

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 18 | Number 3

Article 1

---

March 1990

## Television: Medium Rare

Clifford G. Christians

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Christians, Clifford G. (1990) "Television: Medium Rare," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 18:  
No. 3, 2 - 12.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol18/iss3/1](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol18/iss3/1)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

# Television: Medium Rare

Clifford G. Christians  
Research Professor of Communications



*Dr. Clifford Christians is a 1959 Dordt alumnus. He is a research professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana, where he heads the doctoral program in communications and directs the B.S. degree in Media Studies.*

Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Jacques Ellul represent within communication theory a formidable argument. Understanding television as a medium, as an electronic technology, as a visual system, penetrates more deeply to the roots than focusing on television content per se. In contrast to superficial, transmission views of communication, seeing television as a technological form moves us lightyears beyond our commonplaces. McLuhan correctly observes that debating about words etched on the side of an H-bomb is irrelevant to the power of the technology itself.

Postman, Ellul, and McLuhan are, in effect, defending a particular philosophy of culture. And over a theory of culture, the battle ought to be engaged. In fact, without an articulate worldview, we stand empty handed regarding the volatile question at hand, that is, do we ignore television, destroy, embrace, or seek to redeem it?

In contrast to the shadowy, underdeveloped notions of culture among evangelicals, Calvinist theology provides an inspiring opportunity to make culture central to our analysis. The mass media are agents of acculturation, and to the degree we understand culture, we know communication as well. A biblical understanding of culture is the north star by which we set our intellectual compass.

I defend television. Contrary to Postman and Ellul, I do not consider it the enemy of modern

society, but a gift of God that must be transformed in harmony with the redeemed mind. For those of us who are pro television in a distinctive manner, our intellectual home must be culture and our infrastructure the cultural mandate.

## Communications Theory

Certainly anyone taking a beneficent approach to television—as I do—cannot merely ignore the McLuhan-Postman-Ellul material. In order to meet their challenge, let me reconstruct briefly the case against television and indicate why I find it deficient. I consider it inadequate, in spite of its superiority over empiricist content analysis and behaviorist effects research.

McLuhan, Ellul, and Postman must be set within an influential line of communication scholarship originating with the Canadian Harold Innis. This theory presumes that the history of communications is central to the history of civilization, that social change results from media transformations, that changes in communicative forms alter the structure of consciousness. Innis studied the introduction of papyrus, the printing press, radio, and the telegraph—and documented a bias (tendency, propensity, impulse) in them all. Oral communication systems, he argued, are biased toward time; they render time continuous while making space discontinuous. Print systems, by contrast, are biased

toward space, unifying geographical space and breaking time into distinct units. As a minor premise, Innis argued for a monopoly of knowledge, that is, one form of communication tends to monopolize, and renders other forms residual. Communications media do not simply exist innocently alongside one another.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, from the introduction of cuneiform writing to today's fiber optics, media technologies have attracted considerable attention among scholars in the Innis tradition. They examine all significant shifts in technological form, identifying from them subsequent alterations in culture and in perception. The challenge is to identify the distinguishing properties of particular media technologies such as magazines, cinema, computers, sculpture, and satellites. Thus McLuhan, Postman, and Ellul are fascinated by the sea change that occurs when we shift from books to television.

This approach raises appropriate questions about hearing and seeing; it compares the symbols of cinema with photography and print; it worries over the contemporary fascination with image. In 1988, 1.1 billion books were checked out of libraries, but 1.2 billion videos were rented. Twenty-five million Americans are functionally illiterate. In the Innis legacy, these statistics are not neutral facts but very telling social indicators.

McLuhan was Innis' successor at the University of Toronto. The latter was broadly sociological and historical, but McLuhan intensely psychological in orientation. McLuhan's notions about visual closure, the sensorium, hot and cool, simultaneity, and media massage were formulated in narrowly psychological terms. His argument that television as a cool medium is a revolutionary force for global bonding, presumes a host of psychological claims about perception, mental processing of images, tactility, and the nervous system. Postman and Ellul both cite McLuhan approvingly, though they quarrel with some particulars. And this McLuhan stream within the Innis tradition is an entree to my first critique.

It is the uniform judgment of media scholars pro and con that McLuhan's provocative vocabulary and stunning insights about media systems finally turned disastrous. It begged too many questions about our physiological, mental, and psychological apparatus, and claimed more as a lay observer than even the most sophisticated students of the psychological

arena could deliver. Harold Innis' comprehensive framework embedded in history and social institutions has proved far more penetrating and enduring. By connecting media forms to power, empire, and bureaucracy, Innis continues to dominate the field, while McLuhan was entertained by Madison Avenue but has proved to be a frail reed in academia.<sup>2</sup>

Let me illustrate what I mean from Ellul's recent book, *Humiliation of the Word*. Using a correspondence notion of truth, Ellul writes:

No longer are we surrounded by fields, woods, and rivers, but by signs, signals, billboards, screens, labels and trademarks: this is our universe. And when the screen shows us a living reality—such as people's faces or other countries—this is still a fiction: it is a constructed and recombined reality . . . . It produces acute suffering and panic; a person cannot be deprived of truth and situated in fiction.<sup>3</sup>

And in McLuhanesque fashion, Ellul draws this speculative conclusion:

The visual world leaves empty places (which usually bore the city dweller when he goes to the country. On the contrary, the sight of mountains or of the ocean is full and fills the eyes). But the universe manufactured by artificial images must keep itself filled up.<sup>4</sup>

This line of argumentation is grounded in the assumption that an objective natural reality stands outside knowing subjects to give them an orientation. Give this reality which exists independently of our own human creations, the idea of principal truth is at least conceivable for Ellul. Now that electronic forms of communication have multiplied dramatically and create an environment of images, we have lost our sense of truthfulness altogether. Apparently word forms of communication are less ambiguous and can feed our understanding of truth and enable precise thinking, rather than allowing visual impressions to dance in anarchy around our mind.

The history of communication scholarship convinces me that, along with McLuhan and Postman, Ellul is making a fatal mistake by orienting his argument around psychological motifs. Ellul's trademark has always been the social and historical contours, but in *Humiliation of the Word* his references are decidedly McLuhanesque. Chapters 1, 3, 6 make the same overwrought conclusions

about perception, consciousness, vision, and hearing that in the literature among communication scholars has yielded few definitive conclusions.

But this elaboration in terms of media impact on our psyches begs too many questions. In fact, this body of work is turned upon itself. From a common foundation emerges the doxological praise of television from McLuhan and the dour appraisals of Postman and Ellul. McLuhan concludes from his narrow slice of psychologism that television liberates us from the constraints of typography and opens a global order of simultaneity. He celebrates television for fostering deeply emotional oneness across geographical barriers. Starting from the same reductionist premise, Postman and Ellul cannot envision a complicated social order except one organized around print. These three are at odds with each other because they fall prey to an insufficient psychological reductionism.

Secondly, Innis understands the nature of language more profoundly than does the McLuhan wing of his tradition. Innis has a longer reach into human history, and therefore a more secure grasp of philology. Rather than privilege today's rush toward visual symbols, he studies every shift in media he can investigate: the discovery of papyrus in the Upper and Lower Nile, education in ancient Greece, simplified script in the Roman Empire, print and navigation in sixteenth century Europe, the role of electricity in building the Russian empire after the Czars, and so forth.

For Innis the anchoring mode of communication is oral. Before the invention of the alphabet in 1500 B.C., civilization was exclusively oral, and until the rise of the printing press in the 16th century, human society was predominantly oral. Even today, nearly half of the world's languages have not been reduced to writing. Print and electronics are the foci of McLuhan, Postman and Ellul, but in actuality both are derived from speech. They forget how irretrievably and congenitally words are embedded in sound.

Oral life is our common property, language spoken and heard is God's gift exclusively to the human species. All normal humans naturally learn to speak and hear; none needs the educational skills for print or the economic means to buy electronic equipment. In a long footnote on McLuhan, Ellul notes the distinction between a communication of hearing and one of sight, but then dismisses

McLuhan as erroneous. Ellul badly misrepresents the issues here and draws the outrageous conclusion that McLuhan's only illustration of acoustical communication is music.<sup>5</sup> Precisely at this point, Innis' historical framework keeps our priorities on oral communication and prevents dead-ended speculation which seems to presume that history rises and falls with print.

Granted, we face a Himalayan task of maintaining the vitality of education while at this historical moment electronics are gaining superiority over print. But the buffer for both of these transformations of human speech is the fundamental oral echelon. Oral life must remain our basic priority. A culture overweeningly dependent on electronics needs to be strengthened by the restoration of the oral-aural mode. If we understand human language correctly, our commitment to orality—not print—must be an absolute, categorical one. I am print-oriented myself, but over the long term find it suffocating to insist on abundant print media while leaving the oral, acoustical dimension unattended.

Dissatisfied with the appeals to a truncated psychology and misinformed philology in the anti-television argument, one must note thirdly McLuhan's understanding of technology as an extension of man. Radio is an extension of the human ear, the feather and pen extensions of the human hand, and electronic media an extension of the human nervous system. In developing this argument, McLuhan is fundamentally destroying the naive assumption that media technologies are neutral. Instead they recast us as human beings, they reconstitute us, enhancing the sensorium of seeing over the aural, for example. In contending that communications technologies are biased, are presupposition-saturated, are value-directed, McLuhan is discrediting that superficial communications theory which presumes each medium is a neutral tool to be used for whatever purposes society chooses. The same projector, we are assured, shows a National Geographic special and triple X pornography. A knife in a surgeon's hands saves life and destroys it when used by a murderer. And in contrast to all such functional views, McLuhan understands media technology as embedded in our very humanness and thus value-laden in the deepest sense of the term.

But once again, for all its daring contrast with the neutrality view, mass media technologies are not merely extensions of man. They are instead to be

understood as a distinct cultural activity, in which humans are not just toolmakers but cultural agents exercising their servanthood by forming and transforming the natural creation.

While our everyday nomenclature reduces technology to tools or products, a thicker view centered on the cultural mandate refers to the technological process as a cultural activity involving designing, fabrication, and use. From this perspective, human beings exercise their God-given freedom and responsibility by forming and transforming the natural creation for practical ends. Clearly a biblical understanding of humanity as cultural beings—endowed with the creative ability to generate technological forms—integrates humanness with the technological process, but without McLuhan's presumption that one is a continuous extension of the other.

### Cultural Mandate

Now we can return to the opening claims about a philosophy of culture. I am arguing that the truncated psychology and inadequate philology in the anti-television perspective, and the reductionist anthropology in Marshall McLuhan result from their incoherent philosophy of culture. McLuhan converted to Roman Catholicism after writing *Understanding Media*, though Catholicism's nature-grace dualism would not have seriously affected his analysis anyhow. In terms of American pragmatism, Postman seeks to protect a democratic process with, theologically speaking, an empty center. He is a humanist for whom education is sublime. As a member of the French Reformed Church, Ellul's case appears to be more complicated, but by his own definition his social philosophy is radically Kierkegaardian and thus fractured by a sacred/secular dichotomy and encumbered by a split between the private and public domains.

Thus it remains our task to construct a biblically distinctive approach to culture which establishes a framework for assessing the case against television articulated by Postman and Ellul.

Human beings were given the cultural mandate at the time of creation. As God's vice-gerents over the created order, we have the rationale for studying chemistry and mathematics, producing literature and the arts, redirecting the mass media as cultural institutions, and becoming involved in government and economics.

But recognizing the overwhelming secularization of the present era, God's kingdom builders today often seem to be aliens in a strange land. In similar circumstances, however, with Israel in Babylonian exile, culture-forming is repeated as a prophetic injunction:

This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce . . . . Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper . . . . For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:4-7, 11)

Jeremiah is reminding us that culture is fallen, totally in its extent but not absolutely so. Human creations are corrupted, that is, warped, twisted, and misdirected, but not without redeeming value. Thus the cultural mandate enjoins us to convert cultural forms, not to eliminate them wholesale. The fall is radical, but not co-equal with creation and redemption. We are obliged to demonstrate signs of Christ's Kingdom, rather than unmercifully condemn human cultural achievements.

Culture is the result of human activity as God's image-bearers in which women and men fulfill the creation mandate to cultivate the earth. Culture is a secondary environment built from God's created order by people's creative effort. It stands distinct from nature because it is a human achievement. Culture is our heritage in time and place, our civilization, the total of purposive servanthood. And communication is the catalytic agent, the driving force in cultural formation. Humankind stands in a creaturely relation to its Maker while having dominion over its own creations. As a sign of his unique responsibility, Adam names the animals and communicates with God in the garden giving an account of his activities.

Jacob Bronowski tells the story of the Sherpas in his spectacular book, *Science and Human Values*.<sup>6</sup> The Sherpas know intimately the face of Mount Everest seen from their home valley. When shown another side by Western climbers, they refuse at first to believe. How could it possibly be the same mountain from a different angle? But they are moved emotionally as their disbelief turns to amaze-

ment at the revelation that their time-worn mountain can open to them in a new way. With a view of culture anchored in a world that belongs to God, students of communications can enjoy the Sherpas experience themselves by seeing the mass media from the conceptual apparatus of culture.

Within the cultural paradigm, communication is the symbolic process expressing human creativity and grounding cultural formation. Culture is the womb in which symbols are born and communication is the connective tissue in culture building. Thus released from views of communication rooted in positivism, we are enabled within a cultural paradigm to illuminate and direct the communicative dimension of God's universe in categories faithful to biblical anthropology. Let me sketch how I believe this constructive task ought to proceed.

### Television's Properties

The first intellectual challenge is to identify television's distinguishing properties as a technology. As a Christian physicist steps inside the world of atoms, matter, and motion, to understand them from within, so the redeemed mind, regarding television, must work deeply into its technological and dramatic properties in order to know them fundamentally and distinctly as television's own.

This investigation is not as simplistic as we may assume. If one turns to standard aesthetics, most of the principles there are based on solid materials. We need for television a complex of defining ideas geared to electrical energy. With television we confront peculiar pulsations of brightness and shade, vibrations of sound and light which die away even as they come into being. Aesthetics often results in unhelpful distinctions—Shakespeare as high culture and "Miami Vice" as low culture, for example—remnants of a long standing debate between Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White which has gone nowhere.

If we turn to media studies, we tend to view television in terms of its siblings, film and radio, and call it picture radio or home movies. We give television names such as "cinema made private," or see it as a bland version of theatre film. Television grew out of the womb of radio. It was poured into radio's old frames of reference and network patterns. But this close connection ought not beguile us into wasteful misunderstandings such as picture sound, small-screen film, or electronic book. Ad-

mittedly, four decades are a scant period for coming to terms with television's character, but it retains to this day a peculiar rootlessness born of our reluctance to take it seriously as a communication technology in its own right. In my humble opinion, Postman and Ellul have not understood television in its own terms, and McLuhan became so enthralled with his euphemisms—global village, medium is the message, hot and cool—that he did not comprehend it either with the sophistication this technology deserves.

Every medium has its own grammar, that is, the elements enabling it to communicate. For fruitful analysis, each must be evaluated according to its own aesthetic features. The initial step is identifying the artistic laws and relationships which characterize each medium. And two medium-specific properties of television are intimacy and visual immediacy, that is, depth regarding private space and simultaneity regarding time.

**Intimacy.** Television provides a fresh capacity for the penetration of character not available as explicitly to other media. The foreground becomes the critical element. The iconography of rooms is far more determinative of television than exterior location. Expansiveness is inappropriate and no more than three or four actors can appear on the screen at once. Camera distance is defined by the actors' size and their movements. The constraint of the screen's boundaries, as it were, forces producers to develop the drama by concentrating it in the faces of the characters and entrusting them to unfold the complexity, beauty, and depth of the human personality.

Television's essential artistic resource is the actor's performance. Far more decisively than movie-actors, the television-actor controls the meaning. Television's visual scale grants an intimacy unavailable elsewhere and thereby demands a believable performance. Vivid and highly professional acting over the history of television accounts for nearly all those series most highly rated for quality—"Route 66," "Gunsmoke," "Twilight Zone," "Cade's County," "The Name of the Game," and "Mary Tyler Moore," for example.

**Visual immediacy.** This second property is peculiar to television. The lavish moments in television programming have been live transmissions—the Kennedy assassination and funeral, the 1968 Democratic convention, Vietnam, the moonwalk,

the Olympics. To a degree no other instrument can match, television captures immediacy and eventfulness; its representations coincide with the time of origination. John F. Kennedy's burial did not take place in Arlington Cemetery alone, but in the living rooms, bus terminals, and town squares of the world. Because of television, his casket rode down Pennsylvania Avenue and Main Street Everywhere at the same time. Television made the land mines in Vietnam explode in our own back yard.

Television is an immediate communication mode; the time of creation is simultaneous with the time of showing. Television broadcasters realize that there is no later stage at which they can change the story line. In other words, one difference with cinema is the immediate, spontaneous, and topical nature of televised communication. Television has the tremendous advantage of enabling us to participate, as it were, in events as they occur. Television gives viewers the gift of ubiquity. And the unpredictability and roughness, which are the spice of events as they unfold, give great television an incomparable interest. Aesthetically mature television exhibits these qualities and attracts viewers by the immediacy of the picture.

**Immanence.** Technological bias can also be understood in terms of media categories, the visual media, for example, sharing immanence as a common property. Pitirim Sorokin correctly defined sensate culture as that arena where reality is considered equal to the senses. In this paradigm, no meaningful transcendent vision exists beyond the senses. In a culture of immanence, life becomes located within the universe we see and hear, and not in some referent beyond immediate experience. We call this the secular version of the world where the supernatural is excluded.

Television, cinema, and photography are key factors in maintaining a sensate worldview. They promote a closed, non-transcendent universe where an upper story does not exist. In a simplistic sense, that is what it means to be popular; television's tactile world corresponds to our society as a whole, neither tolerating the non-material. Television art is largely a series of variations on a windowless immanence. Critics typically acquiesce and insist that film and videotape as media are hospitable only to realism. By immersing us in life's action and color, visual media are usually thought intractable to the supernatural.

Television shares its constraints with other photographic media. Television's picture-making is not based on synthesis but reduction. The difference with painting, for example, is fundamental. Paintings are made, constructed from a storehouse of skills, attitudes, and materials; but pictures are taken. As Picasso explains it, the photographer resembles a surgeon who operates directly on the tissues of reality. The painter's image is total and he or she creates in a useful sense of the term, whereas the photographer penetrates through to some detail and concentrates there.

These examples of television's technological properties illustrate how a culture-embedded philosophy of technology operates. On this basis, each medium can be enabled to reach the limits of its symbolic capacity. The Christian community ought to assist communication technologies in establishing them as art forms appropriately their own. If a medium's expressive scope is maximized—or, in other terms, if a medium's biases are overcome creatively—we will be subduing it for the Kingdom of God.

Expressive scope is a key term. In ballet, one primary way of judging performance is whether the dancers use the entire stage. I employ that as an analog. We should aim to discover strategies for using creatively the boundaries that define each communication technology. Television, film, and radio are the only new art forms contributed by the 20th century West. In terms of inculcating social values, television is the dominant medium. It provides a common body of symbols which make our public life possible. Therefore, it is particularly important for this vehicle of communication to enhance the symbolic theatre in which we live.

### **Moral Literacy**

Therefore, what are the implications for television's culture-forming task, normatively understood? How should we proscribe its telos as a Kingdom enterprise?

Redemptive television articulates the moral order. Mass communication technologies ought to engender moral literacy; to the extent television stimulates the moral imagination, it fulfills a transformative purpose. We have heard this language in a sanitized sense: "Do these programs have redeeming social value?" What Christians seek, I would argue, is not unlimited religious

broadcasting but redemptive programming. While redemption with a small "r" cannot be equated with the atonement, a richer concept of redemptiveness insists on Christian agency in culture as a whole. Refusing to abrogate the cosmic implications of Christ's sacrifice ventilates our tired dichotomies and gives us a mighty edge in creating a symbolically mature popular art.

Neo-Marxists speak of the dominant, the preferred reading which serves the ideological interests of the socio-economic elite. The media ordinarily engage in language practices which legitimize existing structures of power. Using these terms, television as a redemptive medium ought to communicate alternative discourses, to offer a subversive text, to struggle against continuities and consensus. At that epiphanal moment when the taken-for-granted world is made problematic, the moral contours illuminated, and the conscience engaged, this medium serves as a signifier of the Kingdom.

Technological culture by definition is an amoral environment. Our values are then measured in terms of technique, efficiency, the mystique of machineness. Moral norms are thus precluded since efficiency values and judgments about rightness or wrongness are mutually exclusive. Ellul foresaw already in 1948 that as the world of technics expands, our concerns will increasingly reduce to cost and time effectiveness, to administrative niceties, and become devoid of the moral dimension.<sup>7</sup> Thus the greater, the higher, the more powerful receive virtually automatic justification. Everything that succeeds is declared "good."

In that climate, the rationale for privileging moral literacy as television's mission ought to be obvious. Assuming that culture is the container of the human symbolic capacity, the constituent parts of such containers are a society's values. As ordering relations, values direct the ends of social practice and provide implicit standards for selecting courses of action. With standards recognized as inherent in the concept of symbolic environments, indicating what authentic existence involves is of premiere importance, theoretically speaking. Defining culture as "the symbolic-expressive aspect of social behavior," Robert Wuthnow correctly identifies the moral order as a set of cultural elements with a distinguishable symbolic structure. Moral codes, therefore, are necessary cultural constructions that articulate "the nature of commitment to a particular

course of behavior."<sup>8</sup> As a sign of our image bearing, we create symbolic patterns along the boundaries between moral norms and actual behavior, the deepest self and our roles, the intentional and the inevitable. These constructs are the moral code which plays a role in human life comparable to that of instinct in the lower organisms. If we read the post-modernist Jacques Derrida as a warning rather than *fait accompli*, the self and public life may come to exist only in the text; our humanity faces the threat of surviving merely in our language and even when we seek it there, it is gone. Therefore, in mass-mediated cultures aligned toward normlessness and illusive centers of textuality, our prophetic task is calling the mass communication technology known as television to its appropriate role in opening windows on the moral landscape.

Glimmers of hope appear at times. Wherever one observes re-enactments of purposeful history and justice, there one sees the results of moral literacy. Video news can be considered redemptive when it serves as instruments not of accommodation but of critique and social change. Documentaries, commentators, public broadcasting and mass-market paperbacks often resonate with a redemptive accent, stir the human conscience, and liberate their viewers from the dominant text.

Over mass media history, one can see a redemptive glow on occasion which encourages us regarding television technology today. We all know of papers and stations and reporters who have refused the arrogance of power and sought to awaken the public conscience with the vigor of Jeremiah. Pulitzer prizes are still awarded, by and large, to professionals who distinguish themselves for community service and who shun careerism and megadollars. The "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour," and National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered," frequently engender moral literacy by probing deeply into events. Ted Koppel's "Nightline" and the ethnic press often provide a subversive reading. Sometimes the news media rise to the occasion and produce a penetrating examination of a local problem, as the *Chicago Tribune* illustrated with its award-winning "American Millstone" series in 1985. *Time's* Lance Morrow wrote a penetrating account of the Pope's visit to his would-be assassin, under the sub-head: "A Pardon from the Pontiff; Lesson in Forgiveness for a Troubled World" (9 January 1984). In this



lead news story, Morrow quoted biblical teaching on forgiveness, probed the psychological impact of this highly-publicized encounter, and then concluded with a redemptive accent:

Forgiveness is not an impulse much in favor. The prevalent style in the world runs more to the hard, cold eye of the avenger. Forgiveness does not look much like a tool for survival in a bad world. But that is what it is.

Roger Rosenblatt's "Children of War" (*Time*, 11 January 1982) and Richard Ostling's "Who Was Jesus?" (*Time*, 15 August 1988) demonstrate the redeemed mind as well, communicating truth in a public medium that cuts away the commonplaces and engages the affective roots of human personality.

And, obviously, we can be aided in moral literacy through entertainment as much as through news and public affairs. Woody Allen's "Manhattan," Antonioni's "Blow-Up," Fellini and Bergman often penetrate to our ultimate values. The classics "Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner," "Charley," and "The Silence" explore the cranies deep within the human spirit. National Geographic's "Incredible Machine" sounds a redeeming note as it celebrates the wonder and polyphony of life. "Chariots of Fire," Horton Foote's "Tender Mercies" and "Ordinary People" offer a healing voice without being Pollyanish. Mel Brooks' "The Elephant Man" wrestles with that immense theme, the apparent arbitrariness of life, its seeming unreason against our yearning for an explanation. John Merrick, the world's ugliest man who dies at age 27 in 1890, is the historical setting for a tale of redemption in which the monstrous deformity cannot crush a heart of gold and the delicate humanity underneath. In Aristotle's profound understanding of artistic tragedy, great dramatists do not merely arouse pity or fear but "effect proper purgation" (*Poeticus*, 1449B). Through the tears of Mrs. Treves, the spire of St. Philip's cathedral across the street, Merrick's astonishing recitation of Psalm 23, his boyish prayers as he lays down to sleep for the last time—"The Elephant Man" resists moral chaos and addresses our human fear of capricious suffering.

### Redemptive Television

The history of communications, I am suggesting, indicates that popular culture need not be anti-

normative per se. But let me deepen this analysis in terms of television technology. Therefore, the problem restated: How can television as artistic form be redemptive? Or, more precisely, how can each of television's defining features—intimacy, immediacy, and immanence—be shaped by biblical givens?

First, television technology has a peculiar capacity to exhibit and penetrate human character. Christians can begin probing television art by asking how our mysterious intimacy is portrayed. The Scriptures shed light on our numberless dimensions—the whole person, the full person, image-bearers of the Creator living in a dependent relationship with Him. Our casual approach toward anthropology in aesthetics and the social sciences should not blind us to its centrality for biblically informed television production.

Television predominantly imbibes a naturalistic worldview in which women and men are bundles of biological drives and physical senses. Television generally creates no strong and complicated people. Only a limited range of human emotions and motivations come through. On balance, no longing for spiritual fulfillment is expressed. It is virtually destitute of moral discernment. While a few action shows, for example, demonstrate self-restraint and moral sensitivity, most prefer hyped-up violence without even a hint of normative reflection.

But television redeems its peculiar capacity for intimacy when it seriously wrestles with our humanness without inducing illusions. God should be thanked for all glimpses of mature realism, for those occasions when the small screen opens an outsized window on credible people. Cut against naturalism, some programming develops a choice between righteousness and evil with people held morally culpable. At various points this symbolic form confronts ultimate human problems—not just this war, but "why any war?," not just this loneliness, but why any forsakenness in the midst of multitudes. "M\*A\*S\*H" raised occasionally the permanent questions about life's logic and God's involvement. "The Associates" regularly combined classy humor with astute social commentary. Compared to "Dragnet," "Cagney and Lacey" is a progressive text, probing issues about authority, punishment, and patriarchy that the earliest shows in this genre never confronted. Cagney and Lacey themselves often become instances of what Jean Paul Sartre in

*The Family Idiot* called the “universal singular,” that is, particular embodiments of broad historical struggles and achievements. “Hill Street Blues,” a critics’ favorite until it waned toward predictability in its later years, made forgiveness integral to the storyline and developed a “rich texture of human relationships.”

And within the aesthetic history of crime fiction, highly sensationalized “Dallas” deserves a closer semiotic analysis than it ordinarily receives. In spite of its contrived characterization, as Mary Mander has argued convincingly, “Dallas” examines the moral realm on the level of organizations rather than that of individual immorality. “Dallas” mirrors correctly our deepening realization that individualism no longer explains the social order. Using the melodramatic formula, “Dallas” contends that only in the collective—the corporation or the family—do individuals survive. “Dallas” enters the domain of power, beliefs, and hidden struggles through the family—a symbol which may have replaced the impassioned image of the frontier in its national appeal. Or stated differently, “Dallas” works off a contradiction between two sets of values: the ruthless, cut-throat world of the corporation, and the domain of nurture represented by the family. As such, this television series has been redemptive in turning its focus to the collective, where the structures of family and organization become the framework for understanding moral responsibility. And that points to an immense cultural struggle North Americans are trying to comprehend. Televised communication has a capacity beyond that of cinema or live theatre for penetrating character, but has not allowed us to grasp visually the corporate and macroscopic. “Dallas”—and “Knot’s Landing” less successfully—represents an instructive attempt to reverse that deficiency.

Given today’s fragmentation, and to the extent that post-structuralism’s “Death of Man” speaks for our age, a medium taking humanity seriously provides a significant counterforce. Yet television’s magnificent potential remains largely undeveloped to date. Scriptwriters and producers may be approximating the right questions and illuminating in a gross fashion the bewilderment of the soul. But it will take the redeemed mind in cultural production before television will compellingly represent the human condition on this side of an historical fall.

Secondly, regarding immediacy, the question is

what view of history emerges from television. How does it treat human society and time? Does the historical tempo on the screen match the biblical one? Television technology makes the living moment brilliant; but, to be redemptive, the vividly immediate cannot contradict the elaborate realities of purposive history. With the exception of soap operas, occasional mini-series, or movies-made-for-television, each episode is artificially self-contained. “Little House on the Prairie,” “The Waltons” and “Bonanza” rested somewhere in a historical period, yet their structural pattern was an enclosed hour and not the perplexing arena of space-time history. Television tends to insulate audiences from history and create a texture commensurate with its own electronic dynamics. On balance, television creates a punctilious canvas, whose momentary flashes and kamikaze dives into our temporality do not register moral sensitivity.

As Calvin puts it, God is constantly vigilant, efficacious, operative, continually engaged, and edging history toward a climax. The Lord of nations catches up their history in His providence; thus, however obscurely seen, nothing is aimless or curved in upon itself or unremittingly destructive. The Christian mind seeks in popular television an orientation to temporality which is linear but centered. We can only introduce more complexity into our speech about morality if human fallenness can be seen as both judged and overcome. Television’s pictorial nature communicates the explicit, but mere disclosure or candor is not the equivalent of engaging the public scruples.

NBC’s nine-and-a-half hour docudrama, “Holocaust,” re-enacted an historic event through the story of two German families from 1935 to 1945. Legitimate critics scorned NBC for exploiting such serious material for commercial gain, and the enormous complexity of the moral issues was inevitably trivialized. Despite the shortcomings, however, “Holocaust” raised the consciousness of millions about the dangers of anti-Semitism by embedding its own event-character within the flow of history. “Roots” also combined historical circumstances with dramatic intensity, in spite of predictable plots and stereotyped characters. The apocalypticism of “The Day After” tended to weaken at times its redemptive impact; however, it nudged its 70 million viewers away from hysteria or indifference, and thus toward heightened moral awareness.

In many respects, Bill Moyers' "CBS Reports: People Like Us" serves as a model of the news story coveted by the redeemed mind. Moyers gave a voice to Larry Ham, Frances Dorta, and Cathy Dixon—powerless people who had fallen through the government's safety net. Television became an instrument for those being hurt—though often unintentionally—by social policies poorly designed or ineptly administered, and in some cases blatantly unfair. Consistent with the canons of acceptable news practice, Moyers gave no moralistic preachments. He sought only to make the faces of the poor as distinct and their voices as clear as audiences typically hear and see from agents of the establishment. The result was redemptive programming anchoring its immediacy in the currents of purposive history and honoring the cause of social justice.

Thirdly, television—as with other visual media—I have suggested, does not easily communicate the non-material. Its technological structure tends to equate truth with immediate sensory impressions and remove mystery from life.

Some dramatic styles in television regularly assert self-transcendence, the necessity of bettering one's lot by moving beyond personal and social circumstances. But that is not what I mean. "The Incredible Hulk," as did "The Six Million Dollar Man" and "Wonder Woman" earlier, demonstrates self-transcendence but it is premised on an ultimate faith in human ability to surmount limitations by technological creativity or a mystical force. The original "Superman" contained these elements, and "Planet of the Apes," "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century," "Battleship Galactica," and "The Night Stalker" some of them. These series presume that humans may ultimately exercise absolute command over their environment, but they do not verify the supernatural.

Mysteries such as "Star Trek," "Twilight Zone," "Space 1999," "Project UFO," and "Mission Impossible" are really a game, a challenge to the organized mind. Since logic and craftiness solve each episode, this genre has not promoted transcendence in a genuine sense either. Certainly people move outside the ordinary through dreams, fantasy, and musical ecstasy; and we need more effort in clarifying to what degree all mystery has a transcendental element. Yet, even high-quality movies such as "Gaslight" and excellent adventures

of the "Columbo" type are really no more than depictions of self-transcendence. They puzzle and intrigue for the moment, but do not finally require antecedents outside the order of nature. Thus television entertainment, in spite of these forays into self-transcendence, remains fully anchored in the sensate. What Levi Strauss calls the narrative's deep structure is fundamentally non-transcendent.

However, in spite of the visual media's bias against an ineffable realm, Paul Schrader marshalls convincing evidence in his *Transcendental Style in Film* that video art can express transcendence. By appropriate symbols, we can be nudged toward the invisible through the visible itself. Another reality is established alongside sense reality. A world can open up which refuses to be constrained within ordinary patterns of explanation.

Our decades of neglect in television will not be surmounted easily. Perhaps the ongoing fascination with fantasy in literature can provide clues for better visual symbolization. For example, whatever the inadequacies of United Artists' "Lord of the Rings," this video advances our ability to animate fantasy. But Mary Tyler Moore's ABC special, "The Incredible Dream," represents an even more ambitious attempt to stretch television beyond the edge of finite sensibility. British innovator Jack Good makes an impressive attempt to knit together honestly humankind's history. The judgment phase stands out decisively also: dark skies, the human species driven from paradise, Sodom and Gomorrah, the flood, mushroom clouds, and a ponderous narration: "All flesh was corrupted." But a transcendent allusion appears prominently, too. I am not referring to Mary's appearance in heaven—complete with white tie and tails, leading a tap-dancing chorus in "Hallelujah." Nor do I mean that powerful scene where she sings before a stained glass window, her arms outstretched as in crucifixion. Both scenes hint at an independent scene of action beyond the immediate, but neither illuminates transcendence as powerfully as the hand emerging from that ancient source of all life, the sea. Fashioned as though from foam rubber, the white hand wafts Ben Vereen, Moore, and the Manhattan Transfer to shore while Mary sings, "Morning Has Broken." To someone interested in more than realism, this television special represents an ambitious example of transcendental style. For television to be redemptive, symbolizing an authentic,

ideational realm warrants our serious artistic attention—armed with the assurance that this technology allows for such a possibility.

Biblical perspectives on humanity, history, and the supernatural often clash with the images conveyed in popular art on those themes. But that does not mean mass communication technologies in general and television in particular cannot be useful for the Kingdom of God. I have indicated some signifiers of hope, and the Christian keeps expecting, promoting, contending for moral literacy. Whenever one sees conscientious insight into humankind as a moral species; whenever there are concerted efforts toward purposeful history; whenever the vast reaches of the supernatural are symbolized, there one sees the hand of God. Such popular culture with a redemptive bearing fulfills the cultural mandate. Neo-Kuyperians agree, I suspect, that by the common grace of God, all truth is His truth.

## Conclusion

Calvinists should do more than mimic the tedious reports of Ellul and Postman on television's part in our modern malaise. Our task centers on enabling this medium to become aesthetically superior. Assisting television art in becoming a distinctive symbolic form strikes me as a worthy enterprise for God's community. The Christian worldview gives one an irrevocable advantage in shaping redemptive products and establishing a healthy critical climate. Popular culture sorely needs its Charles Williams reminding this secular age of a spiritual realm, and its C.S. Lewis dramatizing the good/evil contest within that realm. Obviously courageous executives and creative producers are scattered among the mass media enterprise, but to make it redemptive, television still needs major impact from people of faith.

My preoccupation throughout has been television's technological capacity as an instrument of cultural formation. My concern has not been a comprehensive overview of our mission in the world, but how to think Christianly about one pre-eminent cultural form.

And, of course, I presume throughout education's critical task of empowering students to become transformers of culture. The media's role in moral literacy is analogous to public health; for all its spectacular importance, experts in medicine and surgery are still needed to run a hospital. Popular culture that enhances moral literacy plays a vital part in developing a public philosophy; but that is no substitute for systematically equipping God's people with a worldview education sophisticated enough to minister in depth to professions, institutions, and intellectual arenas alienated from biblical givens. Mobilized to know our age profoundly, God's people can use redemptive television as a resource for their Kingdom activity. Television, a Kingdom resource; I trust you are inspired by its potential in an age drifting along the streams of time.

## Works Cited

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Innis' two major works on communications technology, *Empire and Communications*. London: Oxford University Press, 1950; and *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.

<sup>2</sup>For the classic essay regarding McLuhan's psychological shift, see James W. Carey, "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan," *Antioch Review*, 6:71 (1967), 5-31.

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Ellul. *Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce M. Hanks. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. 228.

<sup>4</sup>*Humiliation*, 143.

<sup>5</sup>*Humiliation*, 26-27.

<sup>6</sup>Jacob Bronowski, *Science and Human Values*, rev. ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1965. 29-31.

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*. New York: Seabury Press, [1948] 1967. p. 75. Other sociologists now confirm what Ellul anticipated more than 40 years ago in this book. Kevin P. Philips writes, for example: "There is a worrisome truth in the analysis that morality and postindustrial-cum-communications technology do not easily co-exist;" in his *Mediacracy* (Garden City, NH: Doubleday, 1975), p. ix. Claus Mueller argues that the central problem of advanced capitalist societies has shifted from the economic sphere to that of moral values and beliefs; in his *The Politics of Communication*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Wuthnow. *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987. 4, 66, 71-75.

<sup>9</sup>Mark Fackler and Stephen Darling, "Forgiveness on Prime-Time Television—A Case Study: Hill Street Blues," *Studies in Popular Culture*, X:1 (1987), 64-73.