

## **THRITY UMRIGAR**

### **Pulling the Plug: Why the Blue Glow of a Television Makes Me Blue**

I grew up in Bombay, India, and was about twelve years old when television first came to that city. Thus, I didn't grow up with the medium that played such an important and formative role in the lives of most of my fellow American writers. I remember my shocked reaction a few years ago, when an American friend, in describing her childhood to me, said, "My mother used television as a babysitter." She may as well have told me that her mother used television to assassinate world leaders. I had grown up in a culture where, thanks to living in an extended family with aunts and uncles, I never once had even a human babysitter, let alone an electronic one.

But for many years after coming to this country, I had an uneasy feeling that I was missing out on something, some essential understanding of the American zeitgeist by not being an avid television watcher. After all, studies indicate that the average American viewer watches between three to f





information into the political arena is slightly more distinguished, as my colleague Davis Schneiderman alludes to, although even that reality is slightly more complicated. Yes, as Schneiderman points out, the telecast of Mayor Daly's cops beating up student protestors in Chicago may have marked an end to Humphrey's presidential aspirations. And television's role in mobilizing against the Vietnam war has been cited so often as to have devolved into cliché. But much has changed in the forty intervening years, most notably the corporate domination of the networks. Take the mass global protests against George Bush's Iraqi adventure. How much of that did one catch on the CBS or NBC Evening News? I would submit that I learned more about the protests from reading the *Times* than from watching the evening news. Yes, television still retains one vital function—to act as a kind of national living room or a chapel, during times of crisis, such as the September 11 attacks or the explosion of the Challenger. But the communal feelings that this mass experience engenders are so visceral and emotional, that I wonder if they result in a serious national purpose. Does repeatedly watching the two towers come down or the space shuttle explode, deaden us to the exquisite horror of the moment? Or worse, does it inflame our nationalistic sensibilities to a point where no serious political discourse is possible? After watching footage of those planes go into the towers on that fateful day, I didn't watch television for several weeks. The most basic reason was that I was, in those days, cableless and to be cableless in America, alas, is to live a kind of fuzzy, snowy life. But I also didn't want to watch those horrific pictures over and over again, didn't want my emotions manipulated by the mass media. In those dark days, I wanted to think, read, argue and go for long walks trying to make sense of the world. I didn't want my love for





even among the hippest, most media-savvy and pop-culture-immersed of my students, I find that the way they respond to a novel by Toni Morrison or a short story by Alice Munroe, say—the light that comes into their eyes, the emotional connections that they make to those characters—is different from and deeper than the way they respond to the latest television show.

I do not believe that it is mandatory to immerse oneself in all existing media. Rather, I think that the glory of being alive in the twenty-first century is that you get to be selective and exercise your judgment as to what you participate in. I honestly don't believe that my pulling the plug on the television set has made me a poorer writer or teacher. I am fairly well-informed; I consider myself an engaged citizen of the world. Like most serious writers, I'd like to believe that my writing is more concerned with the timeless topics—that is, the basic movements of the human heart—that remain true through the decades and even the centuries. Yes, there may be a kind of immediacy and hipness that peppering your work with pop-cultural references may confer upon you, but that's not what I'm trying to do with my writing. Nor is it what I'm trying to teach my students to do with their own work. Instead, I tell them to become experts on human behaviour and psychology—to walk through the world with their eyes wide open, to be deep and compassionate listeners, to take risks in their own lives, to love and to live large. In other words, to have a love affair with the world, to be in love with human quirks and contradictions. Ultimately, I think these are more productive ways to train for a career in writing than to sit alone in your living room before the blue haze of the idiot box.

