Consuming morality: television and postmodern ethics

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Introduction

Where might we get our ethics from? Ethical principles often feel so much a part of us that we might easily believe that we inherit them genetically – I cannot think of myself as ever being physically capable of killing or raping another person. But we don’t have to look far to see others who are perfectly capable of such immoral acts, although often under exceptional circumstances – such as the urgency, fear and chaos of war – that seem to offer some excuse or even sanction. Then there are acts of ethical transgression that don’t seem so far from my own life – the telling of a small lie, gossiping about someone else’s behaviour, using a little cunning to gain advantage in a queue. In so far as I can act both morally and immorally, how do I know what is right and wrong? One important answer is that my parents taught me. They will have taught me by the example of their own behaviour, by direct instruction about what I am permitted or not permitted to do and by correction of my inappropriate behaviour through admonition and punishment. This process of moral education is continued while I am a child in other institutional contexts – most importantly school – where figures of authority provide guidance, instruction, judgement and punishment of my actions. However, our moral education continues throughout life as we review our judgements about our own and others’ behaviour. Just as the law changes over time, so does the moral order of a society; what was once both an illegal and immoral act, such as sex between consenting adults of the same sex, has become both legal and morally acceptable to most people within the culture in which I live during my life course.

The acquisition of morality we would not normally think of as a process of consumption since it is not characterised by choice of any sort – even whether to consume or not – and is provided by society’s institutions, at least partly for its purposes as well as for the recipient. Education of all sorts may benefit the individual and be rightly thought of as a privilege but it also benefits the society as a whole by producing fit and useful members of society. My education in literacy and numeracy help make me into a useful worker and is part of what Althusser called the ‘reproduction of labour power’ (1979). My moral education is similarly important in making me a fit member of society who accepts its rules and customs that constrain action and guide interaction. From injunctions not to murder to respecting the equality of other’s rights to a place in a queue, my moral education is of great importance to my capacity to function as a member of society. The prohibitions of certain types of behaviour, such as murder, are complex in that my learning of the rule is not simply about my future behaviour but also about judgement of other’s future behaviour. Not only must I feel that it is inconceivable that I would act violently enough towards another person to kill
them, I must feel anger and outrage at the idea that anyone else would either. This is, of
course, the basis of Durkheim’s (1933) notion of a ‘conscience collective’, a shared
sentiment of deep conviction that would lead to outrage at any transgression and seek
retaliation. For Durkheim, where this conviction was held with sufficient strength by people in
the same community it took on a religious character and provided the mode of coherence of
society that he called ‘mechanical solidarity’.

You will remember that even with the more complex social form of ‘organic solidarity’
Durkheim did not suggest that the conscience collective disappeared, merely that it was
supplemented by other social ties related to the division of labour. In contemporary society –
which, with respect to Durkheim’s writing at least, we may characterise as ‘postmodern’ –
the means of solidarity and the expression of public life are somewhat different. Moral
education from parents and schools has not disappeared, but it now competes with, and is
influenced by, a more complex public sphere that includes the media in various forms
(Thompson 1990). There are many differences between the moral order of ‘modern society’
that Durkheim described at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the moral order of
contemporary ‘postmodern’ society, but it is the transformation of the means of
communication that is perhaps most striking and pervasive. The balance of importance
between what Althusser called the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ has undoubtedly altered;
the religious, and trade union ISAs have receded while the communication and cultural ISAs
have become emphasised, including their effects on the educational, family and political
ISAs. The legal ISA continues to stand apart, resisting influence from outside, but even it has
undergone changes that continue in the direction indicated by Durkheim in the shift from
repressive to restitutive law. The restitutive function of the legal apparatus continues to grow
but alongside it has grown an increasingly important system of laws of ‘rights’ that encode a
sphere of the moral law, that of the variability and autonomy of individual rights, that only
emerged late in modernity.

If the legal ISA has changed, it is of relatively slight significance compared to the increase in
importance of the cultural and communication ISAs and it is through the increasing
engagement of members of society with these apparatuses that morality has become a
matter of consumption. The family and the education system are still sources of moral
guidance but it is through contemporary consumption of a range of media that many of our
ideas of the morality of actions within our culture are guided. There is a rather strained sense
in which we ‘consume’ the family and the education system; we take in ideas, information
and examples of action that we then use in shaping our lives. But the media are ‘consumed’
in a much more straightforward sense in that the media are presented in the form of
commodities – a newspaper, a book or a television programme – from which we can choose when and whether to consume. Typically there is a direct cost for the consumption of these media and it is reasonable to talk of a market in which the producers of media contents compete for consumers. The commodities of media content have been produced within an industrialised setting and at some remove from the point of consumption although, since the critique of contemporary culture within the Frankfurt School, we can recognise that there is a symbiosis between the contents of culture and the economic and political form of the society. The writings of the Frankfurt School, especially of Theodor Adorno (1991), alerted us to the ways in which industrially produced mass media incorporated ideology which could often be at odds with the moral order of the society; not only did modernity bring us the mass deception of the culture industry but also elements of anti-semitism characteristic of totalitarianism (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979). Adorno (1994) for example, explores how a radio programme can repackage religion in a way that might alter how we think of and act towards others around us to have an impact on the moral order of our society, but it is Zygmunt Bauman who brings this critique of the distortion of the moral order up to date.

**The moral order of low modernity**

Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the trajectory of enlightenment in modernity is towards an industrial system that denies the humanity of the individual and undermines critical thought, Bauman understands the systemisation of modernity in very direct and practical ways. The industrialisation of death that produced the Nazi holocaust was the lowest point of modernity in which not only killing was systematised but morality was systematised into an ethical code of duty. He uses the word ‘adiaphorization’ to describe the abdication of personal moral responsibility of those who worked in the extermination camps:

... **adiaphorization**, the stripping of human relationships of their moral significance, exempting them for moral evaluation, rendering them ‘morally irrelevant’. Adiaphorization is set in motion whenever the relationship involves less than the total person …

(Bauman 1995: 133-4)

His argument is that it was the culture of modernity in which the rational, systematic and codified organisation of society led to individuals accepting that their actions – however inhuman – were nonetheless somehow contributing to the total advancement of humanity.

Bauman not only modified the Frankfurt School critique of modernity by focussing on the processes of industrialised killing as a practice rather than as product of ideas, he also
modified their call for the re-engagement of critical, of two-dimensional thought. For the Frankfurt School, critical theory is based on a humanist aesthetics that celebrates the judgement of the individual artist who takes responsibility for his or her own comments on the flow of history. What the rational, systematic approach of modernity demonstrated for Adorno was the capacity of people to be organised into a mass who could not recognise the value of their own lives, but for Bauman what modernity threatened was the capacity of individuals to recognise the value of the life of the Other. The shift is from politics to morality, from a principal concern with the cultural consequences of a particular mode of production, to celebrating the potential to generate a new awareness to morality of a cultural backlash against the systematising tendency of modernity:

...we move towards the understanding that it must be the moral capacity of human beings that makes them so conspicuously capable to form societies and against all odds to secure their – happy or less happy – survival.

(Bauman 1993: 32)

The problem with modernity for Bauman is the tendency to codify forms of life, to generate a systematic approach that tries to harness human ingenuity on behalf of the collective to change the world. Rather than celebrating the individual genius – the inventor, the poet – the enlightenment of low modernity celebrated the capacity of a form of thought that could be passed from one person to another and whose insights could be recognised by all but not attributed to any one. That form of thought is exemplified in science which had demonstrated its capacity during the first half of the twentieth century not simply to understand the world but in its applied form as technology to shape that world. As Bauman puts it, the thrust of the modern spirit towards the freedom of the human species is marked by ‘the urge to transcend – to make things different from what they are – and the concern with the ability to make things different’ (Bauman 1995: 163). The response he proposes is to free morality from systematisation – a tendency it suffers in the institutional codes of ethics we find in religion and education institutions – and to ‘re-personalize it’ by recognising that it is only through trusting the moral capacities of individual human beings that we can reshape the moral order of postmodern society (Bauman 1993: 34).

Consuming media as morality

Adorno is famous for his intolerance of popular culture, in particular popular music. His remarks about the various products of the culture industry suggest that he could see no critical potential in them whatsoever. He says for example of television that it aims at producing ‘the very smugness, intellectual passivity and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds even if the explicit surface message of the shows may be anti-totalitarian’
(Adorno 1991:142). However, Marcuse had a rather more sympathetic approach to jazz and his remarks on African-American culture and the hippy movement (1969) indicate that the cultural critique of the Frankfurt School was not universally condemnatory of the contents of mass culture. For Marcuse the 'radical qualities of art' lay in its potential to criticise the world as it was and invoke the possibility of liberation through those utterances in which it 'transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence' (Marcuse 1979: 6).

Bauman does not share the Frankfurt School enthusiasm for the aesthetic as a dimension in which radical possibility could be opened up for a society; it is precisely because he sees ‘telemediation’ as an aesthetic space of pure surface that he regards it as distinct from the existential mode; it is a space in which ‘others appear solely as objects of enjoyment, no strings attached’ (Bauman 1993: 178).

Despite the double bind in which Adorno seems to catch TV – it is totalitarian even when it appears to be anti-totalitarian – the problem with the critical theory approach to the media is that it doesn’t recognise the impact of critical theory on mediated culture. Media products may be commodities, consumed by an audience focussed on choice and seeking entertainment and distraction, but they have become more sophisticated in the light of half a century of cultural critique. What they have come to embody is precisely the ambivalence that Bauman wishes to celebrate in postmodern ethics. They resist following a systematic code, instead they seek to amuse and entertain through their irony and subtlety, using plot twists, shock, delay of closure and humour to engage and provoke interest in their audience. To keep their audience entertained, television shows have internally developed narrative forms that avoid creating moral outcomes that are too simple, that might too easily appear to be read from a modernist code of ethics. In fact the consumer of contemporary media – and perhaps in particular television – is confronted with moral dilemmas that are unresolved and which demand some complex judgement on the part of the viewer. Part of the pleasure of viewing is deciding whether or not a character’s action was ‘right’ (i.e. what I would have done) or wrong, taking into account the, often unclear or unresolved consequences for other characters. That judgement is not however final since it can be discussed, reviewed and disputed in other media (e.g. the commentary and criticism of television programmes in newspapers) and debated with other viewers in the family, at work, or in social gatherings. There is to be sure the tendency to generate formulaic narrative patterns within certain genres of programme that Adorno identified in early cinema and popular music but there is, even within the constraints of commodity production, a serious attempt by programme makers to generate something different that has the mark of originality. After all, they know that audiences will respond to something new and different and that while they may enjoy
repeats and old shows, it is innovation that stimulates interest and criticism – and can pull an audience away from the competition. It is precisely because the television shows are produced by a multiple authorial voice of the team of writers, directors, producers, editors and so on that they can achieve a multiple resonance which often resists any underlying logic or system. Their collective interest is in producing something ‘televisual’ (Caldwell 1995) that will attract both critical approval and an audience, rather than in carrying a consistent or even coherent moral message.

Moral ambiguity in television programmes

The convention of detective stories and police investigations is that the killer cannot be the one who seems at first to be the most obvious or most likely candidate. This makes the task of detection suitably difficult with its many twists and turns and it also enables the murderer to continue killing and in doing so demonstrating ingenuity and thought. The murderer is not simply violent; the audience is encouraged to see them as a complex human being, guilty of murder but motivated not simply by an impulse to violence but through some desire to make sense of their lives. For example, the killer in a police murder hunt turns out to be a police pathologist who has assisted the police in gathering evidence from the series of murders that she has in fact committed. By the time she is revealed as the murderer we have come to know her character in other ways; as the bereaved mother of a daughter who committed suicide, as the medical professional who could contribute to the search for the killer, as the wife of a man who has caused her pain and suffering and so on. The murderer has revealed a sophisticated engagement with the idea of hell to be found in Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’ – the murderer’s victims are released from what she construes as a living hell into tableaux that illustrate their transgressions. The killer is not exonerated by these narrative sub-plots but the crimes are given ‘meaning’ that demands that the viewer to question degrees of guilt, to treat even the most vicious murderer as someone who must be understood as a human other and to weight the degree of moral blame attributable to victims. The viewer plays the traditional game of trying to identify the murderer by spotting clues and this, together with the horror felt at the acts of violence, provides the formula of the genre. But as they watch, they can engage with the characters and make judgements about who has acted appropriately and who not – was this policeman right to act in such an aggressive way towards the person he thinks is the murder? was that insensitivity towards a victim’s relative justifiable? … and so on. The narrative device of confounded expectations means that all is never as it seems, so there is no simple case of anyone getting their just deserts; everyone should be treated as equally human until the evidence against them is unequivocal (waiting for conviction by the court is not usually required in this type of drama – courtroom dramas have their own
protocols). The viewer is ultimately entertained by this murder mystery through their interest in the series of minor moral transgressions made during the characters’ response to what is an unquestionable moral outrage.

Soap operas have an insatiable demand for plotlines that can attract viewers and keep them looking forward to the next episode. Spectacles and events – marriages, murders, air-crashes and so on – serve this process well from time to time but they must be sustained by a flow of ‘ordinary life’ realised through relatively mundane plotlines in which what is at issue are the relationships between characters. The focus is on how they respond to each other’s actions rather than how they respond to an event; it is the drive of emotions and behaviours acted out and perceived that is the stuff of soap operas. In one soap, for example, a man rescues his work colleague from an attempt at suicide but then wishes not to be involved, to leave it to the ‘professionals’. But the professionals – first of all the paramedics whom he calls and later the doctor at the hospital – draw him in by stages to feel some responsibility not simply for saving the life of his colleague but also for now helping him through whatever led to the suicide attempt. However, his attempts to be a friend rather than simply a rescuer are not welcomed by the man who felt suicidal who rejects his colleague’s intimacy, shrugging off the suicide attempt as an aberration, a mistake. Here the moral dilemma is not between acting for good and acting for evil as it is with the murderer and the policeman or woman. Instead there is a tension about how to treat others with compassion; how much care for the other is appropriate and at what point does it become intrusive? can one person’s relatively detached perspective be better grounds for judgement and action than that of the other who is directly involved? The viewer of the soap is entertained by the emotions thrown up in the narrative but their emotional engagement is tied to their making a judgement about what is a right action – that is to say, what they have done in the same situation?

The stock in trade of television programmes is the moral dilemma that is presented in a way that cannot be dealt with by reading off from a modernist code of ethics. The characters grapple with the morality of choosing how to act and our interest is in whether or not the moral judgements of the characters is one that meets our approval. While major transgressions are classically resolved – the murder is solved, eventually – many minor transgressions are left unresolved. In the drama series this often leaves plot material that can be picked up again in a later show and the device of cliff-hanger ending can often leave even major moral transgressions unresolved… for now. The formulae of shows that respond to our interest in beauty and degradation, violence and horror, sex and romance, laughter and pleasure must be achieved through the interplay between characters in which the moral
consequences of actions are put into question. The viewer’s interest in the particular show within a genre, a formula that they have probably seen many times before, is driven by their concern with the moral consequences of characters’ actions. This is a mode of ‘reality’ – the moral order of human relationships to others – that gives significance to narrative however absurd, ridiculous, unlikely or unrealistic the situation may be.

A comedy drama show is principally oriented to making the audience laugh – but the laughter can be very uncomfortable when the ‘banana skin’ on which the prat falls is an action towards another character that has moral importance. In one recent situation comedy, the action was oriented around the working relationships between people with a celebrity status interacting others of a nonentity status. The show revolves around the tension between a principal of treating all co-workers as potential equals (all in the same business, all started off the same way) and the opportunities for ‘sucking up’, gaining status and opportunity. It provides plenty of opportunity for showing how compromises about loyalty and respect for other people are managed both by the celebrities and the nonentities. In one episode the tensions were emphasised by introducing a skin colour difference that cut across the status difference. This provided opportunities for social blunders around interactions that could be interpreted as racist simply through a character’s disavowal of the significance of racial difference to them. The question of how others should be treated is often given a particular spin in such shows that challenges any presumption of equality and equivalence of human status across class, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnic, professional and other boundaries of distinction and difference. Humour from a previous era with a different morality of difference, look not simply dated but embarrassing in the moral ineptitude of characters.

In his 2002 book ‘Society Under Siege’, Bauman comments on the so called ‘reality’ shows like ‘Big Brother’ and ‘The Weakest Link’, emphasising their competitive nature that leaves one individual as the winner after disposing of the other players. For Bauman these shows are about exclusion (2002: 65) and the motivations of players to play the game. Their entertainment value is in the spectacle of the gladiatorial contest with the added zest of making the players continually confess to the screen about their tactics and their feelings. Bauman suggests that the predominant message that comes out of the reality TV shows is that of ‘societas abscondita’ – society as absent and having no part to play in the interactions between the characters who are left to compete on their on wits (2002: 67). But while the characters play out their parts in a prison, closed off from the rest of the world (they have no television to watch!) this does not mean that society is entirely absent. Each ‘contestant’ brings their morality with them into the setting and the pleasure for the viewers is in watching
how they interact. The characters who survive the first few weeks usually have a mix of responses to their fellow characters that is not morally consistent; their ability to be outrageous, rude or unkind makes for entertainment as we watch for the reactions to their behaviour. Those who are simply pleasant or do not aggravate anyone are too boring and are quickly disposed of. But too much unpleasantness, unmodulated by sensitivity and demonstrations of sympathy and caring for others, is also deemed to be unacceptable. Bauman is wrong to say that the ‘story comes to the viewers prepackaged’ (2002: 66) because the outcome is not known in advance and the collective response of the viewers does pass some sort of judgement on the behaviour of characters; society not only comes in the morality of the ‘contestants’ but in the moral judgements of viewers. The confessions both during and after release from the confinement of the show’s house do attempt to explore the motivation behind actions and generate more information with which to make sense of the moral worth of participants and their actions. Of course the continual risk of tedium, of having no moral judgement to make, means that the show is at some remove from ‘reality’ and the contrivance of activities set up for participants and the editing of footage for the show ensure that as a moral narrative it is no more real than television drama. In recent years the organisers have given differential power to participants – some know more about the rules than others, some are given a task to lead, others to be lead. This has led to some potentially uncomfortable situations with incidents of violence between participants, attempts at to upset the rule of the programme makers or simply resist its authority. Disputations and the forming of alliances have begun to fracture the ‘housemates’ into groups along age, gender, skin colour and sexual orientation lines. These occasions give a frisson of reality to what is otherwise a very contrived situation but they begin to undermine the moral order that presumes all participants having an equal chance of success, regardless of their identity characteristics. Big Brother has evicted housemates for transgression of rules including violence towards other housemates – it is unclear how it would cope with naked racism or hatred of someone for their sexual orientation.

There is of course a mode of television that does aspire to represent ‘reality’ and that is the documentary. Choice of topic, journalistic writing and directing and editing ensure that a documentary is, for most purposes, simply another television show whose claim to show the ‘real’ actions of ‘real’ people has to be treated with scepticism. Nonetheless, the ‘documents’ that are gathered have a claim to veracity can be persuasive that there is an issue of political and moral importance in real human action that is being reported on. Most documentary shows do present the story as prepackaged in that victims and perpetrators are distinguished for us and the failure of institutions and authorities is revealed to us. But as television programmes have become more complex and the distinction between genres has
blurred – the drama-documentary, the drama-reality show – so the moral direction of shows that claim their foundation in the world lived experience comes into question. For example, a documentary programme that intended to show the moral iniquity of a contrived reality show about homeless people paid to fight each other, inevitably became tainted by the immorality of the original show. In the same way as someone has to view pornography in order to identify it as such, so the contrived reality show had to be hinted at in sufficient detail that those attracted by the original show could find interest in the documentary. The documentary provides a moral high ground from which to comment on the morality of other programmes (the contrived reality show itself was banned from broadcast). But at the same time it appeals to precisely the immoral impulses that it wishes to comment on.

**Conclusions**

What I have argued is that the consumption of television is not simply of commodities that have value to the individual and meet their desires. Despite the conditions of their manufacture in the culture industry, television programmes contribute to the continuing moral education of the viewing public. I have focussed on television not because it is the only medium whose content has a moral import but because it has become so central a component in the public sphere of postmodern society. Other media – such as newspapers and magazines – tend to be consumed individually (the consumer regularly buys the same paper or magazine rather than roving across a range of them) and are characterised by a single editorial hierarchy that co-ordinates the content of each edition. Television involves an increasing number of channels and multiple editorial levels within channels such that viewers pick and choose according to taste and inclination as much for the programme as for the channel or the editorial line. I have argued that ambivalence about moral action is displayed *within* programmes as part of their narrative structure but as important is the juxtaposition of programmes within and individual viewer’s evening or week’s viewing. The ‘flow’ of television in front of the viewer which they may or may not have actively chosen, create conflicting dilemmas of moral action – in a police drama professionals may tend to act in one way whereas in a hospital drama they may tend to act in another way and so on.

What I am arguing about the moral import of mediated narratives is of course not new and we continue to make sense of the moral actions in Sophocles’ and Shakespeare’s plays. The tradition of the novel and other genres of writing including history, biography and the essay similarly raise moral issues that are important to the continual renewal of the moral order of contemporary culture. However, simply because of the volume of output and the size of its audience the ‘mass’ media such as television need to be taken seriously as
providing a key source of moral information for many in our society, regardless of their aesthetic limitations. The tendency of critical theory from Adorno to Bauman to dismiss the commodified products of the mass media on grounds of their complicity within an existing social order should not mean that we ignore their importance in shaping the moral culture of postmodernity. And that moral culture should not be presumed to be a simple collection of ‘moral tales’ that exemplify a pre-codified ethical system. It is instead multifarious and ambivalent and its consumption as a component of the products of the media continually questions and challenges moral precepts and patterns of action – even if many members of society may feel they simply acquired their morality once and for all through primary socialisation in as simple and final way as they did their genetically inherited traits.

References:
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