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ORIGINAL PAPER

The Message in a New Phase of Television: An Exploration of the Dichotomy of Good and Evil

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Abstract

Drawing on the ideas of several key sociologists, and the central argument that reality and representation have become blurred, this conceptual paper sets out to explore how television, one of the Big Seven leisure pursuits, has a damaging impact upon moral sightedness in a world where modernity has entered a state of flux. To link seemingly abstract ideas – those of 'synopticism', 'reterotopia' and 'adiaphorization' for example – and the language of poet-intellectuals with events and consequences occurring in people's everyday lives, a selection of popular reality television shows and TV celebrities are considered. In its second part, the paper goes on to embrace intimations of hope. This is the hope that television can be used in experimental ways to stimulate moral consciousness. To further unpack this suggestion, the paper considers how television networks such as Channel 4, and shows such as *Squid Games* and *Black Mirror*, can excite moral impulses for the 'Other'. In its conclusions, the paper explores whether the presiding message of television can be different to encourage viewers to question what is right and wrong.

Keywords Synopticism · Reterotopia · Misinformation · Adiaphorization · Moral responsibility

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1 Introduction

Every so often a prophetic writer comes along, their special ability that they manage to predict with some degree of accuracy the course of future events. From Karl Marx (the perennial prophet) to Max Weber (the prophet of modernity), these are intellectuals who have envisaged things the rest of us could not. Marshall McLuhan is such a scholar and it is in his celebrated book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he explores how humankind has reached the end of the 'magical' era foregrounding verbalisation, hearing and touch. What McLuhan (1962) points out, in a nutshell, is that the age of the printing press not only helped science and technology progress, but ultimately changed the way human beings communicate with one another. Gradually, it helped to shift attention away from linguistic methods of communication to visual techniques associated with a new electronic age.

The problem with the dawn of a new age of communication is that its new technologies cannot help but influence how all human beings perceive, understand and act in the world around them (McLuhan, 1962). In terms of the influence electronic media has had, especially *television* since it is one of the most successful technologies ever created by humankind (Meyers, 2019; Lekakos et al., 2007), it has rearranged the sensorium of the world in such a way that people have become so dependent upon visual stimuli it is to the detriment of other ways of perceiving, understanding and acting. Following this argument, what McLuhan argues is that mediums such as television can encourage human beings to favour a certain mindset and, therefore, shape and control 'the scale and form of human association and action' (1962: 2).

Building on McLuhan's ideas is the important work of Zygmunt Bauman which directs attention to the consequences of the commodification, marketisation and mediatisation of everything in the world. What Bauman (2016) argues is that the intensification of media influence has created a visually dominated world where the gap between what we view as reality and representation has become unrecognisable. By this Bauman means it is difficult in present modernity to see the world as anything other than a photo opportunity or a public stage. Consequently, everything seems to present itself through the eye as a succession of recorded images, and every event or action as one that *must* attract attention. What this signals, according to Bauman (2016), is that twenty-first century individuals have become consumers who are so interested in televised material they are less inclined to think about the moral responsibility and sensitivity of human actions or notice the absence of continuity and logic in behaviours. As Bauman's puts it, 'the world seen is the world "as seen on TV"', and in the world of television all that matters is the viewing and enjoyment (2016: 293).

Similar sentiments about television are also found in the work of Neil Postman. What Postman (1985) argues, in a nutshell, is that visual media has transformed a world that was previously typographical and deeply literate into one where people are drugged with meaningless entertainment. Following McLuhan's (1964) adage that 'the medium is the message', and the dystopian vision evoked in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, he explains that people have come to love technologies that not only oppress them but undo their capacity to think.

Another important scholar who has successfully developed McLuhan's original thesis is Jean Baudrillard. In a similar vein to Bauman and Postman, albeit it with a pronounced sense of hopelessness in mind, Baudrillard (1970/1998) argues that moving images viewed on television screens belong to the order of hyperreality which means they are not separate from the 'real' world. This is problematic because any truth that once lay behind televised images, whatever that truth was, is no longer there. Nobody realises reality is an illusion either since everything about the world, on the surface at least, seems better and more real than any other type of existence. This is the central idea that informs Baudrillard's vision of the world, and it is the reason he is critical of reality television and televised news. In Baudrillard's (1970/1998) opinion, both reality TV and the news have become little more than catalogues of banal infotainment and daily scandals, and what they have normalised he suggests is the death of privacy, consumption of the ordinary, and above all the catastrophic weakening of moral responsibility and sensitivity.

While television has mutated and lost its public service role, what is clear is that it continues to be one of the primary mediums through which people seek leisure in the twenty-first century (Broe, 2019; Drake & Haynes, 2011). As Johnson (2019) explains, each of the infrastructures, devices and services that deliver their own distinctive frames for viewing have broadened the possibilities of television as a source of entertainment. The biggest change, therefore, is actually in how television (as leisure) has managed to flourish under the auspices of economic neoliberalism by becoming increasingly integrated into the capitalist spectacle (Meyers, 2019). As it is such a malleable medium, television can no longer be talked about as a single entity (i.e. a TV set)[1]. As Bauman (2016) puts it, new technologies delivering television can be carried in pockets and connected with almost anywhere, but most importantly they allow people to watch – and even create – television by their own time, without schedules, and according to their own egocentric interests.

Any liberations brought by television notwithstanding, the broader concern is that it has eroded people's ability to think in terms of mutual interests and fates. That is to say, television plays a key role in contributing to the growing problem of privatisation and alienation in the twenty-first century which, with its long tentacles, reaches far and wide. In such a life, common causes seldom condense or cumulate because people are divided more than they are united. As Bauman (1994) explains, privatisation and alienation might seem advantageous because they free people from constraint, but they inevitably breed indifference, especially to suffering, discontent and grievance, and they promote the idea that different people have different moral entitlements.

It is easy to underestimate the true influence and effect of television in the new electronic age, not least because there is some belief it is a dying medium (Butler,

[1] To be clear on our definition of television, we acknowledge it has reinvented itself in numerous ways in the past few decades. As Spigel (2004) points out, internet convergence, changes in policies and ownership rules, the advent of high-definition television, changes in screen design and new forms of media competition have each contributed to the arrival of a new phase of television. This paper is not the place to define what the new phase of television should be called so we continue to use the term 'television', and occasionally 'screen', to refer to the act of viewing as leisure rather than a physical household entity such as a fridge or a microwave.

2018). Yet, what the discussion so far indicates is that it continues to be a highly successful instrument of power and control in the twenty first century. Using this idea as the starting point, and taking into account the changes it has undergone, the next section of the paper sets out to unpack television's special effect as a principal weapon of intellectual disablement but also how it appears to be triggering a catastrophic decline in moral consciousness. Although this may seem like a nihilistic move to begin with, the paper goes on to consider the idea that moral responsibility and sensitivity can still be achieved. What this paper suggests is that there are subtle intimations television, still in its role as a medium of leisure, can stimulate moral thinking in present modernity.

2 How Television is Shaping the Future: Three Channels of Thought

In sticking with the idea that television programmes are often designed to be episodic, the reader will find the next section of the paper is split into different 'channels' of thought. Our thinking was that this structure is synonymous with the way TV channels can be leisurely 'surfed' or 'flicked' through. Hence, the discussion points that follow might at times appear to be incongruent with one another, but what links them nonetheless is the central theme of the *message of television*. It is with this in mind that we now hand the reader control of the remote.

2.1 Television as a Synoptic Instrument

Thomas Mathiesen is the architect of the widely influential term *synopticon*. The word is effectively an inversion of Jeremy Bentham's concept of the panopticon, a system of complete control guided by the rule of a governor figure and the notion of clear visibility. In a nutshell, Mathiesen's (1997) key argument is that synoptic systems enable the many to observe a specially selected few. Where television comes into the equation, it is said to have become one of the most successful synoptic instruments in present modernity (Lefait, 2013; Bauman, 2000a).

As Lefait (2013) explains, television has played an important role (and still does) in supporting the growth and escalation of synopticism because it brings viewers closer and allows them to interact with impressions of reality. The reader only needs to think of reality shows (I'm a Celebrity, X Factor, Britain's Got Talent etc.) and their high levels of interactivity to comprehend how relevant Mathiesen's concept is in the twenty-first century. On the face of it then, it might appear that television has become a democratic instrument, one that allows audiences to enter the world of the so-called 'high society'. Having been granted the privilege, viewers submit to the illusion they have some control over the course of events being played out on screen (by means of phone voting, online polls, and webcast reviews etc.) (Enns, 2021).

In reality, though, as Baudrillard (1972/1982) reminds us, viewers have very little control or influence since the decisions they can make and the opinions they are given do not extend beyond a narrow selection of predetermined responses. What this means is that audiences are merely duped into thinking they are part of a democratic process which in turn gives them a false impression of democracy (Baudrillard,

1972/1982). Already then there is a great sense of a loss when it comes to thinking about moral sightedness, in the idea that television actually undermines the democratic process since none of the decisions viewers of television are permitted to make are particularly consequential.

More tragic still is that the escalation of synopticism has made it possible for ordinary people to gain visibility. As a synoptic tool television proves it is possible for everyday people to be more than viewers because it can enable them to become one of the 'celebrities' on the big screen (Bauman, in Bauman & Lyon, 2013). According to Nazlı (2020), this is especially true of younger generations since they are continuously bombarded and influenced by the next 'great' television show, celebrity figure, digital application, or trending video. In realising they too can have a slice of the action people find themselves infatuated by the idea of 'tweets', 'thumbs' and 'likes' and the subsequent rise to fame that could result (Bauman, 2017a). It does not matter whether the show is *Naked Attraction*, *Big Brother*, *First Dates*, *Homes Under the Hammer*, or even a self-produced YouTube video either since TV genres have lost all relevance and meaning. All that really matters are the small rewards of frame that can be reaped from every individual appearance. What television reminds people is that it is better to not seek shelter from prying eyes. Instead, as Bauman (in Bauman & Lyon, 2013) argues, television normalises surveillance of the everyday and it teaches people it is normal to fear invisibility. This it turns out is one of the essential conditions of present modernity, and to be part of it lives must be recast as products not only capable of attracting attention but drawing demand from consumers.

The obvious problem with the synoptic way of life, as Bauman (2000a) reminds us, is that it relies on frequent rehearsals of disposability for it to operate with optimal efficiency. In other words, for ordinary people to become visible it is essential that the life cycles of their predecessors are cut short. In fact, the shorter their lifespans the better. As Bauman puts it, 'it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today – not the durability and lasting reliability of the product' (2000a: 14). This sense of disposability makes it clear that human beings are, like everything else in present modernity, first and foremost consumers who are just as consumable as the 'stuff' specifically designed for consumption. The invention of everyday celebrity figures is therefore little more than a production process which includes planned product obsolescence (Bauman, 2000a).

As this channel of thought draws to a close, our argument is that the use of television as a synoptic instrument speaks directly to the insensitivity and immorality of our era. Used as a method of control, the television encourages everyday people to live their lives inside moral vacuums where things such as privacy, empathy and democracy are rendered insignificant. In short, the television is used tactically as a means of sending direct, indirect and subliminal messages to everyday people (Mathiesen, 1997). When used in this way it informs people about what they should do in moments of leisure, not only in what they wear and how they should act but in how they think, feel and exist.

2.2 Television as a System of Cruelty

In 2008 Nick Couldry, a sociologist of media and communication, made the important argument that reality television might better be thought of as a carefully designed 'system of cruelty', one that goads ordinary people into displaying themselves and competing against one another in front of millions of potential viewers. Part of his argument is the suggestion that if the 'secret truth' was spoken about openly it would be deemed unacceptable, irrational in fact, that all the central values (i.e. entertainment, education, information) on which television depends camouflage immense violence and inequity.

With Couldry's warning in mind, our attention turns to why millions of people happily choose to watch reality television in their leisure time. Some viewers, as Condry (2017) suggests, might watch it to escape from their own lives or because they feel they can relate to the people on their screens. Rakić (2021), however, views things differently. He argues that because spectacle is such an important aspect of life in the everyday world most viewers watch reality television to observe ordinary people embarrass and humiliate themselves. From this perspective, regardless of the nature of the programme, whether it is *Britain's Got Talent* or *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (before it was axed for exposing the 'secret truth' of reality TV), awkwardness and degradation have become the backbone of many popular shows worldwide. In other words, because it sells reality television can be used to position bodies in cruel and exploitative ways (Rakić, 2021). Apparently, these are bodies deserving of judgement and ridicule since they are symbols of overindulgence and moral decay (Zimdars, 2019).

While producers of reality television frequently claim their shows promote radical inclusiveness and transparency (L'Hoiry, 2019), what they typically ignore is that their programmes cannot be both moral and entertaining. The British dating show *Love Island* is a prime example. As a programme, it is designed to appeal to people's worst instincts. That is to say, the producers have been highly successful in being able to exploit the fact that shame, humiliation and embarrassment can be enjoyed by an audience. For a start, we could think about how it is specifically disordered contestants with overfilled lips and obsessive levels of dieting, surgical enhancement and exercising that are used to entertain viewers. Toxicity, misogynism and controlling behaviour are also used strategically to ensure some participants are bullied and reduced to tears. All the while, contestants are expected to profess their undying love for one another and have deeply intimate conversations about personal problems and relationships doomed to fail. Set to seemingly sympathetic background music, these unfortunate people are scrutinised as their anguish and torment is skilfully juxtaposed against the glamour of luxury and shimmering poolside lights. Such is the success of the cruelty of *Love Island* that even four suicides all linked to the show have done little to stop the return of a tenth season.

In many ways what *Love Island* is reminiscent of is an imagined world in an episode ("Fifteen Million Merits") of the provocative television series *Black Mirror.* In this episode, ordinary people are enslaved by screens and any lapse of attention results in punishment. The goal of everyday people is simply to gain 'merits' by working out their bodies, and the entire time they are awake they are continually watched for the

watchfulness of their watching. Everyone willingly goes along with the process in the hope that they might win the chance of upgrading their digital viewing experience or their real-world lives on a talent show similar to American Idol. There are of course very few winners. What the episode reveals is the satirical absurdity, emptiness and banality of peoples' existence as they struggle to find hope and splendour in lives that are otherwise meaningless (Gibson & Carden, 2020). Really, everyone's lives are wasted lives filled with constant dread, exhaustion and humiliation. In many ways reality television is not too dissimilar from *Black Mirror's* depiction. With their own creative incentives, shows such as *Love Island* urge contestants to parade themselves in a cruel form of soul execution (Gibson & Carden, 2020).

Thinking next about the kind of 'celebrities' needed for shows such as *Love Island*, attention can be turned to an extended or adapted version of Bauman's (1995) idea of the 'flawed consumer'. According to original metaphor a 'flawed consumer' is somebody who, by virtue of their limited means, lives a wasted life since they cannot participate in the world of consumer capitalism. Our understanding of the concept is slightly different, however, since we view contestants of shows such as *Love Island* as flawed precisely because they treat themselves as commodities too effectively and efficiently. What we mean by this is that reality television 'celebrities' cannot help but suffer certain consequences on the back of their success that are perhaps just as acute as the consequences felt by ordinary 'flawed consumers'. The 'flawed consumers' we are referring to are individuals who have been lured into becoming an actor for a perfectly designed system of cruelty. As Couldry (2008) demonstrates, the rules of *Big Brother*, one of the most famous reality television shows to appear on our screens, can be used to further unpack just how this form of theatre works.

First, in the world of *Big Brother* 'celebrities' are governed by an absolute external power whose authority can never be questioned which means they have far less control over their freedom than the rest of us. What they have, as Couldry (2008) points out, is merely the illusion of more freedom. Second, whilst they are engaged in what is really an individual competition, television stars must also engage in compulsory teamwork. This creates a sense of unavoidable artificiality, insecurity and disorientation among contestants as they must be seen to help one another but at all times value themselves over and above everybody else to ensure they emerge victorious (Couldry, 2008). The third rule is that a performative sense of self must inevitably expire (Couldry, 2008). What this means is that an alternative self must eventually be revealed because performativity is hard to keep up in the long-term, even if this runs the risk of damaging a performative identity that has been carefully and painstakingly crafted.

The fourth rule is that celebrities must act convincingly positive. Doubtfulness, shyness, or pessimism, emotions that perhaps reveal what a 'celebrity' is like in a more authentic way, must be cast aside. Failure to do so can result in the advent of critical reflections (by an audience) of the contradictions inherent in their performance (Couldry, 2008). The fifth and final rule concerns individualisation. Ultimately, every celebrity in the *Big Brother* world is being continuously judged against other contestants and since they cannot challenge their unseen audience or the powerful corporation governing their behaviours and actions, they must each survive individually and bear any consequences of their actions alone (Couldry, 2008). What this

suggests is that successful celebrities are people who surrender themselves to a way of life that is unquestionably abhorrent. It is the complete relinquishment of their liberty and their fervent obedience that makes them flawed and just as one-dimensional as the system controlling them.

In addition to the first type of 'flawed consumer' mentioned above, we would like to outline a second victim of reality television. What we have in mind are people who fall into one or more of the following categories: 'the obese', 'the poor', 'the deluded' and 'the disabled'. As a system of cruelty, reality television is particularly effective at exploiting the desperation of people who are perceived as 'Other' in the everyday world. These are people who turn to television as a last resort, hoping it might improve the overall quality of their lives. Certain television shows are therefore more about the 'losers' than they are 'winners', people who volunteer themselves for public degradation, because they serve as the best kind of entertainment.

Thinking about examples of the second kind of 'flawed consumer', our attention turns to one of the most popular shows in Poland *Chłopaki do wzięcia* ("*Guys up for Grabs*") which tells the stories of young working-class men who are in search of love. While the theme of love is central to the programme, what is more important is the fact that almost all the contestants lead jobless lives filled with continuous boredom, alcoholic tendencies, and occasional violence towards women. It is inevitable that some of the contestants end up in prison, that some do not survive, and that some give the impression they have untreated mental health conditions ('Teddy Bear' for example who attempted to rape his own grandmother) (Drożdżak, 2017). As for comparable shows in the UK, attention might turn to *Fat Families* or *Embarrassing Bodies* where vulnerable people are poked and prodded in front of millions of potential viewers. The reward for these individuals, who we are informed are deserving of their suffering and stigmatisation, is the 'free' help they are being offered. The price they pay for receiving help, however, is to have their private lives and most intimate secrets broadcast across the television. Here they can be ridiculed, their sub-humanity feasted upon by the masses.

In thinking about why programmes such as *Chłopaki do wzięcia* and *Embarrassing Bodies* serve as good entertainment, it has been argued by Bauman (2001) that everyday people are psychologically dependent on the misery, wretchedness and hopelessness of social outcasts because they are made to feel less pessimistic about their own lives. In other words, watching flawed consumers allows people to compare themselves against tragic 'Others' and this in turn has an elixir-like effect on self-esteem (Bauman, 2001). For Ames (2020) there is more to it than this though; what many people have is hidden passion for *schadenfreude* – the grubby pleasure that is sought from another person's misfortune. Certainly, there are times when schadenfreude leaves a person feeling morally uncomfortable, but when broadcasters regularly use it as a means of attracting attention it becomes easier to take pleasure in it (Ames, 2020). As one of the most despicable human traits schadenfreude is as a sure sign of moral failure, yet it is a trait that has been ingeniously exploited using the medium of television.

2.3 Television as a Source of Misinformation

In a chapter on post-truth and trust, Jandrić (2018) has pointed out that deception – the wily art of telling lies – is a pervasive and ubiquitous feature of human relationships and interactions in the twenty-first century. As he suggests, most people are willing to tell white lies. This is one of the consequences of moving into a world where universal truths have been replaced by a plurality of "truths" which are context-dependent and subjective. What Jandrić (2018) also points out is that the internet has improved our ability to lie, so greatly in fact it encourages us to do it daily which signals we have entered what is referred to as an era of 'post-truth'. Of course, Jandrić is correct in his observation that the internet has provided us with a new means of lying, but what he overlooks is the uninterrupted success of television in controlling and distributing misinformation. To unpack this idea further, we can think about one performer in particular who has become all-too-familiar on our screens.

Curiously, it was during an interview with Rona Barrett in 1981 that Donald Trump made the bold claim it was television that had ruined the chances of anyone with strong views from becoming president of the United States. In his mind, the media favoured inoffensive individuals rather than people who are, as he put it, 'a little bit unpopular'. Four decades later, however, and it appears the television has been the very medium to bring about the age of Trump. Despite being famous for his obnoxiousness and arrogance, those unpopular traits he acknowledged in his interview with Barrett, Trump has been successful in achieving symbiosis. That is to say, he has managed to become the television.

As Poniewozik (2019) points out, Trump's career has always been a televised career. His life has been one long show, and it has been so successful its impulses are his impulses, its appetites his appetites, and its mentality his mentality. As Poniewozik (2019) puts it, because he was at the same time a compulsive devourer of television and a conspicuous omnipresence his story and that of the medium of television are intricately entwined. What Trump has always managed to do in other words is use the dominant TV genre of the time, whether that be reality television, talk shows, or news programming, to become a star, a brand, a political agitator, and finally a world leader. Kellner (2018) elaborates on this point, drawing attention to how Trump used television from 2004 to 2015 to play out key roles, not only as a businessman, but also tycoon, co-producer, and host on his reality series *The Apprentice*. Before this, between 1985 and 2001, he also made brief but regular appearances in several films and televisions shows. By 2015, then, it was perhaps unsurprising that it was time for him to launch his latest drama, one that began with his opening presidential campaign speech:

> Our country is in serious trouble; we don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have em. When was the last time anybody saw us beating, let's say China in a trade deal? They'd kill us. I beat China all the time. All the time. When did we beat Japan? At anything? They send their cars over by the millions, and whatta we do? When was the last time you saw a Chevrolet in Tokyo? It doesn't exist, folks. They beat us all the time. When do we beat Mexico, at the border? They're laughing at us, at our stupidity… … So, ladies

> and gentlemen. I am officially running for president of the United States, and we are going to make our country great again.

What is clear about Trump is that he understands necessary spectacle of television. He knows it is better for a person to give the impression they are the most successful businessman in New York City instead of truly being the most successful. What this suggests is that he has always understood why and how it is more important to present oneself in the right way in front of a camera (Meyers, 2019). This is all that matters. Without floodlights, stage sound and television, Trump is a nobody. But, with all these things he is a caricature of wealth, confidence and triumph. Already then there is a clear indication of deception at the heart of Trump's success, and this serves as another reminder that moral sightedness is equivocal and chaotic in the twenty-first century because of television.

So far, however, we have only touched upon the surface of Trump for there is more to be said about his infamous ability to lie to public audiences and somehow get away with it despite being relatively open and forthright about being a compulsive liar. He makes no effort to disguise his lies, but equally he never retracts one either, no matter how much it has defied common-sense understanding.

The key to Trump's success is that he lives in the moment and the consequences of his lies never really matter to him. He is, as McAdams (2020) suggests, an 'episodic man' who lives in a world where all the episodes do not add up. After each one, he simply refuses to remember. Trump gave his advisors this very advice just before he was sworn into office, that they should think of each of his days in office as televised episodes where he overcomes and defeats enemies and rivals. The result is that anybody listening to him can never be quite sure whether his stories are fictitious, yet they continue to listen anyway because of the simple fact they could be true. More worryingly still is that audiences become content with Trump's media spectacle orchestrations, and the compliance of the media in reporting them. What the public admire, as McAdams (2020) explains, is his total engagement with the moment and the audacity of it. There is, he suggests, a 'primal' sense of 'authenticity' to Trump since he tells people what they want to hear without shame or concern for future consequences.

To borrow another one of Bauman's concepts, we argue that Trump is a manifestation of a 'retrotopian tendency'. At the heart of his spiel of lies is the obvious hunger of everyday people. What they are hungry for is change. They seek to replace ineffective and inept parliamentary squabbling and misdirection with the spirited and incontrovertible will of a strong figure and their resolve to impose quick fixes, shortcuts and solutions (Bauman, 2017b). Trump has been skilful in fabricating such an image, an image of a superhero or Friedrich Nietzsche's (1883/2006) Übermensch, but also in offering retrotopian solutions by reminding his followers of the greatness of the old world. In other words, Trump uses the television frequently enough to remind his followers that they too could have a better world if only they dare follow him into the past.

What is interesting about Trump, as Kellner (2018) points out, is that he does not have a definite ideology. Rather, he draws support from compliant media groups and from followers who have endured years of economic deprivation, humiliation, and

political alienation with promises of a magical future (Kellner, 2018). The individuals he targets have lost savings and homes. They are people who have watched as their jobs have been moved overseas. They are people in other words, having suffered immense pressures under the vicissitudes of technological revolution, globalisation and capitalism, who simply live uncertain and episodic lives. And preying on this deep-rooted fear, rage and alienation, it was Trump who was bold enough to use the television, together with restorative nostalgia, to 'wow' the masses into believing in the greatness of nationalism, prejudice and whiteness (Bauman, 2017b).

There is a lot more that could be said about television and Trump, but the paper must move on. Our point, to offer an interim summary, has in fact been less about Donald Trump. He is merely a performative character who has made our task of unpacking the message of television a little easier. Far more important is the power of television, and what we have explored here is how it keeps the spectacle of misinformation alive. Quite simply, to guarantee its own survival it must ensure that everything about Trump, from sensationalism to chauvinism, controversy, frustration, and above all nostalgia, is fed to the public in regular supply. This is how a billion-pound enterprise endures.

3 Interval

In thinking about the ideas that have been discussed so far and how they knit together we turn the reader's attention to what Bauman (1995) refers to as *adiaphorization*. According to Bauman, adiaphorization refers to 'the tendency to trim and cut down the category of acts amenable to moral judgement, to obscure or deny the ethical relevance of certain categories of action, and to refute the ethical prerogatives of certain targets of action' (2000b: 92). Summarising it a little more straightforwardly, Jacobsen and Marshman describe it as 'the social production of indifference' (2016: 24).

One of the central arguments in this paper is that television has extended the power, influence and control of bureaucratic systems by making people morally adiaphoric. As we have sought to demonstrate and unpack, viewers of television are being made insensitive to human embarrassment, humiliation, lies and suffering. In many ways, television has normalised each one of these things so that they have for many people become part of the routine of everyday life. Leonidas Donskis (in Bauman & Donskis, 2013) accentuates this point by pointing out that violence towards other human beings generally ceases to provoke disgust or amazement in the twenty-first century because it stays unreal and remains at a distance on the television.

To be clear, what we are suggesting is not that twenty-first century individuals have any less moral responsibility than their predecessors. Rather, we are conscious that an increasing number of everyday people are being rapidly absorbed into the 'pure surface' of the *telecity* which, according to Bauman (1995), conveys the idea of an ultimate aesthetic space where 'Others' can be viewed and kept at a safe distance. In other words, the telecity is advantageous in that it allows people to travel without ever leaving their homes, but it works on the basis that it disembodies and disindividuates 'Others' as they are transformed into a source of aesthetic pleasure. Once another human being is successfully transformed, they lose all moral significance and

are denied respect because they are suddenly inconsequential (Bauman, 1995). All concern for the welfare of the 'Other' is effectively blunted since the opinion-making enterprise of television trains people to live their lives as wanderers who should seek to immerse themselves in a wide variety of pleasurable episodes without any strings attached.

4 Smart Television

Up to now, we have been highly critical of television as a form of leisure and the tone of the paper has been anything but enchanting. This would of course be a hollow and dispiriting way to finish. Above all, it would be short-sighted since there is still more to be said about the message of television in present modernity. Hence, we turn our attention in this part of the paper to instances where television has been used as a means of encouraging people to think with moral responsibility and sensitivity. As we will argue, beneath the pure surface of the telecity – a world where moral responsibility and sensitivity seem to be increasingly absent – there is evidence that television may still stimulate moral consciousness. The reader should be warned, however, that the following examples are intimations of moral sightedness. Our argument is not that television does make people more morally aware, it is that it has the potential to.

To aid our discussion we turn our attention to scholars who have important utopian or dystopian strands running through their work and whose ideas, intentionally or not, appear to surface in various forms of 'smart television'[2]. Crucially, these ideas may encourage viewers to think about what is happening in the world and see more clearly what else could be or could happen. Another way of putting it might be to suggest that the underpinning ideas emerging in 'smart television' serve to remind us of our own moral responsibility for one another.

Beginning with Jean-François Lyotard, in a series of lectures from 1964 titled *'Why Philosophise?'* he encourages people to think about how children can be taken as a model for how all people should live their lives. Following the idea that good philosophers are typically regarded as individuals who have achieved both maturity and mastery, Lyotard (2013) argues that thinking about philosophers in this way is problematic. His point is that true philosophers not only listen out for things that have not yet been articulated but they also continue to say things that are new. In other words, true philosophers in Lyotard's (2013) mind should deal with answers that have not yet been mastered, may not be comprehensive, and are never permanently settled. Hence, Lyotard (2013) points out that thinking philosophically should be more about being child-like for children never presume to be masters and they develop wisdom precisely because they are aware of the limitations of their own knowledge. Arguably, Lyotard's way of thinking can be applied to humanity in general because returning to a visceral, child-like state of mind filled with creativity, candidness and the magic of possibility makes it more likely people will open their eyes to the needs and rights of others and better understand the potentials of shared humanity.

[2] 'Smart television' refers to television that excites moral conscience and sensitivity.

It is perhaps with an idea like Lyotard's in mind that the creators of *Squid Games*, one of the latest television shows to become an international sensation, use children's games with a violent twist as a means of getting us to think about morality and kindness. On the face of it, the series is about humanity's vile impulses and self-interest. Contestants who are crippled by debt volunteer to take part in six classic childhood games in the hope they might become a millionaire. Each contestant has no prior knowledge of the games they will be asked to play, but they quickly learn that they will be expected to complete against one another until only one winner remains. This seems simple enough, but the catch if they lose is that they die.

On the one hand, what *Squid Games* encourages its viewers to think about is the bloodiness and darkness of consumer capitalism and personal morality as even the nativity and innocence of childhood can be turned upside down. On the other hand, despite the fact games such as marbles, red light green light, and tug-of-war are played in twisted and disturbing ways, the unlikely hero of the story, Gi-Hun, begins to reveal there is a more principled side to himself as the series progresses. Ultimately, Gi-Hun appears to be rewarded for making moral choices since it is his child-like kindness that repeatedly saves his life. However, this is not the true point of the show since the hero is merely lucky his moral decisions save his life. The real point of *Squid Games* may be that even in the darkest times, when we think humanity is spoiled by cruelty and self-centredness, simple moral acts do occur. The final message delivered to us through the haunting aesthetic of play is that human beings are not alone, that child-like innocence, kindness and goodness can play out even if a game is designed to divide us. What has been preserved, therefore, as Lyotard (2013) argues it should be, is the essential voice of the child.

Another scholar who has a lot to say about morality is Bauman. One of his influential ideas on the subject matter is his suggestion that formal prescriptions and prohibitions have long been used as a means of creating 'moral' beings. Often powerful threats of pain, fear or punishment are used to keep people on the so-called straight and narrow, but these processes, as he reminds us, make morality formulaic and soulless. The concern, as Bauman (1995) reminds us, is that habit forming and simple rule following provide very unstable foundations for moral action and conscience, so he advocates for a reawakening of moral consciousness. Despite the seemingly bleak forecast for the future of morality, Bauman (1995) maintains the belief that it is still possible to rouse deep-seated, non-prescriptive moral impulses that have simply been rendered dormant.

Returning our attention to television, our argument is that Bauman's desire for a revival of the moral impulse may be shared by select television broadcasters. What we have in mind here specifically is the British network Channel 4. Beginning life as a paradoxical child of Thatcherism, the channel was launched in 1982 with the promise of offering radically different and innovative programming (Brown, 2018). This was the kind of programming, according to Brown (2018), that was not served by existing terrestrial broadcasters such as the BBC and ITV. Hailed as a revolutionary turn, the aim of Channel 4 was to rely heavily on independent producers to provide television to minority audiences focusing on feminist, gay and black issues.

Despite its commitment to experimentation and innovation, Channel 4 never truly became the revolutionary broadcaster it set out to be. As Andrews (2014) argues,

while the channel did shake up television in the UK with a radically different moral drive, it was never successful in going completely rogue. Financial pressures and being able to attract enough viewers were always a problem (Andrews, 2014). For this reason, it was inevitable that Channel 4 had to become much more sensationalist and run popular reality shows such as *Big Brother* and *Embarrassing Bodies* where racial abuse has been broadcast for entertainment and desperate people have been exploited for entertainment.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding concerns around the obvious failings of Channel 4, what we want to suggest is that Channel 4 has not completely failed in terms of its moral sightedness. In many ways, the channel has continued to broadcast important programmes that do aspire to encourage people to rethink their moral responsibility and sensitivity. Crucially, these are programmes that have been rejected by broadcasters such as the BBC and ITV. A good example is the deliberately hard to watch drama *It's a Sin* which follows a group of gay men living through 1981–1991, a period when there was a fast-developing HIV/AIDS crisis in the UK which became known more widely as the 'gay plague'.

By exploring the inherent darkness of the time, what *It's a Sin* encourages its audience to think about is how people are inclined to jostle with reason and unreason in times when they face fear and uncertainty. That is to say, the drama carefully reveals *everything* from the stark reality of a mystery plague that stalks gay 'communities' of men, to the idea that isolation hospitals were more a form of punishment than they ever were rehabilitative, to the stigma, secrecy, shame and guilt homosexual men endured over the course of a decade. The drama serves as a poignant reminder of the effects a disease had on the lives of other human beings and how ignorance and cruelty can take away the core of our humanity. Like Bauman (1995), though, the show does not tell its audience how to be moral. Rather, it attempts to stir something inside its viewers (we might call it our moral consciousness) and this encourages them, at least it is hoped, to reassess what it means to be fundamentally human.

One more scholar whose ideas have, intentionally or not, been employed through television are those of Jean Baudrillard. Using the term 'implosion' to refer to a system that is collapsing from within, what Baudrillard (1994) argues is that deeper thinking about being and acting in the world is prevented. For Baudrillard (1994), forms of technology such as the television are main causes of the implosion meaning they can be blamed for ushering in the destruction of reality. Consequently, in the world Baudrillard (1994) describes there is the risk of everyday life being reduced to a machine life, a life riddled with simulation and simulacra that inevitably swallows moral impulses and causes social entropy.

Exploring the same problem of technology and its impact on moral sightedness is the cult series *Black Mirror*. While the show is different to most other television programmes because it is anthological, a theme running through every episode is the threat technology poses to human beings regardless of power, gender or race. As Gibson and Carden (2020) point out, not only is technology depicted as being the cause of a wide range of social issues it appears to be the reason why moral compasses have become increasing fragile, wavering and uncertain in present modernity. By dramatising circumstances where technological devices challenge and threaten the psychological or physical wellbeing of characters (often both simultaneously), the

series encourages its audience to think about and question the changing foundations of humanity. As Gibson and Carden (2020) argue, it urges people to think existentially about how twenty-first century lives are lived according to the egotistic, sadistic and increasingly mephitic rules of sheer spectacle.

In addition to reverberating Baudrillard's concerns around technology and the implosion, *Black Mirror* goes further by echoing his concerns around specific forms of technology such as television being instruments of a 'cold seduction' (see: Baudrillard, 1990). What the series does more effectively than Baudrillard (1990) is that it immerses viewers in its scenarios about screens using the medium of the screen. This is a cunning way of showing just how easily devices such as televisions can be used as platforms for public humiliation, torture and flagrant cruelty. An episode titled 'The National Anthem' is a prime example for it captures how readily people become fixated with things presented on television, regardless of the depravity or debauchery, and how nobody stops to think while broadcasting takes place. Quite simply then, *Black Mirror* makes the ideas and language of Baudrillard (1990) more understandable and accessible since its point is one and the same: human life becomes the feeding ground of the television and the television the ground upon which human life feeds.

5 Concluding Thoughts and Intimations of Hope

Any suggestion that television is a dying influence is grossly misjudged. In many ways, television may have changed almost beyond recognition, but we argue, just as others before us have, that it has simply become more mobile and versatile. It was with this in mind, along with our concern that television has little by little abandoned its public service role and become better known as a device of and for leisure, that we set out to investigate the message of television in present modernity.

With the help of an analogy, our first conclusion is that watching television today is like gazing into a mirror. That is, its contents can be said to be an accurate reflection of reality. The danger of course is that in being a mirror image the televised event has become indistinguishable from the world of the living. What is dangerous about this, if we are to think as Baudrillard does, is that is it too easy for a cold medium to be used to serve up cold events for masses who have themselves become colder to good conscience. Creators of television, having discovered the simple and uncomplicated entertainment value of what we might call *schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from another's misfortune), understand this, and this is why they are quick to exploit untruths, red-faced failure, humiliation and misfortune. As we argued using Bauman's idea of *adiaphorization*, the sheer power, influence and control of the television frequently encourages viewers to become morally adiaphoric towards 'Others', to the extent that those 'Others' are fully disembodied and inconsequential.

Notwithstanding the nihilism of our first conclusion, towards the end of the paper our focus shifted to the suggestion that the message of television does not have to be inherently immoral. This enabled us to make a second conclusion which is that television in its role as a form of leisure can be a powerful medium for stimulating moral emotions. To support this idea, we considered three television shows that appear to

communicate the thoughts of key scholars who spent much of their lives trying to better understand moral responsibility and sensitivity.

Our central argument, in a nutshell, is that there are intimations in present modernity that the message of television can be different, that it can serve to remind everyday people of the moral responsibility they should hold for one another. Hope for television, then, lies in its ability to stir feelings and affective dispositions so that they become sources of moral action. To borrow one of Bauman's most important messages on morality from his 1998 paper *What Prospects of Morality in Times of Uncertainty*, altering the message of television starts with viewers awakening their conscience and making the silent demand of morality audible. By encouraging people to say, "I have not done enough, I am not settled with the conventions of the 'Other'", responsibility can suddenly be placed in viewer's hands. This, we think, is the potential message of television.

Declarations

Conflict of interest *On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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