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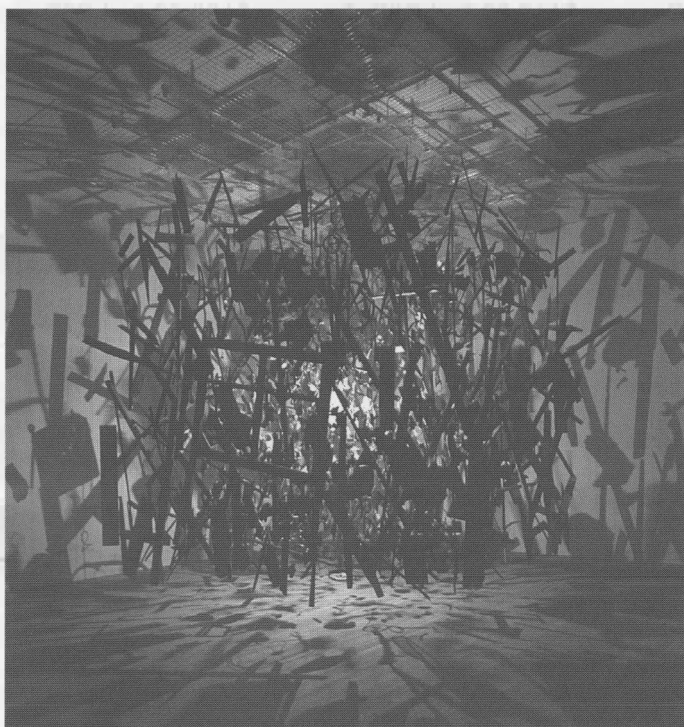
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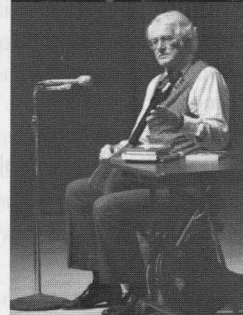
Seamus Heaney

Poet, essayist and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney was born in Northern Ireland in 1939. Since 1972 he has lived in the Irish Republic where he is regarded by many as a worthy successor to W.B. Yeats.



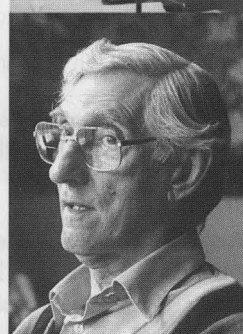
Robert Bly

Robert Bly lives in Minnesota USA. He has been a major force in American poetry for more than four decades, and gained world wide recognition for his book *Iron John*.



Urgyen Sangharakshita

Sangharakshita is the founder of the Western Buddhist Order. Now, age 75, he has handed on all of his responsibilities to his senior disciples and intends to devote himself to finishing his memoirs.



Linda France

Linda France lives in Northumberland overlooking the Tyne valley. Her poetry is published by Bloodaxe Books. The new collection, *The Simultaneous Dress* is due out in 2001.



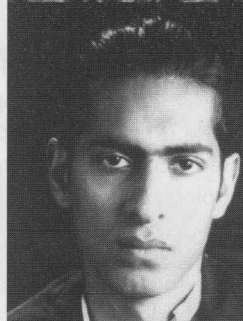
Alison Harper

Alison Harper is a painter and part time lecturer at the Glasgow School of Art. She lives in London, where she attends the London Buddhist Centre. Her work is exhibited regularly in the UK and abroad.



Pratap Rughani

Pratap Rughani is a documentary film-director living in a Buddhist community in East London. He is currently making a series for Channel 4 on India and Britain in the eighteenth century.



'Idiot Box' or 'Window on the world'?

As television faces the biggest shake-up for a generation, Pratap Rughani asks, is watching TV worth it?

It's a familiar moment – often of self-congratulation – when a speaker at an FWBO event celebrates the day they threw out their television. For many it stemmed what had become a bad, even dangerous habit. The image is one of couch potatoes, made passive by a hypnotic and greedy medium – the idiot box commanding attention that it rarely deserves. For many Buddhists watching TV was and is an addictive waste of time: hours of insubstantial programmes are consumed to little effect; communication is stifled rather than enhanced.

But those who condemn television *per se* blame the medium for the messages they dislike. It's as though the printing press were damned at its advent – because there were suddenly too many trashy novels.

Maybe it's us who should be more selective and look to see how higher values can be and to some degree are articulated on film and television. Without it we remove ourselves from the diversity of perhaps the most complete medium through blind condemnation. We miss the opportunities and potential of a defining feature of our times.

For me, it's not whether I watch but what and how I watch that's the key. I should declare my hand. I make documentary films, mostly commissioned for BBC TV or Channel 4. For me TV, radio, newspapers and the web – but especially TV – are windows on the world. At its best TV is a magic portal; a gateway to a broader discussion; an instrument of democracy; a rich source of information, education, entertainment and shared stories. From the Arctic to Albania documentary can foster a connection with the seasons of human existence and help to expand our circle of concern. Through an exploration of common human values in the crucible of a well-made programme we can glimpse and even feel our connectedness more clearly.



Photo: Pratap Rughani

A necessary tension? – a soldier's rifle lying next to a mike boom.

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The challenge is: how to use television well? Making and watching quality TV requires discrimination.

From the other side of the TV screen, there are great opportunities for trying to understand human journeys. TV addresses a wide constituency of opinion, unlike our newspapers which are overwhelmingly partisan, sometimes to an extent that blurs news reporting with editorial opinion.

It's a rich time for me to be thinking about this. I've just finished work on a documentary series for Channel 4 called *New Model Army*. It's the fruit of 18 months of observational filming, following the experiences of new recruits in the British Army. It's a sensitive subject for the Army because the project evolved from the Army's censure for racism and its sub-text examines Army attempts to come to terms with multicultural Britain. It's ideal observational documentary territory. A quintessentially British institution, including its ceremonial heart, the Household Division, attempting to modernise in the delicate and politically explosive area of race. The Army agreed

filming access because they wanted a makeover that would please their political masters. With recruitment down they also hoped for a cheap way to draw more people into signing up.

They tried to control the filming with additional contractual obligations. The result: during filming we were subjected to unprecedented surveillance. A succession of full-time Army minders was at our side throughout the process. During recruit training; in the camps; even when filming in Sierra Leone. Their techniques were something out of a Cold-War spy manual. A favourite was 'eyeballing'. This habit, utterly undermining for an interviewee, involves a minder (sometimes with another senior officer) standing and staring at the interviewee just off-camera during filming. Sometimes the minder briefs them (not so subtly) on what they 'really think' about the Army. The only comparable experience I have had was in China in 1994. There, a Communist Party official (for whom we had to pay) was instructed to monitor all behaviour and interactions of the team, including vetting questions. The Chinese at least were up-front about what they were doing. It's a self-described communist dictatorship, where party propagandists control the media.

Such attempts at manipulation may surprise viewers, so in *New Model Army* we showed the minder when he strayed into shot. The rules of engagement between the Army and the media have been famously fraught for over a century. Listening to the representations of senior Army lawyers and officers following the preview of *New Model Army*, I saw yet more clearly how they try to manipulate the media. But the discipline of being exposed to independent observation for TV broadcast concentrated the minds of senior officers remarkably. Being on TV can shine a light on the gap between words and deeds. It's an essential part of the democratic process and contributes substantially to how society sees and understands itself.

TV has its own talents and tyrannies. The camera individualises and humanises. It's better at getting to know a person in the flesh than pursuing linear lines of argument. Both are possible but it's a rare double-act to pull off. At its best the camera can act like an X-ray machine. At critical moments it can sniff out truth. The mouth may say one thing; the eyes another. Sound, gesture and movement are all revealing; this is the raw material from

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which to explore the texture of a contributor's experience. A documentary film can become an arena in which people of radically different perspectives can hold out their (sometimes conflicting) visions to a wider world. Well-edited, an ordinary person can hold to account a powerful one. In documentary the raw moments of encounter – how someone reacts when faced with a genuine situation – can reveal things that may not be drawn down into a written or spoken report of the event.

If the technology of TV is neutral, TV culture is not. It reflects and feeds into the broader culture and in so doing helps to shape it. If it's dominated by consumerism and modern materialism that's partly because so many choose these things. But watching doesn't necessarily mean agreement. Much depends on how we receive programmes and their messages. There's great scope to produce and watch TV with greater acuity. Watching critically; being aware of good work; seeing how narratives, arguments, visual sequences and shots are constructed all add to our appreciation and understanding and will make time spent with the TV more worthwhile.

Television today is undergoing radical change. The arrival of digital and wide-screen technology further enhances picture and sound quality with an improved image ratio. What's coming on these brighter TV sets is being plotted now in the biggest shake-up of public service and commercial broadcasting in Britain for 25 years. On the horizon is interactive TV, an explosion in web-casting and the convergence of telephony, internet, shopping, broadcasting and narrow-casting. What can we expect? More channels showing the same thing? Well, not necessarily. New technology should make it easier to select the kind of programming we'd like to see. A smart box will notice your viewing patterns and offer suggestions in related programming. Dedicated channels will make it easier to identify more of what you want to pursue, from football to opera or sci-fi movies.

Why not programmes more deeply informed by higher values? Imagine: a channel of programmes that you really wanted to see, exploring values you felt with some depth. If this is ever to become more than the occasional 'find' on TV, commissioning editors need to be brave enough to cultivate such work, backed by viewers insisting on quality.

Increasingly, TV will have to earn its place among the burgeoning activities of the West's leisure age. Will TV only survive as a bad habit? Rather than blaming TV for existing, perhaps we can ask of ourselves: do I switch off when I switch on?

Pratap Rughani is currently making a series for Channel 4 on India and Britain in the eighteenth century.

