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Tunnelvision

Alexander W. Butler

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Tunnelvision

High School Essay Competition

Alexander W. Butler, First Place

Coffee High School

My generation has run out of things to do. We are the yard sale of nostalgia, the leftovers of other generations. We have adopted the button-down look of the Fifties; we wear the mini-skirts of the Sixties and have taken on the hippie look of the Seventies. What will distinguish us from these generations will be less tangible than a look and far more serious than a fad. We are a generation that has been reared by TV. Our morals, our sensibilities, and our view of the world have come largely from television.

One cannot doubt that television has had a pervasive influence on my generation. Because everyone has a TV or at least has access to one, it is a highly effective medium for conveying information. We have seen everything from the wildebeest migration to spacecraft launches. We get a daily panorama of thirty-second segments covering such diverse topics as pandas and AIDS. However, in bringing us this information TV also affects our sensibilities. A tornado rips through a town in Texas killing twenty-three people and doing millions of dollars worth of damage. So what? To a lot of us this really doesn't mean much because we're accustomed to it. We have become insensitive to death, loss, and pain. We are constantly exposed to violence, starvation, and disaster but we are unaffected by it because thirty seconds later we'll be viewing the joys of squeaky clean dishes and a sparkling no-wax floor.

This entire generation has grown up seeing the world through the eyes of Big Bird and Boss Hogg, or more accurately, through their language. This is perhaps the most alarming element of TV's influence. By one expert's count, most TV shows use an average of only 900 to 1,000 different words per program, regardless of whether the program lasts half an hour or two and a half hours. The same expert estimates that the total number of words in all of TV programming does not exceed 5,000 words—hardly a comprehensive vocabulary for anyone beyond the grade school level. With this limited vocabulary it is impossible to make fine distinctions or to comprehend complex situations. Simply, television discourages thought and in its place gives us depthless, prefabricated images.

It is television, rather than reading or even going to the movies that has become my generation's pastime. Life is put on "pause" for MTV and the Cosbys. The percentage of our lives given up to watching TV is astonishing. Average teenagers spend 20,000 hours in front of the TV by the time they are twenty. That is considerably more time than is spent in school. Just think of the pursuits that time could have been applied to. In half that time they could have learned several languages fluently and then in the other half they could have walked around the world trying them out and then have written a book about the experience. The potential that we as individuals and as a nation are losing is enormous.

Mine is a generation of television addicts. We are addicted to a medium that prides itself on conveying information, but rather than stimulating thought, produces a passive acceptance in us. If a foreign nation found a way to induce such vacuousness in our society we would be immediately alarmed. Perhaps we should be equally alarmed when our own diversions cause this mindlessness, for without active analysis and imagination we will fail to solve the challenges that we will face. □