

Growing Up with TV: A Sequence of Two Invitations

Invitation #1: A plain or elegant box, enclosing a cathode-ray tube with a luminous face. A phosphorescent screen where images of people and objects, static scenes and dynamic actions, are transmitted as electromagnetic waves, then reconverted into visual images integrated with voices, music, and other sound effects. A medium of mass communication and entertainment. An industry.

If you consulted a dictionary to find out what the word television "means," the definitions listed would include some or all of the information paraphrased above. But you would not find what watching television "means" to you. Though growing up with TV is, no doubt, an experience which almost everybody has in common, though you've seen many of the same programs and reruns, this invitation may help you discover that one person's pleasure is another person's complaint.

What are your earliest memories of the images and sounds that came out of the plain or elegant box at your house? What did you watch before you were old enough to go to school? My favorite (as a parent, not a child) was Captain Kangaroo, who was obviously watched and emulated by the creators of Sesame Street and Mr. Roger's Neighborhood. If you rushed home from school every day so you wouldn't miss your favorite program, talk about that for a while. Or share some memories of the first weekend shows you enjoyed until you outgrew them. As you recall these experiences, try to explain the appeal of the shows you remember most vividly. Which characters did you love and admire? Which villains did you enjoy? Did you ever want them, instead of the heroes, to win? Daytime and nighttime soaps, wild west sagas and police shows, sit-coms and made-for-TV movies, talk shows and news and documentaries, and spectator sports... which kind of program is preferred by your family? Who wins if there's an argument about what to watch? Why? As you respond to these questions, you'll be telling yourself, and your readers, what growing up with TV has meant to you.

Invitation #2: A vast wasteland of mediocrity and gratuitous violence. A powerful manipulator of people's minds. Though you won't find those "definitions" of television in your dictionary, some TV critics and political analysts would argue that every set should be clearly marked with a warning: "This idiot box is capable of impeding the development of your mind." (Though classified as slang, "idiot box" is in some dictionaries.) If you compare television experiences with friends or classmates, you may have some lively disagreements about the excellence or mediocrity of somebody's favorite show. And if you discuss the most provocative responses to my questions, you'll probably find yourself considering the possibility that some of your opinions and attitudes have been shaped by the pervasive influence of TV.

As you began identifying with the actors, musicians, comedians, and athletes you watched on TV, who became your favorites? Why did you prefer these over all the others? How do you now see and relate to them? Did a particular kind of show, or a particular TV personality, ever determine the games you played? Has TV ever helped you make a personal decision? Has it ever influenced the position you've taken on a controversial issue? How often, and how much, have TV commercials affected your family's weekly shopping list? Or their choice of a home appliance or an automobile? Did TV ads ever determine what you dreamed of getting on your birthday, or some other gift-getting day? What images or concepts of personal power and financial success has TV given you? What typical and frequent images of TV

violence can you immediately recall? How would you describe the most typical and frequent TV portrayal of American minorities? Of relationships? As you respond to these questions, as you take a second look at your experiences in videoland, I hope you'll see the images TV has given you from a more thoughtful and critical perspective. I hope you'll discover new meaning in what you already know.