Comment:
Soap Opera Culture

'A people who spoke the tongue ... of Shakespeare and Milton', Peter Hitchens says in his recent widely reviewed book, *The Abolition of Britain: The British cultural revolution from Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair* (Quartet, £15), 'could never have submitted to the hamburger and soap opera culture which now has the British working class in its greasy grip'. (Peter Hitchens is a brother of Christopher Hitchens, an even more prolific journalist, notorious in Catholic circles for the attack on Mother Teresa that he published recently.)

One wonders what the groundlings were up to, in the theatres of Shakespeare's day, whatever about the taverns in Milton's: littering the floor with well-gnawed chicken legs, guffawing at the bawdy and gross innuendo, and no doubt indulging then in much the same litany of monosyllabic expletives that are relished by the working class of person today (and not-so-working but often unemployed and unwaged person too), who follows the football on the big screen in the nearest pub, since the price of entry to the stadium itself is prohibitive. And what tongue the vast majority of people spoke, in Shakespeare's time, is another matter: it does not take an expert in historical linguistics to recall the immense variety of all but mutually unintelligible dialects then prevailing. For that matter, even today, despite the dominance of the 'common culture' of the television channels, against which Hitchens inveighs, the idiosyncrasy of spoken English, in urban as well as rural communities, remains remarkable, when outsiders are absent or just keeping quiet.

Peter Hitchens quotes the famous letter that T.S. Eliot wrote to *The Times* just before Christmas 1950, prophesying against the BBC's newly revealed plans to increase the amount and extend the accessibility of television broadcasting in Britain. Having just returned from the United States, where television was already widely established, Eliot felt 'only anxiety and apprehension about the social effects of this pastime'. If only the august and influential readers (and writers) of letters to *The Times* , in those far-off days, had paid attention to Eliot's warning, Hitchens says, we could have been saved from 'the takeover of our brains by television studios'.

Unfortunately, as he goes on to note, by insisting that the Coronation in 1953 should be covered by television, Winston Churchill, then prime minister, put the demonic goggle-box into the homes of hundreds of thousands of people: the privilege of taking part, in their

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own living rooms, in the inauguration of the New Elizabethan age, rapidly became fascination with whatever appeared on the screen. Even more deplorably, as Hitchens goes on to say, a Tory government then went on to destroy the BBC monopoly by licensing commercial television channels, in defiance of the advice by the BBC's high-minded Scottish director, Lord Reith, that 'it was only the brute force of monopoly which allowed the [BBC] to take a conservative moral position'.

That there has been a lamentable 'dumbing-down' of television programmes in Britain may be taken to be a fact by those (like me) who seldom if ever watch anything at all, even newscasts and documentaries, let alone sport, quiz games, the addictive serials, and the rest. It is, however, a richly ironic comment on the history of British culture that readers of *The Times* , half a century ago, might have regarded themselves as having the authority to prevent the spread of television, and that Mr Hitchens believes they might have done so: now owned by Rupert Murdoch, *The Times* is a tiny item, no doubt heavily subsidised, in his world-wide television empire, beaming the same diet of soap opera adultery, murder and mayhem, on a third of the population of the planet, from Britain to China, by means of the machinery rotating in the sky. It is ironic, also, that the defeat of the censor and the publication in a cheap edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* should mark the beginning, in Peter Hitchens's story, of the British 'cultural revolution' (alluding, there, of course, to China): D.H. Lawrence would surely have been just as hostile as T.S. Eliot to television as a 'pastime', and just as apprehensive about its 'social effects'.

Irony is the best defence, widely practised. People who seldom if ever watch the soaps do not realize how little those who do so are 'dumbed down'. As in Shakespeare's day, what happens on the stage is taken at many different levels. The guffawing of dedicated soap watchers, drifting on a summer's day from the open windows of the television lounge, attests the sophisticated irony of the viewers. The communal analysis afterwards, not to mention the shouts of anger or despair throughout a football match being followed on the large screen in a pub, afford rich evidence of humour and critical detachment. People need no protection from self-appointed censors who have no understanding of how irony has always functioned in popular culture. When — thanks to Rupert Murdoch — the peasants in remoter regions of China have the chance to watch the soaps are they going to be dumbed down, or falling about with laughter?

F.K.

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