
Television

The Beast in the Box

by Karl E. Meyer

WHEN IT COMES to television, we are all guinea pigs in a living room laboratory. Just suppose that television turned out to be the cultural equivalent of lung cancer, its pulsing electrons deadly to the values of democracy and to the power of reason. By the time we found out what was happening, it would be too late to summon the doctor because we would all be stricken in the same cancer ward.

These (no doubt) excessively gloomy reflections are prompted by two new books intended as an early warning of possible malignancy. Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (Morrow, \$11.95) makes no claim to balance. A former adman turned Sierra Club publicist, Mander regards television as a monstrous child of technology incapable of serving civilized ends.

Only a little less vehement is *Remote Control: Television and the Manipulation of American Life* (Times Books, \$15), by Frank Mankiewicz and Joel Swerdlow. (Mankiewicz, the president of National Public Radio, was George McGovern's campaign director in 1972, and Swerdlow is a young free-lancer.) In their view, American television is an evil only marginally redeemed by its blunted promise. But the authors propose no cures and close on a note of unqualified despair.

Where both books strike home, however, is in the amount of information they amass about the pervasive influence of the box. Television is different in kind from any other medium of communication. It is a baby-sitter, a tutor, and an insidious huckster; it colonizes our minds with images and is as addictive as heroin; it creates its own mesmeric reality and alters our attention span and even our ability to absorb the written word.

So real is television, writes Mander, that no less than 250,000 Americans have written to Dr. Marcus Welby, seeking medical advice, as if he were an actual physician. According to Mankiewicz and Swerdlow, *Kojak* and *Police Story* have turned cops into actors. The authors write:

Police detectives across America are drawing chalk lines around the body on the floor, taking endless photographs at the scene of the crime, dusting for fingerprints, showing pictures of suspects to the victims... all because over the past two decades Americans have seen police do this on television and will not be content until police do it in real life.

Television supplants parental authority and may indeed be undermining the family itself. The same authors cite the results of a two-year study in which a college researcher asked children aged four to six, "Which do you like better, TV or Daddy?" Forty-four percent said they preferred television. (In 1976, Chicago police entered an apartment in which a father had been murdered by a burglar 10 hours before; they were shocked to discover three children watching television while the father's bloodied body lay a few feet away.)

Given the verifiable facts about television's influence, the dearth of basic research about its impact is appalling. Mander is particularly good on this point. The UCLA biomedical library has a computer that can scan the half-million treatises on neuroscience published since 1969. The machine could locate only 78 items dealing with our neurophysiological response to television (by comparison, a thousand items are published annually on sleep and dreaming). Mander hired a researcher to check *Psychological Abstracts* all the way back to 1940; this search yielded nine additional references.

Does television dim the mind and induce a kind of hypnotic trance? How much do we *really* remember about the programs we see? Is the artificial light that television drills into our eyeballs causing irreparable damage? To these and other disturbing questions the answer must be that we don't know. The existing scientific literature is sufficient only to suggest that the questions demand full-scale inquiry.

(On the question of memory, a poll found that more than 70 percent of the American people believe they saw the assassination of John F. Kennedy on television in 1963. In fact, nobody saw it live on television, and it was not until 1976 that a closely edited portion of the Zapruder film, show-

ing the actual murder, was broadcast.)

Messrs. Mander, Mankiewicz, and Swerdlow are plainly witnesses for the prosecution, and before a verdict can be reached the jury must hear both sides. Neither book, for example, discusses the beneficial effects of television in relieving the boredom and sense of isolation among aging Americans. For millions of viewers, television is literally a window onto the world of ideas and events that would otherwise be inaccessible. For those who are geographically remote, television fulfills the same positive purpose.

Moreover, television may enrich the nonverbal perception of preschool age youngsters. Mankiewicz and Swerdlow do allude to the Brookline Early Education Project, which since 1972 has examined learning patterns in the vital preschool years. According to this study, a rise in the intelligence quotients of preschoolers in Brookline, Massachusetts, seems to be the result of television watching. But, significantly, the study also indicates that the benefits of television may be exclusively confined to the preschool years.

At every point, we are confronted by a paucity of information. Aside from the famous, and controversial, 1972 study on the impact of television violence—which was carried out by the National Institute of Mental Health at a cost of \$1.5 million—we have had no studies of TV comparable to the kind of scientific research devoted to cancer. If I were a member of Congress, I would cry havoc, because in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed monster rules.

My own tentative judgment is that all three authors have been conditioned by American television. I do not think they would have arrived at the same conclusions in Great Britain, where public television is dominant and even commercial broadcasting is comparatively more benign. The tragedy is that in the United States we have given control of an incomparably influential medium to those whose final commitment is to the network profit line. It is rather like turning over a nuclear weapon to a teen-age gang.

Lacking scientific research, we rely on journalists to tell us about the effects of television. None is more knowing than Les Brown, of *The New York Times*, who reports truthfully and succinctly about the beast in the box. It gives me pleasure to call attention to Brown's *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Television* (Times Books, \$20), which will, I am certain, acquire gospel authority as a source of facts about the most troublesome communications system ever devised. ●

Bone-dry in the '70s

by Barry Gewen

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, André Hodeir, an eminent French jazz critic, observed that the music he loved seemed to have retraced in 50 years the path that European classical music had required 10 centuries to cover—the path of birth, development, maturity, and decline. These days, a stroll through a record store or a twist of the radio dial (AM or FM, it no longer matters which) brings similar thoughts to mind about rock music—except that rock's life cycle seems to have been only half as long as that of jazz. Music—at least popular music—is in a sorry, and possibly terminal, state.

This, of course, is not the first time that American pop music has slumped. Rock itself arose during a lull in the early Fifties. At that time jazz had turned into an exclusive club, practically Ptolemaic in its structure of circles within circles: white cultists on the outer rim, contemptuous of the straight majority that had given its heart to Eisenhower; black hipsters in the second circle, mutely disdainful of the white hangers-on; and jazzmen at the cool-blue center, scorning everything but the Inner Voice and showing what they felt for their fans by playing concerts with their backs to the audience. The "Top 40," meanwhile, contented itself with the musical dregs of a flabby Broadway—which had not yet given itself over to live sex shows—performed by a colorless parade of Perrys and Pattis and Eddies and Tonys and Rosemarys. Then Elvis arrived, and "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" was never heard from again.

A second dry spell began around 1959 and lasted until the arrival of the Beatles at the end of 1963. Rock 'n' roll, which for five years had overwhelmed everything in sight, lost its vitality at the end of the decade and sought sustenance in the weighty issues of high school proms, teachers' pets, and acne control. One by one, the music's luminaries passed from the scene: Buddy Holly died in a plane crash; Chuck Berry was sent up on a morals charge; Little Richard entered the ministry; Frankie Lymon drifted into drugs and self-destruction;

Elvis himself went into the army and came out with more than his hair cut off. At the same time, the vultures descended—modern-day alchemists who turned plastic into gold by means of fabricated talents like Frankie Avalon and Fabian. Commercialism and cynicism did their worst, and for four years the people dwelt in darkness—until Britain sent a great light.

The music entered a slough for the third time about 1968, and it is one that we are still wading through. The strongest indication of a decline from the rock heights of the mid-Sixties was, obviously, the breakup of the Beatles in 1970, but before that explosion there had occurred the eerily appropriate death of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, two performers who had specialized in a kind of demonic abandon and whose end seemed to mark a certain drawing of limits. There had been, as well, the ugliness and violence of Altamont, after which, consciously or unconsciously, Mick Jagger's satanic majesty transmuted into an androgynous theatricality that spawned a legion of disingenuous transvestites, the pop heroes of teen-agers who in the Seventies have made a style out of decadence. And following the Beatles' demise, there was Don McLean's "American Pie"—probably the best song of 1972 and certainly the most important of that year and possibly of the entire decade—which lamented the death of rock music and signaled the onset of a sensibility that continues to prevail in pop music, a sensibility that withdraws from immediate experience into nostalgia and sentimentality. McLean himself has gone on to become one of the leading members of this school, whose king is John Denver.

Commercial black music, no less than white, has fallen on hard times. Dominated now as it was in the Sixties by the Motown sound, it has taken the virtues of the original Motown style and refined them into the rude and mindless thumpety-thump of disco. Not since the days of Fabian has any music been so wholly the product of businessmen.

What distinguishes the present situation from the two previous lulls, however, and

what suggests a terminal condition is its peculiar "no exit" quality: For nine years pop music has been wandering in a desert with no relief in sight. In the early Fifties, though you never would have guessed it from watching Lucky Strike's *Your Hit Parade*, interesting musical developments were taking place around the country—rhythm and blues in Chicago, country and western up from the South. Similarly, in the depths of the early Sixties doldrums, one could, if one looked, find a number of bright spots, harbingers of things to come—the beginnings of Motown; the folk music revival that first brought the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul, and Mary to prominence and that later produced Bob Dylan. But today, in rock music, a wasteland of gaudy hard rock, insipid disco, and mushy sentimentality stretches as far as the eye can see.

How can this be changed? In two ways, it seems to me. The first is to try to reestablish a unity in music, to draw connections between rock music, jazz, and the Western classical tradition. Insofar as this has been attempted by contemporary musicians, it has usually resulted in monstrosities like rock versions of Mozart's G-minor symphony, aggression rather than art. All such efforts are doomed to eclecticism at best because common intellectual and spiritual ground simply does not exist. To create it at present is probably more a job for music teachers than for musicians, but once it is established, the musicians may be able to draw authentically on sources from the past to create popular music in the present.

A second approach would be to reach out to international sources. Jamaican reggae has already had a healthy impact on music in this country, but how many people here know that traditional Celtic music is undergoing a revival in Ireland and in Brittany, that Mikis Theodorakis has revolutionized Greek popular music, that a new song movement was developing in Chile with the music of Violeta Parra and Victor Jara before it was cut short by the coup? The French buy Woody Guthrie records. The Japanese listen to bluegrass. Probably no major country in the world is as isolated musically as is the United States, and if our popular music in the past was able to draw upon itself for vitality and innovation, it may now be time for us to stop listening only to ourselves (or close musical neighbors like England) and to open our ears to other people and other traditions. ●

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