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## **The Future of TV: The Television Writer**

Review Article: Lupita Aquino-Concio

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# Book Reviews

## THE FUTURE OF TV

**THE TELEVISION WRITER.** By Erik Barnouw. New York: Hill and Wang, April, 1962. vii, 180 pp.

"Literary currents in the novel and the theater are made by writers: in television, writers bob hopelessly adjusting as they go..." This is how Eric Barnouw in his latest book underlines the influence exerted by classical writers in the novel and theater, and, conversely, the impact television as an industry has had on its present-day writers.

Author Barnouw (*Handbook of Radio Writing; Mass Communication: Television and Radio, Film and Press*) deplores today's television programming of crime formula after cowboy formula, and series after series of the same carbon copy. In retrospect, he recalls the period in the 1950's, the first full decade of television, as a prodigious era of production ferment and experiment in live programs, tape or film which challenged the script writer to broaden his scope and refine his techniques. For a medium which has enjoyed so exciting a past, the promise of the 1960's seems to be not only stagnation but even disaster. In sizing up the present crisis Barnouw echoes David Davidson, National Chairman of the Writers Guild of America, who testified at a hearing of the Federal Communications Commission in 1961: "Never in history have so many writers been paid so much for writing so badly."

In unmistakable terms, the author pinpoints the crisis: much of television today is considered in terms of its applicability to a merchandising objective, and the result is an overpowering aura of commercialism and conformity. To restore the television writer to an atmosphere where the play is the thing, alongside the dramatists of other literary media, he inquires deeply into the many conflicting forces at work in the industry, and suggests in outline solutions which

should provoke further thought and study. In this important sense the book differs from others of its kind. Many books on television writing have concentrated on techniques, dialogue, camera usage and practices of the trade. Mr. Barnouw follows a different approach, not only by giving an exposition of techniques and practices, but also by discussing the world of the television writer as the inescapable environment in which he works.

The first part of the book examines in detail the forces which have made the writer a captive in his own environment, a story which has been called the "industrialization of the writer". The present-day television writer, even if he works at home, finds himself covered by collective-bargaining agreements negotiated by the Writers' Guild of America which make him by contract an *employee* of either the advertising agency or the producer, both in behalf of a corporate sponsor. These collective agreements have brought the writer as an employee substantial economic benefits: increased rates of pay, re-broadcast fees (*Perry Mason* series), film rights (*Dragnet*), Broadway play rights (*The Miracle Worker*), book rights (*Patterns: Four Television Plays*). But they have also brought servitude to the writer: control of his production by his employer, submission of scripts to revision by other writers, overconcentration on popular "Western" and crime programs which can sell merchandise to the greatest number of television viewers. And so it is that the diversified and well-balanced television programming in prime hours has gradually vanished, and with its classical drama, documentaries, public affairs programs, experimental formats, opera, symphony, all of which fell by the wayside in favor of such program sequences as *Hongkong*, *Hawaiian Eye*, *Naked City*, *Johnny Midnight*, *Racket Squad*, *Harbor Command*, *Rough Riders*, *Aquanauts*, *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, *Wagon Train*. And so it is that the television writer is forced to write the commercial, and apparently more popular, variations of the same formula, or turn elsewhere for an outlet.

As a solution, Mr. Barnouw advocates the removal of the advertiser from programming decisions. He cites the example of the British system where the corporate sponsor buys time for commercials but does not control programs. He draws a parallel to newspaper and magazine media where the advertiser does not demand a pleasant news story "befitting his product image, with human interest and nothing controversial". And, within the industry itself, he points out that his solution is being adopted in the area of news and public service where the network assumes the responsibility of control and supervision. By authority and requirement of the proper regulatory agency, this "magazine concept" can be made a matter of uniform policy on all networks, Mr. Barnouw argues, and even advertisers

will welcome it since they will not be any longer responsible for every word uttered in the programs. But, by all means, the television writer should speak up and assume the role of leadership in his medium. "New worlds lie open to the coming dramatist," Mr. Barnouw concludes, "but he should also know that he may have to struggle for the right to explore these worlds."

No doubt considerable discussion will arise from Mr. Barnouw's suggestions. There will still be advertisers who will insist on buying time only for programs which draw the largest audiences, and this will mean a continuation of the same variations and formulae. And these questions will always persist: Is "better" television necessarily the more "popular"? Is the public interest served by offering more of the "better" television programs and less of the more "popular" programs during the prime viewing hours? Is a network justified in serving what it judges as the public "good" rather than the public "want"? The television writer, while being guided in his work by the techniques and procedures of the trade (Part Two), and in his business relationships by his industrial environment (Part Three), will do well to seek the answers to these questions.

LUPITA AQUINO-CONCIO

## THEOLOGY OF THE CHURCH

**WHAT IS THE CHURCH?** By André de Bovis, S.J. Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism, 48. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1961. 157 pp.

P. André de Bovis' **WHAT IS THE CHURCH** is not meant to be a complete treatise on the Church. The author tells us that he has "preferred to concentrate attention on one [point] alone, the mystery of the Church as she is in herself" (p. 10).

The Church is the assembly of those who are baptized and inspired by supernatural faith in Jesus Christ. They recognize the authority of Peter, of the Apostles and their successors. And, *at the same time*, the Church is the instrument by means of which God in his mercy provides for the salvation of the whole human race. The mystery is the union of these two points of view. On the one hand, it is a human society, and on the other, it prolongs the existence of Christ. (p. 13)

What P. de Bovis gives us is, then, a properly *theological* study of some aspects of the Church as the primordial sacrament of the Incarnate Word.

The work treats successively of the Church as the object of divine predestination and prophecy before her visible coming-to-being in the