The Shift from Movies to Television in the Federal Republic (May 8, 1965)

Abstract

West German cultural critics had mixed feelings about the shift from movies to television in the first half of the 1960s. They were ambivalent because they saw this change in leisure habits as indicative of a move toward social isolation in the privacy of one's own home.

Source

Between Movies and Television
Changes in Evening Leisure Habits in the Federal Republic

Two handymen are working in a house. One says: "Did you see the TV movie last night?" The other responds: "I watch TV as rarely as possible. But my father, with him it's like a disease. He turns the thing on when he gets home and stays parked in front of it until the bitter end—every night." Based on the experience of the United States, it wasn't hard to predict that the incredible allure of the TV screen would totally revolutionize the evening leisure habits of German citizens. To be an eyewitness to everything that is happening in the world from the vantage point of your own home is a small miracle—actually, a big one. So millions of people sit in front of their television screens every evening. When exciting soccer games are broadcast in the afternoon, the streets are deserted. Thieves prefer to break into empty buildings after 8 PM because the eyes and ears of Germany's citizens are totally fixated on the tube. At the end of an episode of a murder-mystery series, so many toilets are flushed at once that the water pressure drops rapidly during the span of these few minutes. That's the extent to which, thanks to TV, we're all marching in step: An entire nation goes simultaneously—as if on command— "to where even the emperor walks on foot," as the saying goes. In March 1965, 10.5 million television sets were registered in the Federal Republic; in 1959, the number was only 3.4 million. Ultimately, there will be a television set in almost every household—that's as good as certain. Not at all certain, however, is whether Germany's whole population will continue to worship the flickering idol to the fullest every evening. That would in fact be devastating.

Television, of course, has an ally that makes its omnipotence virtually imperturbable: the penchant for comfort and laziness, which has practically become a dominant feature of consumer behavior by now. TV is the pinnacle of laziness. The world is delivered to your home: all you need to do is collapse into an armchair. All other options for spending evening leisure-time would be less convenient. To go to the movies, for instance, you'd have to get dressed, do the work of driving to the movie theater, look for a parking space, and be at the box office at a certain time. And who knows if the movie in the theater is even any good? Better safe than sorry; avoid any and all unnecessary movement. Television is much better in that respect: it is the laziest form of leisure-time consumption, and in this regard it is absolutely unbeatable. Many citizens confirm that it is excellent preparation for and a preliminary stage of going to bed. People don't do anything anymore other than turn on the tube; instead of entertaining themselves, they are entertained. They aren't subjects but rather objects of what's happening. In this role, they act as passively—as apathetically—as they possibly can. When these ideas were presented here for the first time (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* July 7, 1960), we still believed that we would be filled with horror by the thought of a future time when the Federal Republic would have multiple channels and people would have to decide which one to watch. Today, we face the agony of choice, and it's basically a thorn in the side of the average TV-viewer. If I have to think about what I want to watch—and possibly have to make

that clear to the rest of the family—I'd rather just go to the movies.

The historical course of events plays a role as well. A smart aleck once said that if the railroad had been invented after the automobile, then everyone would be riding the train today. Cinema has had the bad luck of being the neglected older sister of the baby of the family. But the luster of the favored child begins to fade as he gets older. The American experience confirms that interest in TV-viewing declines noticeably five years after the purchase of a television. If we are not mistaken, then the number of "post-fivers" who have turned gray in the TV harness, and are gradually tiring of it, is on the rise. Also, the—usually excessive—interest that children show in television is becoming more differentiated. Later-born children who have had a television at home for as long as they can remember are far less obsessed with TV-viewing than their older siblings, who used to have to resort to spying on the neighbors' TV before their own family "finally" bought one as well.

There are other opportunities for television in an age without domestic help. Grandmothers live too far away or are too busy with their own lives to want to mind the house at their grandchildren's place. Only millionaires can afford servants; even student babysitters are too expensive. Many couples avoid these costs and ensconce themselves at home until their children are grown. In such cases, the television is a comfort: you are in the midst of life and don't miss the theater, movies, concerts, and socializing with friends as much as you would have otherwise. It can't be denied that television, even aside from the babysitter problem, encourages an immersion in family life. More than a hundred years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville had [already] opined that democracy and affluence would lead to a situation in which no one had to rely on anyone else anymore—and that the ties of human affection outside of the family would weaken. Television greatly promotes this intra-family focus. Married couples with little to say to one another hardly sense the emptiness when the TV is on.

Gradually, however, the craving for an exchange of ideas with others, the desire for good old-fashioned sociability returns. Having the world in your own home was extremely enjoyable at first, but in the long run, it is just as unenjoyable to be at home all the time. The Mainz Shrovetide carnival programs might still be watched in large groups of friends, as they have been traditionally, but people certainly don't visit each other to watch TV to the extent that they go to the movies with other couples and then go out for beer or wine afterwards. How about going to the movies again some time? This question is beginning to pop up more often again. It also reveals a certain sadness: after all, a "post-fiver" doesn't enjoy staring at the TV screen the way that people used to enjoy going to the movies. Professor Dolvifat classified the magic of the cinema under the heading "displacement," a term that expresses the viewer's level of participation in the events taking place on screen—something much more achievable in the semi-darkened rows of a cinema's orchestra seating than at home, where you are also never safe from disturbances.

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Source: Jürgen Eick, "Zwischen Kino und Fernsehen. Wandlungen im bundesrepublikanischen Feierabendverhalten," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 8, 1965.

Translation: Allison Brown