

Sympathy for the Devil

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2005-05-05

Bart and Lisa Simpson are arguing over who their baby sister, Maggie, loves best.

"Go to the one you love the most," coos Lisa.

Maggie looks at her brother, looks at her sister, turns around and crawls up to the TV set and gives it a loving embrace.

Like little Maggie, I also love my TV -- and it's safe to say you'll never see me sporting any "Kill Your Television" propaganda. But the Simpsons joke plays off real (and, I believe, ridiculous) concerns that TV is taking over our families and distracting us from healthier aspects of our lives.

Are we really that easy to manipulate?

TV Turnoff Network seems to think so. Last week was International TV Turnoff week -- a yearly event sponsored by the non-profit organization, which is dedicated to raising "awareness about the negative impact of television."

Arguments on their Web site for condemning TV include: "television cuts into family time" and television "harms our children's ability to read and succeed in school." Statistics about how programming promotes copycat violence, illiteracy and obesity are geared to support the tired argument that TV is the root of most societal problems.

Its project motto is "turn off TV and turn on life." How about a more realistic maxim? "Turn on your TV, complicate your notions about the world."

Popular culture is a part of life. And there are healthy children who watch TV and still do well in school. And what is "reading" anyway? Can't we "read" TV?

Embracing televised programming hasn't given me attention deficit disorder. It hasn't made me obese, depressed or single. And I find it tiresome to hear people say "TV is stupid" or "Kill Your Television" (like the decision to not watch TV is an act of violence). With their reductionist naivete, these cliches suggest a refusal to consider "new" ways of watching.

There is much to be gained from the project of "reading television." Steven Johnson, author of the soon-to-be-released *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*, thinks so too. In his book, Johnson argues that while mass culture has typically been designated as dumbed-down entertainment, TV has actually become more cognitively demanding.

He likens watching TV to reading a book -- "Think of the cognitive benefits conventionally ascribed to reading: attention, patience, retention, the parsing of narrative threads. Over the last half-century, programming on TV has increased the demands it places on precisely these mental faculties."

We speak of television as if it were an independent entity with the force to wreak havoc on our society, but the "problem" isn't with TV per se -- it's that most audiences don't view programs with critical eyes.

Johnson effectively argues for "a change in the criteria we use to determine what really is cognitive junk food and what is genuinely nourishing -- the true test should be whether a given show engages or sedates the mind." And there are plenty of shows that engage.

An active viewer of *Alias*, *Lost* or *24* will find themselves getting a mental workout because, as Johnson points out, these shows layer "each scene with a thick network of affiliations. You have to focus to follow the plot, and in focusing you're exercising the parts of your brain that map social networks, that fill in missing information [and] that connect multiple narrative threads."

I'm certainly not advocating the fashioning of an "ass-groove" in your couch a la Homer J. Simpson, but it's important to acknowledge TV is not the enemy. Nor is it antithetical to living -- as TV Turnoff Week seems to suggest.

Programming, when responsibly discussed between parent and child, can provide a unique and engaging approach to education. I have friends whose daughters Tivo the campy Batman series from the 1960s. Once their homework is finished, they get to watch an episode. Then they discuss issues of morality, violence, justice and gender as depicted in the series over dinner with their parents.

Holy family values, Batman! That's way cool -- and it makes me want to hug my TV.