me alone; can’t you see I’m watching the Super Bowl?"

How are our neural pathways taken over? We think we are looking at a picture, or an image of something, but what we are actually seeing is thousands of dots of light blinking on and off in a strobe effect that is calculated to happen rapidly enough to keep us from recognizing the phenomenon. More than a decade ago, Mander and others pointed to instances of "TV epilepsy," in which those watching this strobe effect overextended their capacities, and the New England Journal of Medicine recently honored this affliction with a medical classification: video game epilepsy.

**Shadows on the Screen**

Television also teaches that people aren’t quite real; they are images—gray-and-white shadows or technicolor little beings who move in a medium no thicker than a sliver of glass, created by this bombardment of electrons.

Unfortunately, the tendency is to start thinking of them in the way children think when they see too many cartoons: that people are merely objects that can be zapped. Or that can fall over a cliff and be smashed to smithereens and pick themselves up again.

Profiled recently by People magazine as one of America’s leading novelists, Larry Woiwode is the author of What I’m Going to Do, I Think (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969). Beyond the Bedroom Wall (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975, reprinted by Aron and Penguin Books), Even Tide (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, reprinted by Noonday), Poppa John (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981, reprinted by Crossway). Born Brothers (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988, reprinted by Penguin Books) and The Neumiller Stories (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989, reprinted by Penguin Books). Three of these novels have been chosen as "Best Books of the Year" by the New York Times Book Review. A former college professor who lives on a working ranch in North Dakota, Mr. Woiwode has also written numerous short stories and poems for publications such as Atlantic Monthly, the New Yorker, and Harper’s. A new novel, Indian Affairs, will be published in June by Atheneum. 4
the determining factor is the amount of TV parents permit their children to watch.

Eron’s present partner in this extensive ongoing study, University of Illinois professor of psychology Rowell Huesmann, has written:

“When the research was started in 1960, television viewing was not a major focus. But in 1970, in the 10-year follow-up, one of the best predictions we could find of aggressive behavior in a teenage boy was how much violence he watched as a child. In 1981, we found that the adults who had been convicted of the most serious crimes were those same ones who had been the more aggressive teenagers, and who had watched the most television violence as children.”

Where is this report? Buried in an alumni publication of the University of Illinois. In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health published its own study: “Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the ‘80s.” This report stated that there is “overwhelming” evidence that violence on TV lends to aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. Those findings were duly reported by most of the major media in the early ’80s and then were forgotten.

Why do such reports sink into oblivion? Because the American audience does not want to face the reality of TV. They are too consumed by their love for it.

**TV: Eating Out Our Substance**

TV eats books. It eats academic skills. It eats positive character traits. It even eats family relationships. How many families do you know that spend the dinner hour in front of the TV, seldom communicating with one another? How many have a television on while they have breakfast or prepare for work or school?

And what about school? I’ve heard college professors say of their students, “Well, you have to entertain them.” One I know recommends using TV and film clips instead of lecturing, “throwing in a commercial every ten minutes or so to keep them awake.” This is not only a patronizing attitude, it is an abdication of responsibility: A teacher should teach. But TV eats the principles of people who are supposed to be responsible, transforming them into passive servants of the Cyclops.

TV eats our substance. Mander calls this the mediation of experience: “[With TV] what we see, hear, touch, smell, feel and understand about the world has been processed for us.”

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And, when we “cannot distinguish with certainty the natural from the interpreted, or the artificial from the organic, then all theories of the ideal organization of life become equal.” In other words, TV teaches that all life-styles and all values are equal, and that there is no clearly defined right and wrong. In his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, one of the more brilliant recent books on the tyranny of television, the author Neil Postman wonders why nobody has pointed out that television possibly oversteps the injunction in the Decalogue against making graven images.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many of the tradi-

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Freedom, Responsibility and the American Literary Tradition

The novel of morals and manners was central to the early American literary tradition. It articulated that which has distinguished the American character and the American national experience from the Old World. There is little doubt that, despite its obvious inheritances from abroad, there were indeed important distinctions. Says NYU professor James W. Tuttleton, the greatest was the American "claim of liberty as the prior condition of all politics, religion and social organization. This claim is no less at the heart of American artistic endeavor, particularly in the novel."

Best-selling author Larry Woiwode gave a reading from The Neumiller Stories.

Today, however, the "critics' choice" often dismiss such distinctions and consign society as well as literary tradition to the rubbish heap of outmoded consciousness and convention. Here are excerpts from Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on February 10-14, 1991, which take exception to that trend.

"The Tension Between Emerson and Hawthorne"

James W. Tuttleton, New York University Author, The Novel of Manners in America

To speak of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne together is to recollect one of the most lively and creative periods in American literary history. But it would be hard to imagine two neighbors so close who have so different a view of human nature, history and tradition, and of the workings of good and evil in human experience. Hawthorne was frankly disturbed at the discrepancy, as he saw it, between the Emersonian theory of human perfectability and the reality of human nature. But it would be hard to imagine two neighbors so close who have so different a view of human nature, history and tradition, and of the workings of good and evil in human experience. Hawthorne was frankly disturbed at the discrepancy, as he saw it, between the Emersonian theory of human perfectability and the reality of human nature.

...The self vs. society, feeling vs. rational thought, freedom vs. responsibility, the passions of the individual vs. religious and social values, the role and status of men and women: much of the literary expression of the "American renaissance" is a manifestation of cultural struggle where containing values are dramatically debated and tested, an arena where principles are implicitly analyzed and their consequences are figuratively represented. Freedom is assumed as a given, but Emerson and Hawthorne diverge sharply on the question of how we make responsible use of that freedom.

"Liberty and the Southern Tradition"

George Garrett, University of Virginia Author, Entered from the Sun

The Southern writer writes about individuals, not groups. Part of the charm, the enchantment, of Southern literature from the earliest days until now has been its characters, that is, its literary celebration of odd and interesting individual characters. There is next to no place, then, for Marxist or Freudian determinism. On a lighter note, there is also a whole philosophy and way of life encapsulated in one remark by a character named Cherry in a story told by Lee Smith: "When you get to be too old to be cute, honey, you got to be eccentric."

In spite of all its cliches and conventions, contemporary Southern literature has more form and variety of content than any national literature allows, or indeed, than any other nation (Russia may prove to be the exception now that the Soviet Union has fallen into ruin). In spite of all its cliches and conventions, contemporary Southern literature has more form and variety of content than any national literature allows, or indeed, than any other nation (Russia may prove to be the exception now that the Soviet Union has fallen into ruin and fragments).

...Of course, all this discussion of Southerners' love of diversity, of liberty, of individuality tempered by the code of manners and the dictates of reason—all this has avoided the question looming like a large threatening cloud on the horizon—What about slavery?

Post-Civil War Southern writers lived in a time of defeat, of guilt, and of fundamental contradiction. The South was the home of liberty on this continent. It was Southerners who held out for the Bill of Rights. And yet it was also Southerners who fought to the death, with truly extraordinary sacrifice and bravery, to defend their "right" to deprive others of their liberty.

"T.S. Eliot and That Service Which Is Perfect Freedom"

Russell Kirk, Author, Eliot and His Age

Literary decadence commonly is bound up with a general intellectual and moral disorder in a society—resulting, presently, in violent social disorder. The decay of literature appears often as a result from a rejection of the ancient human endeavor to apprehend a transcendent order in the universe and to live in harmony with that order. For when the myths and the dogmata are discarded, the religious imagination withers. So it had come to pass with 20th century Protestantism, Eliot believed.
Religious postulates about the human condition having been abandoned by men of letters, the moral imagination starves. And presently the moral imagination gives way, among many people, to the idyllic imagination; and after they have grown disillusioned with Arcadia, they turn to the diabolic imagination, which afflicts both the best-educated and worst-schooled classes in Western society today.

...Eliot suffered no such affliction. He was a free man because he acknowledged a Master; a responsible man because he lived by a tradition; a great man of letters because he knew that literature has an ethical end. At

"What's Wrong With the Literary World: Egocentrism in the Name of Ideas"

Daphne Merkin, Former Associate Publisher Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Author, Enchantment

As a writer and an editor, I've come to the conclusion that what is wrong with the literary world is the disappearance of the good old-fashioned notion of character, which is now deemed quaint and retrograde. Today, when character comes up at all, we're told that it is inseparable from culture, which in turn is inseparable from the unexamined—or at the least insufficiently examined—precepts within the culture itself. These are precepts which presumably endorse the supremacy of one system of values—i.e., the white male capitalist system of values—over another presumably less suspect system.

The scrupulously relativistic, anti-exclusionist, nonjudgmental approach has led to a state of affairs both in the world of letters and in society that espouses equality for some and victimhood for all. In an article on the recent absurdities of the Modern Language Association called, "Deciphering Victorian Underwear and Other Seminars," the New York Times magazine noted that it has become a serious insult to even use the word judgmental. This climate has, in turn, led to a point where individual destiny and choice—in novels and in life—fall away and in its stead we come upon a clanking grid of causes, like a steel casing around living flesh, which does away with

Thus Jane Austen, for instance, could no longer be comfortably approached as a spinster who lived with a moderate amount of pleasure amongst her family and wrote of the world in which she lived with witty, even subversive understanding, but instead must be viewed as a tragic instance of feminine compliance, who wrote novels with a secret subtext of insurrectionary intentions.

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