

Foreword

One Thing about Television and Ten Things about Canadian TV

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One Thing about Television

Simply put, I believe in the benign influence of the medium. I've been a TV viewer since the age of four and a TV critic for more than a decade. When I began writing about television there was still a widespread belief among educated, well-intentioned readers of *The Globe and Mail* that TV was an instrument to engineer conformity. It is nothing of the kind. As television has expanded from a handful of commercial-supported, over-the-air networks into a multitude of niche channels, and technology has changed every aspect of it, television has become an instrument of subversion and change. Raw, live news footage beggars language in its power to influence opinion and attitude. Dramas and comedies aimed at a discerning audience, and made for broadcasters that don't rely primarily on advertising support, have the freedom to tell stories that challenge rather than comfort an audience.

The hostility toward television among an educated audience in Canada has always seemed peculiar, if not outlandish, to me. It was, after all, a Canadian academic, Marshall McLuhan, who pioneered the serious study of television and the manner in which the consumer participates in all that television achieves. McLuhan's legacy often seems thin in Canada while it prospers elsewhere. One can speculate that as Canada asserted a national identity and culture for itself, primacy was given to literature and art while the study of popular culture of all types was ignored or downgraded. And yet as a country so vast that, pre-Internet, one could justifiably claim that television and radio linked

distant communities and created uncommon instances of shared experience, it seems obvious that scholars should extrapolate meaning from television. Just as they extrapolate meaning from novels. They do so now with greater emphasis than before. In fact the study of television is a rare arena in which journalism and scholarship meet with ease—the impact of television compels the journalist to seek out greater understanding that must be conveyed to the reader who feels that profound impact. And that greater understanding is supplied by those academics who are unconstrained by daily or weekly deadlines. The medium is utterly compelling as a subject for both journalism and scholarly research, and its influence should never be underestimated.

Television can kick open the shutters in a closed society. I wrote a book about this very subject. My memoir, *A Great Feast of Light: Growing Up Irish in the Television Age*, is about the impact of television on Ireland in the 1960s and 70s. An extraordinary thing happened when I was around four years old. It was then, in rural Ireland, that electricity finally became available to everyone. People had light in their homes. Shortly afterwards, television arrived, and that meant people had light from other places. In conventional US network TV programs they saw sunny California, the bright lights and ideas of the world outside. Small-town Ireland was then fairly isolated from the rest of the world, ruled by priests, traditions, and steeped in anti-British politics. Divorce and contraception were outlawed, many books and films were banned, and new ideas of any kind were viewed with a suspicious eye. Ireland was a conservative Catholic society. There were rules about this, that, and the other. And much of the establishment was vaguely terrified by television because of all of these foreign things on it and what was being discussed, even in innocuous programs.

A famously conservative member of the Irish Parliament, Oliver J. Flanagan, was outraged and appalled by television. He stood up in Parliament and fomented against it, and described all of the things that people talked about that hadn't been talked about before, like sexuality and adultery. And he declared, in a confusion of rage and hysteria, "There was no sex in Ireland before television!" What he meant, of course, is that people were talking about sex because it was sometimes talked about on TV. Oliver J. Flanagan was afraid of what today we call "the water-cooler moment" created by TV—that moment when people talk about their shared interests at work. And what everyone shares, mainly, is the experience of watching television.

Ten Things about Canadian TV

1. *The Two Strands*

There are two genres of Canadian TV drama. One is best described as generic. Recently I was in Ireland and noticed that the CanWest Global teen drama *Falcon Beach* and the CTV teens-on-skis drama *Whistler* were airing there. As far as the local audience is concerned, these shows are vaguely if not emphatically American, with their emphasis on good-looking characters, love triangles, individuals overcoming some minor obstacle to achieve success. These shows follow a pattern that can be found in hour-long drama anywhere in the world.

The viewer watches passively. There is no social realism to jolt the viewer into thoughtful response. The series are essentially set in fantasy locations—whether the beach in summer or the ski slopes in winter. The characters are going through typical, age-old coming-of-age developments. There is an honest but troubled leading young man. There is a female bitch figure. There is a wealthy family or rich character; there is a poor family or figure. A lesson is learned about adult responsibility, even as most of the drama concerns the avoidance of adult responsibility by young people. It's always the same. These Canadian shows are created from a template, which is why they are sold and watched around the world. At the same time there is a second genre of Canadian TV, one that instinctively includes elements that distinguish it from American TV and, indeed, from most TV around the world.

While I was in Ireland I noticed that another Canadian series was airing there: *Trailer Park Boys*. This brings me to the second, more interesting genre of Canadian TV drama, one focused on what can be summarized as “hosers, whores, boozers, and losers.”

At the core of *Trailer Park Boys* is habitual criminality. There is acceptance of growing marijuana as a legitimate occupation, much cigarette smoking, regular fistfights, and occasional gunplay. A couple of characters are homosexual, but nobody takes any notice. All of this is delivered to viewers with dialogue that is highly profane. Content like this undermines everything thought appropriate for American audiences. Mike Clattenburg once remarked that when he conceived the *Trailer Park Boys* concept he thought of it as *COPS* from the criminals' point of view,¹ and there is a remarkable cultural self-assurance to Clattenburg's vision—it's simply the opposite of what is thought of as the template for US network content.

Now, there is a parallel stream of Canadian TV drama that fits into the “hosers, whores, boozers, and losers” category. It just lacks the loquacious

profanity of Ricky, Julian, and Bubbles. I mean the dramas created by Chris Haddock. *Intelligence*, his latest, follows in a direct line from his previous dramas, *Da Vinci's City Hall* and *Da Vinci's Inquest*. What have these shows been about? Mainly the need to create an acceptance of illegal drugs and prostitution in the culture. Throughout *Da Vinci's Inquest* and *Da Vinci's City Hall*, the hero, Dominic Da Vinci, had several aims—creating a red-light district in Vancouver, establishing a needle-exchange program, and moving the problem of grow ops out of police jurisdiction to make it a civic rather than a criminal matter. *Intelligence* offers a drug dealer as a hero. It tells viewers that illegal drugs are part of the commercial culture, just hidden from official view. Again, all of this goes against everything thought appropriate for American audiences and counters the view of the world presented in most mainstream American TV. *Intelligence* is another example of cultural self-assurance. It and the two Da Vinci shows, all from Chris Haddock, assert that we're different here. If they are not read as anti-American, at least they are obviously anti-American TV.

2. No Playwrights, Please

A few years ago the acclaimed playwright George F. Walker was unleashed on the Canadian TV world. He created for CBC the legal drama *This Is Wonderland*. Walker once said in an interview with my colleague Kate Taylor of *The Globe*, "First and foremost, an audience wants to be connected.... They connect emotionally."² Asked why he directed his own plays, he said, "I want to make sure they have a pulse. I don't want the intellectual approach to my work that I think is a big deal in Canadian theatre." With *This Is Wonderland*, Walker brought his emphatic theatrical style—that pulse—to Canadian TV. And it was a disaster. Every episode was filled with shouting, braying characters. Everything was written and acted in broad emotional terms to force viewers to connect emotionally.

I believe Walker fundamentally misunderstood television. He would have done well to remember Marshall McLuhan, who said in the early 1960s that "TV is a medium that rejects the sharp personality" and that "the success of any TV performer depends on his achieving a low-pressure style of presentation."³ Put simply, and outside the area of theory, George Walker's *This Is Wonderland* was hard work to watch. It felt like an assault. Perhaps we go to the theatre to be assaulted and gain that cathartic release, coming out exhausted. But we don't want that on our couch at home.

In sharp contrast, Chris Haddock has, I think, a much more instinctive and truer understanding of the power of television. All the emotional melodrama—so adored by Walker—is drained out of *Da Vinci's Inquest*, *Da Vinci's City Hall*, and *Intelligence*. The result is often powerful television. Haddock's style is elliptical and quiet and his shows have the sort of skeptical intelligence that connects with viewers in the private emotional state in which they watch TV. The next time a distinguished playwright is commissioned to write for Canadian TV, I hope they watch a little TV before they impose their theatrical style on it. Anything else is an arrogant assumption about how television works.

3. *Canadians Like Victims*

Back to George Walker first. *Wonderland* was less about lawyers than it was about the victims of the legal system. In Chris Haddock's case *Da Vinci's Inquest* was really about the victims. Apart from its being a coroner's job to investigate what happened to a victim, the show focused on the victim's story. The fact is, Canadian viewers are drawn to stories about victims. TV movies and miniseries about Canadian victims always do remarkably well with viewers.

A few years ago, there was considerable surprise in the TV business when a CTV TV movie called *Tagged: The Jonathan Wamback Story* was a huge ratings success. Nobody should have been surprised. Canadians like to see the story of victims of violence and injustice. Because Canadians like to sympathize. In *Tagged*, fifteen-year-old Jonathan Wamback, a victim of bullying, limps back to school with brain damage after being brutally attacked by a gang of teenage thugs. But that scene, as dramatized, is clearly not intended to be a triumph over the enemy. It's simply about surviving. Here's this kid—who fought to regain his dignity and the use of his body after months of physical therapy—going back to show his enemies they haven't beaten him. As they watch the story unfold, what the audience feels is shame. It's not the superficial, feel-good sentiment that has always been at the core of prime-time TV and Hollywood movie entertainment. There's no victory for the main character. As the broken teenager limps painfully up the steps of his high school, what the audience feels is heartbreak.

Other Canadian TV movies or miniseries about victims have also done surprisingly well with Canadian viewers. And it's not just a TV phenomenon. Canadian pop music has a surprisingly large number of songs about victims.

4. *From Satirist to Softie: The Morphing of Rick Mercer*

As part of the comedy group that was featured in *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, and located in the show's production base in Halifax, Rick Mercer was a merciless satirist. In recent years, with his own show, located in Toronto, and relying on the participation of politicians to get ratings, Mercer has become a kind of tame, in-house gagster for Canadian culture. An aside here. CBC TV is, I think, responsible for putting the marginalized Newfoundland culture of satire into the mainstream of Canadian culture. Thanks to national exposure on TV for such distinctly Newfoundland comedies as *CODCO* and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, the accepted style of comedy—especially political comedy—in Canada is the Newfoundland style. This is an aberration in a country where the English culture is anchored in Toronto and Vancouver.

The Newfoundland style is, obviously, based on its distance from the centre of Canada and on its Irish heritage. It is a style that cherishes sarcasm, savage wit, and the pricking of pomposity. Mercer is a notable example of this Newfoundland style, one that works particularly well on TV. But what has become clear is that the style is literally strengthened by closeness to Newfoundland. Take Mercer away from what nourishes that savagery, and its power is diluted. He's been absorbed into the mainstream.

5. *The CBC Is Okay*

Although I attack CBC TV management often in my columns, I believe that the CBC needs to exist. It's a matter of cultural literacy. A country without a healthy diet of continuing homegrown drama is lacking in the fibre of contemporary storytelling. And CBC TV is our best hope for that diet of homegrown drama. In every country that has even the vaguest notion of a culture and identity, there is a distinct link between the idea of itself and the fictive imagination. A country is simply inauthentic if its stories are not reflected back to itself.

That's why Canadian publishing is subsidized and Canadian television is regulated. At the root of the original, decades-old decision to support homegrown storytelling in print and on TV, there was a profound consensus about the need to keep storytelling alive. Besides, the money needed to keep Canadian stories on TV would be well spent in keeping an industry afloat and would amount to a mere fraction of what is needed to keep a factory or a mine open in some impoverished province. Even if the story on TV isn't a hit, at least the actors and crew can make a decent living and contribute back to the

economy. In any case, sustaining the living thread of storytelling is a necessary endeavour, like ensuring health care and safe drinking water. Storytelling should be perceived as another aspect of literacy, and the CBC as its main tool for furthering it.

6. *The CBC Is Screwed*

Right now, I think CBC management is suffering from a bout of the narcissism of leadership. The CBC is a curious hybrid, simultaneously a public broadcaster and reliant on commercial revenue. As a public broadcaster it can afford to ignore ratings, and as a partly commercial broadcaster it can't. However, what's happened has been surreal—executives have set an audience target for many CBC shows, even documentaries, of one million viewers. The strength of any public broadcaster—even one that airs commercials—is that it can afford to be unpopular, sometimes. It can afford to be obscure, to be different. By setting audience targets that match commercial broadcast standards, CBC is asserting itself as another part of the commercial TV realm. My suspicion is that CBC executives want to be showbiz, not public broadcasting. And that's suicidal for any public broadcaster, because sometimes the show isn't going to be showbiz but only a show that matters on a smaller, more meaningful level to fewer people.

7. *Why Does Corner Gas Work?*

There are only eight characters. Nothing happens. That's why. *Corner Gas* is terrifically sweet, not sugary. And nothing really juicy ever happens. Often the show's appeal has been described as "coffee shop humour," but that doesn't really cover it. I think the appeal is, literally, the nothingness of it. There's no fighting, no gung-ho stuff about heroes and guns and mayhem and similar themes. There's no sex. A bunch of people in a tiny town swap low-key jokes and get excited about what's on the menu at the local diner. The cops are a bit incompetent and crime is non-existent. The harshest word heard is a coot hissing "Jackass!" Yet Canadian viewers love it. They lap it up. And I think that's partly because it's how we see ourselves. But it's also because *Corner Gas* is, in its nothingness, the opposite of almost everything else on TV. Part of the appeal is watching the half-hour being filled by what is meaningless, mundane, and too slight to ever seem worthy of television's attention.

8. *Canadian TV Needs to Be Different, Tough, and Challenging*

What we've seen in recent years in Canadian TV drama—*The Associates*, *Blue Murder*, *Whistler*, *Falcon Beach*, right up to CBC's *The Border* and Global's *The Guard*—has been too generic, too mild-mannered, too ordinary. In a country where *The Sopranos* can be shown on over-the-air TV, uncensored, we can tolerate something smarter and more sophisticated than what's been made recently. There have been exceptions, of course. But overall we can afford to spurn the antique American, mild-mannered storytelling model of continuing network dramas and look to American cable dramas and British series as inspiration. We can be more realistic, satiric, complex, and truthful. We can't afford to be ordinary any more.

9. *Why I Hate George Stroumboulopoulos*

This Stroumboulopoulos guy is huge. He was on CBC Newsworld hosting *The Hour* four nights a week, now he's on the main network with *George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight* and on CBC Radio too. Sometimes he's on again in the middle of the night. That's a lot of airtime. Compared with George, Peter Mansbridge is a mere mite, a flea hovering around the CBC schedule. Stroumboulopoulos is heavily marketed by CBC. I've seen *The Hour* many times now and discovered that not only is Stroumboulopoulos huge but he uses the word "huge" all the time. Once, he used it four times in eight minutes. I counted. Every darn thing he talks about is "a huge story." Otherwise it's "cool." Putting together the clues, I'd speculate that an important news item for Stroumboulopoulos is both huge and cool.

Of course, I don't actually hate George Stroumboulopoulos. What I find maddening are the claims that CBC makes for *The Hour*. CBC's position is this: "*The Hour* brings viewers a different take on the news. It's not a newscast. It's not a magazine show. This time, it's personal." Now that's BS, and often *The Hour* is total BS—glib, fast, flippant, half-assed, and full of itself. Of course, CBC is entitled to try to attract younger viewers hungry for a breezy, opinionated take on the news. But *The Hour* is just silly. It looks cheap and toxic, but it's just simple-minded piffle. Worst, it trivializes the news.

It's nothing personal. I'm sure George is a nice enough guy. But I think George Stroumboulopoulos is to CBC TV News programming what George F. Walker was to Canadian TV drama—an assault on the senses. Too much bluster, not enough quiet. Too much heat, not enough cool. Saying the word "cool" a lot, as Stroumboulopoulos does, fails to make anybody cool.

10. *Why The Trailer Park Boys Rule*

Trailer Park Boys is a weird and wonderful series and a uniquely Canadian phenomenon. Why? Because it's an anti-bourgeois soap opera, a cheerful and loving celebration of life at the bottom. In Canada we feel that as a society with government-supported universal health care and a host of other social benefits, we embrace those at the bottom of the social ladder. It's what makes us who we are. And *Trailer Park Boys* epitomizes that embrace. The core theme of the show is the need for friends, family, and community. As asinine as the main characters might be at times, they are forgiven by the community in the trailer park and loved by their pals and family. They form a supportive commonality. The characters might be losers, but they are loved. Best of all, this aspect of the show is recognized even by viewers who might be less than enamoured of the show's foul language and the unending criminality of Ricky, Julian, and Bubbles. Once, when the show was dismissed as merely vulgar by a writer for *The Globe and Mail*, a reader responded with a rejoinder in a letter to the editor. He wrote, "The Park is us. We are the Park." That's why the Boys rule.

Notes

- 1 Cavu Pictures, *Trailer Park Boys: A Visitor's Guide to The Sunnyvale Trailer Park*.
- 2 Taylor, "Playwright Shoots from the Gut."
- 3 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 141.