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A Television Controversy

Although eclipsed by the more recent explosion of the Internet, television reached a comparatively similar level of ubiquity in American households following its inception. In her essay, "Television: The Plug-In Drug," Marie Winn makes the largely unsubstantiated claim that television has single-handedly and irreversibly destroyed once great American family life. To persuade her readers of this opinion, she employs a number of emotionally grounded rhetorical techniques, namely, fear mongering, appealing to nostalgia, and, to a lesser emotional extent but in a nonetheless manipulative way, dismissing the possibility that factors other than TV could have negatively affected American family life.

A common theme throughout Winn's essay is that television's extensive effects on many aspects of American family life are ultimately culminating in its destruction. In creating this atmosphere of urgency, Winn intends to scare her targeted readers into, at the very least, acknowledging the magnitude of television's sway on family life. Immediately in her essay's title, she calls television a drug. If the comparison is not initially clear (it seems unlikely to entertain the concept of television possessing healing properties), Winn later spells it out: "the television experience is instrumental in preventing its viewers from recognizing its dulling effects, much as a mind-altering drug might do" (446). Similar to the self-destructing behavior often associated with substance abuse and addiction, Winn warns that "through the changes it has made in family life, television emerges as *the* important influence in children's lives today"

(439), and, as a consequence, “family life becomes increasingly more unsatisfying for both parents and children” (446). She details these dissatisfactions as the loss of family uniqueness (440), the reduction of children’s abilities “to relate well to *real* people” (443), the use of “television to avoid confronting [families’] problems, problems that will not go away if they are ignored but will only fester and become less easily resolvable as time goes on” (444), and the diminution of love to “an abstraction that family members know is necessary but find great difficulty giving to each other since the traditional opportunities for expressing it within the family have been reduced or eliminated” (446).

In focusing on these deleterious consequences, Winn can be seen as making an appeal for the reversal of television’s encroachment into child rearing households. Upon closer analysis, however, her arguments are not as strong as suggested by their dooming emotional context, even if they appear well intentioned. Almost all of the pieces of anecdotal evidence Winn includes in her essay come from women in child nurturing positions: “a first-grade teacher” (440), “a writer and mother of two boys aged three and seven” (440), “a young woman who grew up near Chicago” (442), “a teacher” (444), “a mother” (444), and “a family therapist” (444). Women matching these profiles are her targeted audience as they can most readily empathize with the situations described. As the evidence presented within each of these examples describes one or more negative effects of television, Winn uses these women’s experiences to alarm her audience of what she considers television’s purely detrimental effects on their families. Acknowledgement of this issue is essential to Winn’s argument, and implicit in it is the idea that inaction will result in the continued decline of family life.

In order to qualify this purported decline in family life, a pre-television era family bears closer examination; Winn presents a nostalgic, idealized image of this family. Initially, she denies such conjecture:

Without conjuring up fantasies of bygone eras with family games and long, leisurely meals, the question arises: Isn't there a better family life available than this dismal, mechanized arrangement of children watching television for however long is allowed them, evening after evening? (441)

Later, however, Winn gives an example of such fantasies by citing a young woman who gives an account of her “wonderful” extended-family holiday gatherings, before becoming “stunned by how awful [it] was” when television became the primary attraction at these gatherings (443). What, then, made these unafflicted-by-television American families so remarkable? Winn’s analyses on television’s inroads into family rituals (442) as well as its role in “undermining the family” (445) demonstrate how her argument applies to a certain type of American family. It can be deduced that such a family contains a married couple and their children, and it must also possess the means to afford a television, therefore belonging to the middle or upper-middle class: a functional, successful American nuclear family.

Winn maintains the misconception that, before television, such families were without their problems. She goes so far as to compare families who spend time watching television with Neanderthals: “Not since pre-historic times, when cave families hunted, gathered, ate, and slept, with little time remaining to accumulate a culture of any significance, have families been reduced to such a sameness” (443). This idea of a model, wholesome nuclear family that is unscathed by the influence of television contradicts Winn’s argument of families losing their uniqueness. In her envisioned pre-television age, Winn generalizes families as being classifiable

as this best-possible type. Although effective in encouraging her readers to recall only the positive aspects of a time before television, Winn's stereotypical image of a thriving American family is romanticized and only selectively portrayed. It's a sentimental plea that falls apart when considered objectively.

Consistent in the technique of manipulating her readers, Winn is quite dismissive of any points of view contrary to her own, specifically that television alone is responsible for the deterioration of American family life. In an effort to thwart potential criticisms, Winn includes an attempt to absolve television from this condemnation:

Of course television has not been the only factor in the decline of family life in America. The steadily rising divorce rate, the increase in the number of working mothers, the trends towards people moving far away from home, the breakdown of neighborhoods and communities—all these have seriously affected the family.
(445)

She then discusses how the circumstances surrounding a family determine the sources of its degradation (445) and states that “[television]’s dominant role in the family serves to anesthetize parents into accepting their family’s diminished state and prevents them from struggling to regain some of the richness the family once possessed” (446). According to this logic, if television has such a dominant role in a family, then it must influence, or even govern, the family’s circumstances, thus making it the determining factor in the family’s degradation. Additionally, the mention of other detracting factors from family life occurs near the end of Winn’s essay, and it brushed off as an afterthought with no further mention or analysis.

The language surrounding Winn’s derogatory mention of non-television factors as contributors toward family decline creates a condescending tone. Words like “of course” (445),

“obviously” (445), and “certainly” (446) create this tone; a tone that inclines readers to agree with Winn’s perspective. Her implied superiority (though she provides little proof of her qualifications) is an endeavor to strengthen her argument about television’s overwhelming capacity in ruining American family life.

Winn’s essay focuses only on the negative effects of television on what she reminisces as a once flourishing American family life. Her rhetoric is based primarily on emotional appeals and manipulation, which are required to strengthen her otherwise unfounded arguments. Anecdotal evidence is used to validate her opinions as facts. She creates a sense of fear, warning of the drastic consequences of too much television. She illustrates only an idealized image of pre-television family life, and she discounts the influence of other negative factors on American families. All these strategies elevate her one-dimensional representation of television’s effects on family life.

Word Count: 1259

Works Cited

Winn, Marie. “Television: The Plug-In Drug.” *50 Essays: A Portable Anthology*. 3rd ed. Ed.

Samuel Cohen. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011. 438-46. Print.