

## "Television: The Cyclops That Eats Books" by Larry Woiwode, Best-Selling Author

Preview: *Once, radio was called "the tread-mill to oblivion." Novelist Larry Woiwode reminds us that television has even greater potential for harm. On campus last February for Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Freedom, Responsibility and the American Literary Tradition," Woiwode, best-selling author of The Neumiller Stories and other contemporary fiction, vividly described the profound changes wrought by this modern "Cyclops."*

What is destroying America today is not the liberal breed of one-world politicians, or the IMF bankers, or the misguided educational elite, or the World Council of Churches; these are largely symptoms of a greater disorder. If there is any single institution to blame, it is, to use the cozy diminutive, "TV."

TV is more than a medium; it has become a full-fledged institution, backed by billions of dollars each season. Its producers want us to sit in front of its glazed-over electronic screen, press our clutch of discernment through the floorboards, and sit in a spangled, zoned-out state ("couch potatoes," in current parlance) while we are instructed in the proper liberal tone and attitude by our present-day Plato and Aristotle—Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw. These television celebrities have more temporal power than the teachings of Aristotle and Plato have built up over the centuries.

Television, in fact, has greater power over the lives of most Americans than any educational system or government or church. Children are particularly susceptible. They are mesmerized, hypnotized and tranquilized by TV. It is often the center of their world; even when the set is turned off, they continue to tell stories about what they've seen on it. No wonder, then, that as adults they are not pre-



pared for the front line of life; they simply have no mental defenses to confront the reality of the world.

### **The Truth About TV**

One of the most disturbing truths about TV is that it eats books.

Once out of school, nearly 60 percent of all adult Americans have never read a single book, and most of the rest read only one book a year. Alvin Kernan, author of *The Death of Literature*, says that reading books "is ceasing to be the primary way of knowing something in our society" He also points out that bachelor's degrees in English literature have declined by 33 percent in the last 20 years and that in many universities the courses are largely reduced to remedial reading. American libraries, he adds, are in crisis, with few patrons to support them.

Thousands of teachers at the elementary, secondary and college levels can testify that

their students' writing exhibits a tendency toward a superficiality that wasn't seen, say, ten or fifteen years ago. It shows up not only in the students' lack of analytical skills but in their poor command of grammar and rhetoric. I've been asked by a graduate student what a semi-colon is. The mechanics of the English language have been tortured to pieces by TV. Visual, moving images—which are the venue of television—can't be held in the net of careful language. They want to break out. They really have nothing to do with language. So language, grammar and rhetoric have become fractured.

Recent surveys by dozens of organizations also suggest that up to 40 percent of the American public is functionally illiterate; that is, our citizens' reading and writing abilities, if they have any, are so seriously impaired as to

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render them, in that handy jargon of our times, "dysfunctional." The problem isn't just in our schools or in the way reading is taught: TV teaches people *not* to read. It renders them incapable of engaging in an art that is now perceived as *strenuous*, because it is an active art, not a passive hypnotized state.

Passive as it is, television has invaded our culture so completely that you see its effects in every quarter, even in the literary world. It shows up in supermarket paperbacks, from

Stephen King (who has a certain clever skill) to pulp fiction. These are really forms of verbal TV—literature that is so superficial that those who read it can revel in the same sensations they experience when they are watching TV.

Even more importantly, the growing influence of television has, Kernan says, changed people's habits and values and affected their assumptions about the world. The sort of reflective, critical and value-laden thinking encouraged by books has been rendered obsolete. In this context, we would do well to recall the Cyclopes—the race of giants that, according to Greek myth, predated man.

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Here is a passage from the well known classicist Edith Hamilton's summary of the encounter between the mythic adventurer Odysseus and the Cyclops named Polyphemus, as Odysseus is on his way home from the Trojan Wars. Odysseus and his crew have found Polyphemus's cave:

"At last he came, hideous and huge, tall as a great mountain crag. Driving his flock before him he entered and closed the cave's mouth with a ponderous slab of stone. Then looking around he caught sight of the strangers, and and

*Profiled recently by People magazine as one of America's leading novelists, Larry Woiwode is the author of What I'm Going to Do, I Think (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), Beyond the Bedroom Wall (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975, reprinted by Avon and Penguin Books), Even Tide (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, reprinted by Noonday), Poppa John (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981, reprinted by Crossway), Born Brothers (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988, reprinted by Penguin Books) and The Neumiller Stories (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989, reprinted by Penguin Books). Three of these novels have been chosen as "Best Books of the Year" by the New York Times Book Review. A former college professor who lives on a working ranch in North Dakota, Mr. Woiwode has also written numerous short stories and poems for publications such as Atlantic Monthly, the New Yorker, and Harper's. A new novel, Indian Affairs, will be published in June by Atheneum. 4*

cried out in a dreadful booming voice, 'Who are you who enter unbidden the house of Polyphemus? Traders or thieving pirates?' They were terror-stricken at the sight and sound of him, but Odysseus made shift to answer, and firmly too: 'Shipwrecked warriors from Troy are we, and your supplicants, under the protection of Zeus, the supplicants' god.' But Polyphemus roared out that he cared not for Zeus. He was bigger than any god and feared none of them. With that, he stretched out his mighty arms and in each great hand seized one of the men and dashed his brains out on the ground. Slowly he feasted off them to the last shred, and then, satisfied, stretched himself out across the cavern and slept. He was safe from attack. None but he could roll back the huge stone before the door, and if the horrified men had been able to summon courage and strength enough to kill him they would have been imprisoned there forever."

To discover their fate, read the book, preferably Robert Fitzgerald's masterful translation, if you don't know Greek. What I find particularly appropriate about this myth as it applies today is that, first, the Cyclops imprisons these men in darkness, and that, second, he beats their brains out before he devours them. It doesn't take much imagination to apply this to the effects of TV on us and our children.

### **TV's Effect on Learning**

Quite literally, TV affects the way people think. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1978), Jerry Mander quotes from the Emery Report, prepared by the Center for Continuing

destroys the capacity of the viewer to attend, it also, by taking over a complex of direct and indirect neural pathways, decreases vigilance—the general state of arousal which prepares the organism for action should its attention be drawn to a specific stimulus."

We have all experienced this last reaction: "Dad, it's time to—"

"Go on, get out of here!"

"But Dad, Mom just fell down the—"

"Leave me alone; can't you see I'm watching the Super Bowl?"

How are our neural pathways taken over? We think we are looking at a picture, or an image of something, but what we are actually seeing is thousands of dots of light blinking on and off in a strobe effect that is calculated to happen rapidly enough to keep us from recognizing the phenomenon. More than a decade ago, Mander and others pointed to instances of "TV epilepsy," in which those watching this strobe effect overextended their capacities, and the *New England Journal of Medicine* recently honored this affliction with a medical classification: video game epilepsy.

### **Shadows on the Screen**

Television also teaches that people aren't quite real; they are images—gray-and-white shadows or technicolor little beings who move in a medium no thicker than a sliver of glass, created by this bombardment of electrons.

Unfortunately, the tendency is to start thinking of them in the way children think when they see too many cartoons: that people are merely objects that can be zapped. Or that can fall over a cliff and be smashed to smithereens and pick themselves up again.

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Education at the Australian National University, Canberra, that when we watch television, "our usual processes of thinking and discernment are semi-functional at best." The study also argues "...that while television appears to have the potential to provide useful information to viewers—and is celebrated for its educational function—the technology of television and the inherent nature of the viewing experience actually inhibit learning as we usually think of it." And its final judgment is: "The evidence is that television not only

This contentless violence of cartoons has no basis in reality. Actual people aren't images but substantial, physical, corporeal beings with souls.

And, of course, the violence on television engenders violence; there have been too many studies substantiating this to suggest otherwise. One that has been going on for 30 years, begun by the psychologist Leonard Eron, began research on 875 8-year-olds in New York state. Analyzing parental childrearing practices and aggressiveness in school, Eron discovered that

the determining factor is the amount of TV parents permit their children to watch.

Eron's present partner in this extensive ongoing study, University of Illinois professor of psychology Rowell Huesmann, has written:

"When the research was started in 1960, television viewing was not a major focus. But in 1970, in the 10-year follow-up, one of the best predictions we could find of aggressive behavior in a teenage boy was how much violence he watched as a child. In 1981, we found that the adults who had been convicted of the most serious crimes were those same ones who had been the more aggressive teenagers, and who had watched the most television violence as children."

Where is this report? Buried in an alumni publication of the University of Illinois. In 1982, the National Institute of Mental Health published its own study: "Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the '80s." This report stated that there is "overwhelming" evidence that violence on TV leads to aggressive behavior in children and teenagers. Those findings were duly reported by most of the major media in the early '80s and then were forgotten.

Why do such reports sink into oblivion? Because the American audience does not want to face the reality of TV. They are too consumed by their love for it.

### **TV: Eating Out Our Substance**

**T**V eats books. It eats academic skills. It eats positive character traits. It even eats family relationships. How many families do you know that spend the dinner hour in front of the TV, seldom communicating with one another? How many have a television on while they have breakfast or prepare for work or school?

And what about school? I've heard college professors say of their students, "Well, you have to entertain them." One I know recommends using TV and film clips instead of lecturing, "throwing in a commercial every ten minutes or so to keep them awake." This is not only a patronizing attitude, it is an abdication of responsibility: A teacher should teach. But TV eats the principles of people who are supposed to be responsible, transforming them into passive servants of the Cyclops.

TV eats out our substance. Mander calls this

the mediation of experience: "[With TV] what we see, hear, touch, smell, feel and understand about the world has been processed for us."

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And, when we "cannot distinguish with certainty the natural from the interpreted, or the artificial from the organic, then all theories of the ideal organization of life become equal." In other words, TV teaches that all lifestyles and all values are



equal, and that there is no clearly defined right and wrong. In his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, one of the more brilliant recent books on the tyranny of television, the author Neil Postman wonders why nobody has pointed out that television possibly oversteps the injunction in the Decalogue against making graven images.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many of the tradi-

tional standards and mores of society came under heavy assault; indeed, they were blown apart, largely with the help of television which was just coming into its own. There was an air of unreality about many details of daily life. Even the "big" moral questions suffered distortion when they were reduced to TV images. During the Vietnam conflict there was graphic violence—soldiers and civilians actually dying—on screen. One scene that shocked the nation was an execution in which the victim was shot in the head with a pistol on prime-time TV. People "tuned in" to the war every night, and their opinions were largely formed by what they viewed, as if the highly complex and controversial issues about the causes, conduct, and resolution of the war could be summed up in these superficial broadcasts.

You saw the same phenomena again in the recent war in the Gulf. With stirring background music and sophisticated computer graphics, each network's banner script read across the screen, "WAR IN THE GULF," as if it were just another TV program. War isn't a program. It is a dirty, bloody mess. People are killed daily. Yet, television all but teaches that this carnage is merely another diversion, a form of blockbuster entertainment—the big show with all the international stars present.

In the last years of his life, Malcolm Muggeridge, a pragmatic and caustic TV personality and print journalist who embraced religion in later life, warned:

"From the first moment I was in the studio, I felt that it was far from being a good thing. I felt that television [would] ultimately be inimical to what I most appreciate, which is the expression of truth, expressing your reactions to life in words. I think you'll live to see the time when literature will be quite a rarity because, more and more, the presentation of images is preoccupying."

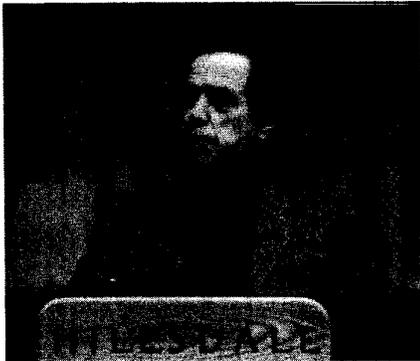
Muggeridge concluded:

"I don't think people are going to be preoccupied with ideas. I

think they are going to live in a fantasy world where you don't need any ideas. The one thing that television can't do is express ideas....There is a danger in translating life into an image, and that is what television is doing. In doing it, it is falsifying life. Far from the camera's being an accurate recorder of what is going on, it is the exact opposite. It cannot convey reality nor does it even want to." £

# Freedom, Responsibility and the American Literary Tradition

The novel of morals and manners was central to the early American literary tradition. It articulated that which has distinguished the American character and the American national experience from the Old World. There is little doubt that, despite its obvious inheritances from abroad, there were indeed important distinctions. Says NYU Professor James W. Tuttleton, the greatest was the American "claim of liberty as the prior condition of all politics, religion and social organization. This claim is no less at the heart of American artistic endeavor, particularly in the novel."



Best-selling author Larry Woivode gave a reading from *The Neumiller Stories*.

Today, however, the "critics' choices" often dismiss such distinctions and consign society as well as literary tradition to the rubbish heap of outmoded consciousness and convention. Here are excerpts from Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on February 10-14, 1991, which take exception to that trend

## "The Tension Between Emerson and Hawthorne"

James W. Tuttleton, New York University  
Author, *The Novel of Manners in America*

To speak of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne together is to recollect one of the most lively and creative periods in American literary history. But it would be hard to imagine two neighbors so close who have so different a view of human nature, history and tradition, and of the workings of good and evil in human experience. Hawthorne was frankly disturbed at the discrepancy, as he saw it, between the Emersonian theory of human perfectability and the reality of human nature.



Hillsdale professor John Reist concluded the CCA week by recalling the theme of liberty which underlies the American literary tradition.

...The self vs. society, feeling vs. rational thought, freedom vs. responsibility, the passions of the individual vs. religious and social values, the role and status of men and women: much of the literary expression of the "American renaissance" is a manifestation of cultural struggle where contending values are dramatically debated and tested, an arena where principles are implicitly analyzed and their consequences are figuratively represented. Freedom is assumed as a given, but Emerson and Hawthorne diverge sharply on the question of how we make responsible use of that freedom.

## "Liberty and the Southern Tradition"

George Garrett, University of Virginia  
Author, *Entered from the Sun*

The Southern writer writes about individuals, not groups. Part of the charm, the enchantment, of Southern literature from the earliest days until now has been its characters, that is, its literary celebration of odd and interesting individual characters. There is next to no place, then, for Marxist or Freudian determinism. On a lighter note, there is also a whole philosophy and way of life encapsulated in one remark by a character named Cherry in a story told by Lee Smith: "When you get to be too old to be cute, honey, you got to be eccentric."

In spite of all its clichés and conventions, contemporary Southern literature has more form and variety of content than any national literature allows, or indeed, than any other nation (Russia may prove to be the exception now that the Soviet Union has fallen into ruin and fragments).

...Of course, all this discussion of Southerners' love of diversity, of liberty, of individuality tempered by the code of manners and

the dictates of reason—all this has avoided the question looming like a large threatening cloud on the horizon—What about slavery?

Post-Civil War Southern writers lived in a time of defeat, of guilt, and of fundamental contradiction. The South was the home of liberty on this continent. It was Southerners who held out for the Bill of Rights. And yet it was also Southerners who fought to the death, with truly extraordinary sacrifice and bravery, to defend their "right" to deprive others of their liberty.



University of Virginia professor and novelist George Garrett discussed historic conceptions of liberty in Southern literature before and after the Civil War.

No one in his or her right mind today would defend slavery. No one would deny that guilt was deserved, but rather than wallowing in it more than a century later and making blacks permanent victims and whites permanent oppressors, we should be devoting our energy to understanding what, contradictions aside, is the best legacy of Southern literature, and that is liberty. t

## "T.S. Eliot and That Service Which Is Perfect Freedom"

Russell Kirk, Author, *Eliot and His Age*

Literary decadence commonly is bound up with a general intellectual and moral disorder in a society—resulting, presently, in violent social disorder. The decay of literature appears often as a result from a rejection of the ancient human endeavor to apprehend a transcendent order in the universe and to live in harmony with that order. For when the myths and the dogmata are discarded, the religious imagination withers. So it had come to pass with 20th century Protestantism, Eliot believed.

Religious postulates about the human condition having been abandoned by men of letters, the moral imagination starves. And presently the moral imagination gives way, among many people, to the idyllic imagination; and after they have grown disillusioned with Arcadia, they turn to the diabolic imagination, which afflicts both the best-educated and worst-schooled classes in Western society today.



*Best-selling author Russell Kirk, whose 30 books have collectively sold over a million copies, is one of Hillsdale's most popular CCA lecturers and is a current Hillsdale parent.*

...Eliot suffered no such affliction. He was a free man because he acknowledged a Master; a responsible man because he lived by a tradition; a great man of letters because he knew that literature has an ethical end. Ai

## ***"What's Wrong With the Literary World: Egocentrism in the Name of Ideas"***

Daphne Merkin, Former Associate Publisher  
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Author,  
*Enchantment*

As a writer and an editor, I've come to the conclusion that what is wrong with the literary world is the disappearance of the good old-fashioned notion of character, which is now deemed quaint and retrograde. Today, when character comes up at all, we're told that it is inseparable from culture, which in turn is inseparable from the unexamined—or at the least insufficiently examined—precepts within the culture itself. These are precepts which presumably endorse the supremacy of one system of values—i.e., the white male capitalist system of values—over another presumably less suspect system.

The scrupulously relativistic, anti-exclusionist, nonjudgmental approach has led to a state of affairs both in the world of letters and in society that espouses equality for some and victimhood for all. In an article on the recent absurdities of the Modern Language Association called, "Deciphering Victorian Underwear and Other Seminars," the *New York Times* magazine noted that it has become a serious insult to even use the word judgmental. This climate has, in turn, led to a point where individual destiny and choice—in novels and in life—fall away and in its stead we come upon a clanking grid of causes, like a steel casing around living flesh, which does away with

the quixotic and unexpected that is so much a part of the human scheme and offers in its place the tightest of causalities: "Due to such and such a class, gender, race and sexual predilection, one will only be comprehensible in such and such away."



*Daphne Merkin, novelist and former associate publisher of Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, noted that today's literature reflects too much self-absorption and too little character*

Thus Jane Austen, for instance, could no longer be comfortably approached as a spinster who lived with a moderate amount of pleasure amongst her family and wrote of the world in which she lived with witty, even subversive understanding, but instead must be viewed as a tragic instance of feminine compliance, who wrote novels with a secret subtext of insurrectionary intentions. t

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