

TELEVISION ETHICS: HOW DOES IT WORK

On the Manipulation in TV Shows: An Ethical Attitude.

Short Approach for Romania Case

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Abstract: Television ethics makes a great subject for opening the discussion about what's worth being watched by us on TV screen. I think that the real democracy on TV screen depends directly on the democracy of ideas that concerns a country. In the case of Romania, for example, this topic is largely expanded on TV reality shows, news programs or TV shows with a doubtful method of deontological view in a journalistic sense. In this article, I'm trying to defend the moral statement of TV programs. It seems to be the greatest challenge nowadays, especially for the Romanian TV watchers, where the rate of TV watching is higher than the rate of read books in a year.

Keywords: television ethics, manipulation, morality and TV manipulation, Romania's television

INTRODUCTION

The problem with TV shows in Romania, in most of the cases, is that it is promoted a kind of TV reality which doesn't seem to be moral but it also seems to attracting very loyal audiences.

Programs like reality shows with the involvement of the public, with the involvement of simple audiences, seem to create a new kind of TV pleasure: one defined by simple life stories, simple people that can do better after they appear on TV. And it creates dependence; it creates a style of wishing 'to look great on TV'.

This idea touches a very sensible point in nowadays; namely, that reality shows create the power of engagement for the viewers. The price for this is the appearance of more and more TV stations with a very low profile of what means ethical approach. Also, what we can easily observe is that TV makers are very much helped by the marketing people, and such a situation creates a disloyal relationship

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between the viewer and the television. Manipulation intervenes here. A TV show intensively promoted and a great image benefit within the public space will always take a great part of the audience. And this is not a singular case, just for Romania.

For the instant, in Romania there are twenty-eight TV stations, mostly with a general view programs, and some of them focused on the news programs.

Analyzing Romania's TV general image, the question is that if any moral engagement by watching television does function. Is at work any space for diversity in types of moral reflection? The problem is raised considering that in the history of television there are many discussions relating on how a society reflects its morality on/through the TV screen.

According to Tony Krijnen „even though there are ample voices arguing for the importance of television for building a moral civil society, television is often still assumed to have a negative influence on its audience's morality”.¹

How imagination is engaged by a TV screen and its characters? It's simple when we choose to discuss in a perspective of philosophy: the more viewers are watching TV, the more their imagination works with TV authority. While watching TV, we are in a process of assimilation that includes the association (image with sound and ideas) and interpretation (the narrative way with sound and image is definitely the best way to manipulate).

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discussing the media's level of morality we get a debate about what is worth watching on TV and what is not. More than that, the idea is that we blame the TV productions without discussing about the doers of the programs, about their education and professionalism. In many cases of the TV Romania's stations, we can see a low level of moral engagement. This means that the programs are indecent in the very basic sense of the word. There is an academic debate about this in the public space, but it is almost insignificant in the academic one; which should concern a specific number of media persons, and not merely. It

¹ Tony Krijnen (2011). “Engaging the moral imagination by watching television: Different modes of moral reflection”. *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 2.

is impossible, for TV shows, to remain just on one direction, because the audience means money and without it the activity stops.

Whose responsibility is it to assume the television's negative influence? Who is, for example, the responsible for the sexual explicit content programs too often in a vulgar manner and, by consequence, for the moral health of young viewers? Here is just a part of what means the human factory in the TV industry and we are not saying that the TV itself has a negative influence. But despite the negative effects, the television has the power to engage its viewers in a very challenging travel: in a world of unlimited possibilities, in a world where all is nearer than we can imagine. This power of 'what is watched' can defend the educational role of television for many of us.

Another component of what TV manipulation means is strongly related with melodramatic imagination. This functions like a process of bringing in our quotidian life the most powerful drama of moral forces. As we can imagine, all the reality TV shows involve stories of simple people but with a melodramatic point, largely narrated on the screen. It creates a moral issue that can be related to our everyday life. But it contains a special offer: the TV dependency with all the sincerity of the viewer's eye. For example, young girls can very easily adopt a vicious style of what does mean to be 'a TV star' and it can destroy their own evolution in society, being influenced by ridiculous uneducated but so much mediatized characters, usually the TV assistant girls becoming public faces of large audience which exceeds those of real cultural characters.

ENTERTAINMENT AND THE ETHICAL VIEW

In general, *entertainment* means an agreeable activity for the mind. But what does it mean in our days? Among so many kinds of being entertained, there is one very cheap and special for the human eye and mind: television. Television is a medium of diversion for us, that brings to our perception more than entertainment; it brings a way of viewing things. The verb to entertain means an activity that pleasantly holds one's attention.

The origin of the term entertain is to be found approximately in 1425 – 1475, in Middle English, as *entertenen*: to hold mutually; it is the equivalent of the Latin *inter* (among, together) and *tenēre* (to hold). The etymology helps us to understand better the way in which the term evolved in its own trajectory, and especially herein in its TV relationship.

Television exists thanks this 'to hold'; much more, through TV space, everything is transformed in this verb, from commercials to particular shows. All TV actions must keep the watchers attentive, as a promise for a continuous entertainment, easily accepted, easily watched and that does not claim at all a rigorous discernment. The most important element here is the emotion, which prevails in most of the discussions on TV entertainment, the one thought and produced with one final goal: money and audience.

When we get the term of *ethics* closed to that of *entertainment*, the discourse may appear rather in a idealistic note, because never the entertainment is to be interested about an ethics of its own representation. Entertainment exists precisely to ease the atmosphere around those surrounded by a too rigorously or too demanding ethics.

Discussions on an *entertainment ethics* exist, and those who have already approached the issue, thinking on a broader scale, talk about the ethics of entertainment as part of an ethics of society². The authors interested by this topic explain the association in useful perspectives for the viewers and for the creators of entertainment. The discussion includes ideas about the creation of celebrity, the manipulation of entertainment on children, the blend between news and entertainment, the diversion between copyrights and intellectual property rights in entertainment; but mostly, on the role of human dignity in media representation.

Mass media, generally, deals with moral and ethical aspects of broadcasting. Television must be a first medium to consider the ethical caring.

The question of ethics concerns the media consumption more than we can imagine: „As Bernauer has put it in a discussion of Foucault's ethics, in the search of moral code is [that] 'like Oedipus we become victims of our own self-knowledge', articulating our 'shelves through the language and categories of bio-political knowledge'³. From this idea of bio-political knowledge we can determine a kinship between human interest for the own quality time and human interest for each of activities that bring a great pleasure, instead of an amenability of

² See Howard Good and Sandra L. Borden (eds.) (2010). *Ethics and Entertainment: Essays on Media Culture and Media Morality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

³ Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds.) (1995). *Global Modernities*. SAGE Publications Ltd., p.238.

actions meant to entertain.

There is a large ethical disconnect in social discourse between two areas of television influence that are not absolutely and fundamentally as dissimilar as they often been identified: television and entertainment. Socially, these two elements of nowadays media are constructed by the correspondence of what the term and act of 'loisir' mean for people.

The TV interpretation in this context can be sectioned in multiple discourses of entertainment, if we admit that entertainment is a concept for the the theory of television and it can legitimate an appropriate treatment for our focus on a subject.

Information and entertainment can be a couple of perfect era of television and image of our world: we produce images, television and information. We are the producers and no less we are the consumers.

If there is a space for talking about ethical prudence, then we can imagine the world without broadcasted terrorism, violence and all over the screens promoted death. The social criticism that concerns television can be more disposed to call the world, the global television, to a more human media, because television is in front of media instruments and can manipulate in a good spot. If we can rethink the idea of entertainment we can distinguish the profile of a new formula of the meaning of life: to overcoming transience and time through activities that produce joy and make us forget our daily life or make it fall in a different category of quality time.

Describing a type of *ethics in entertainment*, we can explain how TV determines a range of values like: truth, dignity, non-violence, freedom of choice, honesty, etc.

Often, the ethics of entertainment includes issues caring about violence and sex, products placement and stereotypes. In such a context, the query of privacy is essential, because being single in the front of TV entertainment means that our privacy is strongly inundated by an apparently use, but it is in contradiction with the freedom of spirit. And this can be checked on a baby mind, when his mind is in contact with television, especially with entertainment and advertising videos. The activity of broadcasting shares with people a sort of eye deftness associated with an electric eye, where the entire process is artificial, and that can describe the constant urgency of an ethical perspective in entertainment.

In the book *More than a Movie: Ethics in Entertainment*, a new type

of discussion is inaugurated as concerns the *ethics in television*.⁴ It begins by questioning if media persuades society, if effects of media involve a contract of expectation, of confidence and if reality is remanded by television image.

Undoubtedly, the role of entertainment is massive in our lives because it transforms nearly all of the meaning of our daily life and of our life in general. Entertainment interchanges with all that we understand by transforming reality; it is a process of consciousness that creates our world: „Those who propagate 'The Myth of the On/Off switch' ignore the plain fact that popular entertainment contributes to the cultural climate in which we all live. Ideas have power, words and images have consequences.”⁵ And this is applicable in various considerations about how television makes us happy or about how it manipulates us during an entertainment production or a reality show. Thus the new age of television can be called „a new era of frolic entertainment”.

In conclusion, regarding the inquiry on how television can make us a sort of machinery, I support an effective television, that cares about an ethical view with due respect for us as *humans* – in our deep core, as moral beings.

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⁴ See F. Miguel Valenti (2000). Edited by Les Brown and Laurie Trotta. *More than a Movie: Ethics in Entertainment*. Westview Press.

⁵ Mary Ann Watson (2013). “Ethics in Entertainment Television”. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Volume 31, Issue 4, p.146.