

TV or Not TV



Man Watching TV, Dan Kedar, 1978

Lately we have been thrown upon the oracle: beguiling but illusory, presenting a glaring simulacrum of connectedness—a fragile respite from entropy. Technology has turned our ‘television sets’ into ‘monitors,’ just as our ‘phones’ are used for so much other than conversation, the paleo-use we once made of ‘telephones.’ Voyeurs in the midst of a wasteland, we struggle to navigate among platforms. But not in my memory: then it was and always will be *television*.

And about that, this: real television never was the wasteland once claimed for it. Those of us of a certain age recall when that slander was first slapped on. It was the takeaway line in a speech delivered on May 9, 1961, by Newton Minnow, the chairman of the FCC, to the National Association of Broadcasters. The *New York Times* headline read “F.C.C. Head

Bids TV Men Reform 'Vast Wasteland' –Minnow Charges Failure in Public Duty–Threatens to Use License Power.” These were Minnow’s words:

When television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there for a day without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.

Now, who in his right mind would do *that*? With magazines, newspapers, or theater? So why such an inane fixation with television? How pleased I was to learn that the [S.S. Minnow](#) of [Gilligan’s Island](#) was a sarcastic gesture named after the commissioner. If only Minnow had watched more *Twilight Zone*.

By the time of his speech the technology as a privately available medium was only some fifteen years old, twelve in my household. I was three when it arrived: big box, small screen, fuzzy even when tuned with various knobs and adjustable rabbit-ear antenna, and (need I say) no color, no remote control, and no channels above the basic five. It was an engaging novelty (like the first Polaroid camera years later), but it did not narcotize. I was amused, rarely amazed, not entangled. It joined comic books, toys, my imagination, and my big brother.

My good fortune was to have spent the early years with radio drama: not only my grandmother’s daily soap opera ‘stories’ (*Helen Trent* was a favorite), fifteen minutes per show beginning at noon, but real excitement at night—*Inner Sanctum*, *The Shadow*, *Straight Arrow*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Tom Mix*. In the dark of my bedroom, under the covers, stories and more

stories populated the theater of my imagination. At that time television simply could not compete, and didn't try (though it would steal from radio). Baseball; the fights (Friday night); very brief news broadcasts (but also the Army-McCarthy hearings, which mother would not turn off); some mid-afternoon song (Perry Como and Kate Smith, "the only woman never to lose her figure," my father would quip) and *Your Hit Parade*. (Just how much was that doggy in the window? I wondered.)

Soon children's programming came along: *Rootie Kazootie*, *Kukla*, *Fran and Ollie*, and *Howdy Doodie* with his peanut gallery (all live), and the Saturday morning cartoon ghetto ("when there is a wrong to right, Mighty Mouse will join the fight," sung operatically), along with Andy Devine's "Andy's Gang," featuring the sinister Froggy: "Pluck your magic twanger Froggie!" though no one could say exactly what that twanger was). But none of these was 'don't miss' TV; there was too much else to do.

Not even the early sitcoms could make me an addict, though I enjoyed the people in them. Forgotten now are the stars of the earliest of these— bona fide movie stars, including some who won (Broderick Crawford) or would win (George C. Scott, Donna Reed) Oscars. Though few were 'above the title' in the movies, all were known names: Gale Storm, Anne Southern, Eve Arden, William Bendix, Robert Young and Jane Wyatt, later Loretta Young, and, of course, Jackie Gleason and Lucille Ball. The early word was television would be the death of movies, an appearance on TV the death of star careers. Both proved false.

Most were more than merely watchable. Short teleplays, quickly paced (twenty-two minutes is not much time) and deftly edited (though some very early on were live), they brought viewers in and moved them along with plots and characters that were recognizable. They stole from vaudeville (which networks continue to do to this day). Ethnic types were all over the place. Peggy Wood as the Norwegian wife in *Mama* (from *I Remember Mama*), Gertrude Berg, *Amos and Andy* and *The Beulah*

Show, starring the great Ethel Waters (though how great a singer she was I would not learn for a decade)—all played to type, but rarely stereotype.

A few performers had migrated from radio, and many had long CVs. Many were comforting in different ways; for example, to a boy with no mother Margaret Anderson (Jane Wyatt) and June Cleaver (Barbara Billingsley) became downright surrogates. And here I remember Danny Thomas, whose sitcom lasted from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties. A renowned and versatile entertainer (live and on film), he achieved genuine greatness with his *St. Jude Research Hospital for Children*, where no patient ever has to pay. An attraction of the show for me in mid-run was that Danny, like my own father, became a widower. *The George Burns Show* was post-modern well *avant la lettre*. (He would follow the plot of his own show on television in his den, surprising the other characters with his knowledge of their conspiracies.) No wasteland there.

The search is further thwarted by the rise, in the early-to-mid-fifties, of great live comedy, variety, and dramatic programming. Milton Berle was number one (until bishop Fulton Sheen, of all people, knocked him off: when accepting his Emmy award he thanked his writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). *The Arthur Godfrey Show*, rambling in the mornings, ruled (until we learned how big a bastard he was), as did *The Lawrence Welk Show* weekly of an evening, which did not seem corny at the time (but that's from an old accordion player), and, on Saturdays, *The Ted Mack Amateur Hour* (you cannot count the progeny).

But no one could knock off the master, Sid Caesar, not least because of his team, above all the genius Carl Reiner. That being said, no one could knock off the non-genius Ed Sullivan. From plate-spinners, to opera singers, to scenes from Broadway shows (all live, by the way), as of 8pm on Sundays the American public saw *as one* what they otherwise would never see. That applied to drama, too. The *Hallmark Hall of*

Fame gave us Shakespeare, *The U.S. Steel Hour* and *Alcoa Presents* gave us *Twelve Angry Men*, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, and much else, all performed by the highest caliber talent, live. (If you want to know how great an actor Jack Palance was, see his *Mountain Rivera* in *Requiem*).

I watched much of the array, missed much, there being no home recording devices. It was all not only fun but interesting, revealing, moving. If a child wanted to be amazed, he could watch Superman actually fly. (For a while, at least at the beginning, that was must-see.) Justice restored? The Lone Ranger and Tonto (unpatronizing and unpatronized). By now we're still only in the mid-fifties, a mere six years from the Minnow speech. I still had not yet learned the difference between local stations (some of those independent) and networks (though broadcasting across the continent remained down the road) and syndication, stations buying (usually old) shows—where the enduring income is for performers.

Was this structure behind Minnow's outburst? Many degrees back, maybe; the beast had to eat, and the medium is fundamentally commercial. But the answer, I think, is game shows, early versions of reality TV and—westerns. Bud Collyer was the gamemaster of *Beat the Clock*, a mindless stunt show with its particular amusement and now progeny to spare. Noteworthy here is that Collyer came from radio, where he played . . . Superman. As games go this one was not a wasteland, merely fun to watch, just as was its antithesis, *What's My Line?* Maybe Minnow did not like games (though the big-name scandals did not help). What was mindless, and worse, was *Queen for a Day* on which the most pathetic tale, as voted by the audience, won gifts for the teller. There were others I cannot recall and may never have watched. Still, in those days TV-watching was opportunistic. Snack time? Well, there was *The Cisco Kid*, with adventure, stunts, and the warmth of true friendship.

By the way, a certain class of TV 'personality' is worth noting here. These were men with no discernible knack except relaxed personalities, camera-savviness, and glibness. How often I wondered exactly what it is that Robert Q. Lewis, or Gary Moore, or Arthur Godfrey actually *did*. Of course, they are still with us (cf. Ryan Seacrest), and some had gigs before TV. Not included in this group is Steve Allen, the man who invented late-night talk *and* was mutli-talented, as well as thoughtful. Others (e.g. Jack Paar, who had the wit to have on Peter Ustinov, Cliff Arquette and Jonathan Winters frequently) would aspire to that station, as many do now, but Allen remains king of the hill (yes, even over the great Johnny Carson), though the real innovator was Ernie Kovacs, who played upon the structure of TV like a bass fiddle.

Alas, the copy-cat syndrome really does evoke waste, the biggest offender being. Nothing new, to be sure: whatever the first successful screwball comedy was would spawn imitations, all the way back to Ancient Greece and Rome. But westerns raised imitation to unrelenting heights. They would be replaced by crime shows, either procedural, violent, or on-location grit (e.g., the early *Naked City*); and I note that these waves overlapped each other and were preposterously uneven. I never watched *Rawhide* and have no regrets, nor *Wagon Train*, but I did catch *Bonanza* and, except for noting a late appearance by none other than Errol Flynn, am sorry I did. Broadcast in color, it sold lots of sets for RCA.

Four westerns, however, were topnotch. *Gunsmoke* delivered character, story and a certain gravitas consistently. It would become the longest running series in the history of commercial TV. Another was *The Rifleman*. He was a widower-rancher with a young son, calm, Bible-reading, upright, and, when necessary, deadly. But above all, he was a father's father. (Sad to learn that last April, Johnny Crawford, the actor who played young Mark, died of Alzheimer's: my age.) *Have Gun Will Travel* brought home medieval knight errantry, with the hero,

Paladin, living the life in San Francisco until he was called to a quest. Richard Boone, who played our knight, was a founding member of the Actors Studio, and it showed. The production values were of the show's budget, but Boone sold it, the *it* being both the suave and highly cultivated gent along with the man of many skills dressed in black on horseback. Ethical and historical themes were strongly represented. But one memory has nothing to do with show *per se*. The hero's calling card read "Wire Paladin, San Francisco," and a friend wanted to know, What the hell kind of name is 'Wire'?

The fourth western is . . . counter-intuitive: *Star Trek*. Why not? After all, they explored the frontier, settled justice and territory at great risk to themselves, showed dollops of carnality and even of romance, battled creepy villains (including one of the greatest, Ricardo Montalban's Khan) all within, through and over forbidding landscapes. Above all the crew hung together. Technology was the bridge to the future: phasering, beaming, and vastly advanced computing both amazed and pointed to whole franchises-to-come— and implicitly inspired hope. But the real attraction was fantasy; easily overlooked was the magic of time-travel, beings from beyond (Apollo made an appearance), mind-melding and the like. (Fantasy would catch on big, becoming an anti-Materialist stick in the eye of our secularist culture.) Moreover, there was that famous interracial kiss between Captain Kirk and the communication officer Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols. But I asked, Who would *not* kiss her? I once saw Nichols in person and found her imposing, the more so when she sang. No wonder MLK, Jr. called her to say he wanted her to remain on the show.

Which reminds me: what I've seen of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* tells me I must do my due diligence, but not ritualistically, ritual being what much TV-watching was and remains. My wife and I will not miss *Jeopardy* over dinner,

or *The Phil Silvers Show*, with the great comedian as Sergeant Ernest Bilko. Phil made the show continuously interesting, funny, and fast: his cons were brilliantly convoluted (my Army vet father said they were absolutely realistic, though with a face not quite straight). I truly believe that some characters are so strong as to transcend their series. Paladin deserves a novel: prequel and sequel into his seniority. Mr. Spock should have had his own series. Adrian Monk, too, should have *worthy* novels. So: no wasteland I say, especially for a medium that was and is fundamentally commercial. With *Meet the Press*, the first presidential debates (1960), Leonard Bernstein teaching children the scaffolding of musical masterpieces, and Pablo Casals giving a master cello class every Sunday morning, how could there be waste?

And I say that without even having mentioned the big feature: movies re-played on TV—not the made-for-TV variety but feature films. Surely the mix was dizzyingly uneven, but who cared? From three feet away, while watching the 1931 *Dracula* and feeling the concrete struggle between good and evil as Dracula, with his hand held straight out, attempts to hypnotize and lure Van Helsing, I knew I never wanted to be so tempted: would I be strong enough to resist? Or *Frankenstein* (and his *Bride*): how I rooted for both! (I knew one day I'd have to try smoking cigars, which I would do for fifty years, though not in a blind man's cottage.) I became a Basil Rathbone fan with his Holmes: did not matter how many times I'd seen any given film, there was always more to notice and enjoy. (He is the one who started me on looking up actors: we should know how many were war heroes, for example.) There is no *Tarzan* movie I have not seen thrice, and there is no Tarzan but Johnny Weissmuller. When he discovered his ruined tree house and that Jane and Boy had been kidnapped and he stalked into the camera with the words, "now Tarzan make war" I quaked with anticipation.

In that paleo-age we had *The Late Show*, on CBS at 11:30;

that's where I saw Jane Wyman win an Oscar for *Johnny Belinda*, after the movie embargo on post-1948 movies was lifted. I made my father wake me up for one that is now on my 10-best list (which has nearly fifty titles), *The African Queen*. Above all, though, there was Million Dollar Movie. It was on WOR, channel 9: the same movie all week *twice each night*. One could—and this one did—get as much of the greatest movie ever made he could possibly want: *King Kong*.

Only much later did I realize how butchered these movies-on-tv were. When finally I saw *Kong* on the big screen, unedited, I was dumbstruck: the original power was exponentially heightened. (I once asked my father, who was thirteen when the movie came out in 1933, if he had seen it and, if so, what effect it had. "You have no idea. None. And nothing close since.") Not long after seeing *King Kong* I saw *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and the Gill-Man became number two, but I've never seen him on the big screen. I ask only that you not refer to either Kong or the Gill-Man as 'monsters.'

So here endeth television, though I do binge on 'television' if I think the writing good enough. (I will watch the last episode of *Monk*, if I can find the clicker.) Copycatting thrives, of course: how many *Swedish* murderers can there be? (Italians are different: Commissario Montalbano excels, and he eats better than all the others combined.) Minnow was wrong in his day because *he overlooked our values*. But looking ahead to our age he would seem prescient, almost; now it is the world that has gone to waste: our new Dark Age.