THE UNSURPRISING CASE AGAINST TELEVISION LITERACY

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In recent years a herd of composition theorists has followed the lead of Gavriel Salomon by demonstrating how, surprisingly, television can be good for writing students. One such article was even titled "Television: A Surprising Acquisition Source for Literacy" (*TWI* 5 (Spring 1986): 104-111). Its author, Sandra Mano of UCLA, studied how one high school student's television viewing affected his writing positively, and Mano consequently advised composition teachers to "make television programs the topic of traditional writing assignments" (110). I seriously doubt whether any of the "traditional educators" Mano excoriates took her advice, but if any had done so, he or she might have wanted to have been told in advance by Mano that her teen-age subject, Simon, was the son of two college professors. The point is that Simon's case is hardly typical. I would argue Simon is a "successful adolescent writer" primarily because he has been immersed his entire life in a highly literate family environment. In discussing Simon's television viewing habits, Mano seems to want us to apply the literary principle that the specific illustrates the universal, but Mano's case study is not poetry. It is instead a useful history of one young man who does not merely watch television but studies it in order to advance a personal dream of becoming a highly paid professional writer. If I should ever have a class full of Simons on my hands, I will now know what to do.

That said, I must declare straightaway that my interest here is less in a rebuttal of Mano's paper than in the use of it as a convenient point of departure for my own position that it is far too premature for composition theorists to extol the benefits of television to composition teachers. I only point to Mano's work to the extent that it is representative of a growing number of theorists who are arguing for rapprochement with television. I am not among them.

Mano's argument that television is a "surprising" source for literacy reflects a rhetorical posture I find discomforting and hardly in the service of composition theory. That is, she wants to establish a fictional opposition between "traditional educators" and enlightened post-modern compositionists, and of course Mano's type of "traditional educator" makes for a convenient straw man all too easily knocked down. But who exactly are these teachers who would be "surprised" that Simon could learn how to write for television by studying it? Where are these teachers who view television and film as "enemies of the written word" (111)?

That favorite whipping boy E. D. Hirsch, Jr. comes to my mind. The mere mention of his name can produce smug derision wherever compositionists are gathered. Hirsch's most recent book, *Cultural Literacy* (1987), has made him the subject of grotesque attacks for having the temerity to argue that a truly literate American is one who is familiar with our civil religion and the vocabulary of our national discourse.[1] Some might want to read all of Hirsch's writings before cudgeling this traditional educator. One might then recognize, for example, the value of his *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) to the scholarly editor who cannot shrink from making decisions about authorial intention.[2]

But whatever one's view of Hirsch, a reading of *Cultural Literacy* indicates that Hirsch sees the irony of a national literacy crisis that is most acute among ethnic and racial minority groups being adjudicated by a corps of compositionists which is nearly 100% white middle-class. Rather than make concessions to a television culture he finds personally distasteful, Hirsch would have the courage of his self-admittedly value-laden convictions and try to bring poorly educated Blacks, Hispanics and all others within the text of national discourse. If this is what makes Hirsch a traditional educator, he would probably plead guilty to the epithet Mano wants to hurl. Say what one will, but Hirsch can probably sleep at night.

But after one has swatted aside Hirsch, who is left? Hirsch is hardly representative of the people I see teaching college composition, who are for the most part young doctoral candidates who have been fully introduced to contemporary composition theory. And I know of few high school teachers who have not by now come in contact with one new-age writing project or another. Indeed, high schools have been so eager to embrace the video culture that one inner-city teacher could note drily that "we show more films than Hollywood." I am afraid I don't see as many television-bashers as Mano. No one I know is seriously hoping that television will go away. So the effort of theorist Mano to make some good of this "bad" medium strikes me as analogous to the general who sprints to stay ahead of her own troops rather than lead them to new territory.

This is all the more regrettable since those of us who have taught in urban high schools recall facing not classrooms full of Simons, but children who often have never observed a parent reading a book, or for that matter may not have even one parent in the home. I will do Mano the courtesy of not reading aloud in the teacher's cafeteria of any Los Angeles *barrio* or ghetto high school her suggestion to "encourage home viewing with family and friends" (110).

Surely Mano must know that most high school teachers operate under the severely restricted lesson plans of the "back-to-the-basics" movement. Those few (tenured) teachers who do have the freedom to incorporate television-centered instructional programs would obviously have ethical qualms about being perceived as endorsing increased television viewing. This is even more the case for teachers in white upper middle-class school districts who might expect to have a few Simons in their classes; in such districts it is the more highly involved parents who view television as the enemy, and woe to the teacher in the current reform era whose class is not producing critiques of *Hamlet*. Mano's recommendations for the most part cannot be implemented. Her article promises insight, but is merely platitudinous.

But since Mano's recommendations can be implemented at least in the case of Simon, let us for a moment follow out the implications of television-based instruction. The irony of Simon's intensive critical study of television is that he will discover, if he has not already done so, that television's genres are so rigidly determined and calcified that he may end up dismissing as a writer the very medium he began to study. Television is decidedly not a medium that is given over to Shklovsky's concept of defamiliarization. It exists, as if anyone need be reminded, to advertise consumer products. Its programs – even such "good" shows like "Cosby" – are consciously crafted to reinforce the fictions of middle-class values that make such consumer products desirable. If Simon is to become a successful *adult* writer, he will need to overcome the television-ization of his critical capacity to examine received values.

So what can the writing instructor do with television? Exactly what most teen-agers do – watch and enjoy it. Television viewing

is enjoyable precisely because it offers a respite from the activities of reading and writing. Theorists like Mano and Gavriel Salomon who point to "emerging evidence" that the skills of television literacy may be transferable to print literacy seem to miss or ignore the fact that television viewing is a much less active cognitive endeavor.

And they also seem to ignore the mass of solid evidence that does not support their conclusions. One very recent survey conducted by Yale University's Family Television Research and Consultation Center used the "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" program to compare four groups of youngsters on the basis of creativity.[3] Even though the Rogers show is one of the few that tries very hard to get children to use their own imaginations, those children who watched no television and instead interacted with adults scored highest on creativity tests, above those who watched the Rogers show. Despite this evidence of television's unhelpfulness, the co-director of the study, Dorothy Singer, wisely refrains from the kind of over-interpretation that informs Mano's reading of her own case study. Singer warns against hazardous generalizations because it's crucial to weigh the broader social context of each child. In other words, what's true for Simon may not be true for Paul.

Researchers at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver launched a different kind of study whose results permit one to be less circumspect about the value of television in the composition classroom.[4] They found a Canadian town that because of geography did not receive television service. They compared the creativity levels of fourth graders and seventh graders of this town, dubbed "Notel," with those in two other towns that had television. Not surprisingly, the children without television did significantly better on all creativity tests. Two years later "Notel" had obtained television service, so the researchers returned and performed the same tests. Result: the creativity scores of "Notel" students had fallen to the same level as those of children in the two other towns with television.

I cite these studies to suggest that if evidence like Mano's is to "emerge," it will have to compete with recent studies such as these which recognize the importance of creativity in composition. Undoubtedly television can be used to teach some techniques of characterization and narrative, but Mano does not give due attention in her article that expository prose *is* creative writing. "How-to" articles like Mano's may be partly responsible for turning too many college composition classrooms into skills courses like Auto Repair. Sometimes evidence like Mano's emerges simply because it is iconoclastic. But however useful iconoclasm may be in winning a reconsideration of an issue, it can never be a substitute for a sound theoretical foundation.

For such a foundation we might begin by placing television discourse on the Aristotelian model for rhetoric of ethos/pathos/logos. Then we would discover that television is a wholly pathetic medium since its only concern is for audience. The term "quality" is a relative term and as applied to television only denotes the kind of audience: more of the college-educated may watch "Masterpiece Theater," but what is served to them is often only a literary analogue of "Dallas."

My focusing on television's pathos-intensive discourse is not intended to put aside the medium. I watch and enjoy television, and I am willing to amuse myself in the suspicion that many critics of television covertly tune in their favorite game shows. The purpose at hand is to demonstrate that television has turned the nation into an audience which talks about itself only in terms of its existence as an audience. I have observed that students do not discuss topics or ideas as often as what they have seen on television. Indeed, any political campaign strategist can attest that nothing really happens unless it happens on television. Campaign managers understand that our vision of the world is constructed almost entirely upon media events. As very few of us are in or on television, many of us – especially teen-agers – become not participants in our own events but part of an inactive audience that witnesses only imitated events.

Consider what happens to rhetoric when everyone is in the audience: we lose the rhetorician. No one exists to take up Frank Smith's challenge to defend the proposition that literacy is desirable and beneficial.[5] Rhetoric thus dissolves itself. This leads to an enervated condition in which a well-informed scholar like Smith can call for a defense of something that isn't even under attack in our culture.[6] Gavriel Salomon's assertions are symptomatic of this condition. As if sending up a flare for help, Salomon states, "television like print, music or ballet, is assumed to require its own kind of literacy" (67). (Forgetting for the moment the incongruous simile that watching television is like reading or dancing, note how the passive construction of this sentence reflects the dissolved rhetorician.) As I have tried to argue, television requires no literacy of any kind, only time and being – even an infant or the family pet can watch it. When Salomon, whom Mano cites for support, goes on to suggest that the skills of "television literacy" may be transferrable to print literacy, he does so without acknowledging the ruling principle of audience for television viewing.

Rather than look for ways to encourage students to remain in the television audience, compositionists would do well to search for ways to reduce the size of that audience. The urgent need is to reinvent the rhetorician. Shakespeare's famous metaphor that all the world's a stage is meaningless in a post-modern world without actors. Composition teachers must help students get up on the stage of the world so that they can create and not merely accept versions of reality. Since we speak commonly of the "acts" of reading and writing, it would follow that only as actors can students become skilled in reading and writing.

But acting implies an Aristotelian dramatic action, a wanting of something, and the anxiety-ridden members of the contemporary global village may not be capable of sustaining such action. Perhaps we will begin to make progress toward solving our literacy crisis once we have identified a reason to read and once we have perceived that there is something new to be learned in books about the human experience. Before we invest much more time in teaching students how to read and write, it might be wise to get our culture's agreement that there is something worth reading and writing. Ultimately, the task for the composition theorist may be how to restore to our culture a tragic consciousness in which man does fail but only after active pursuit of a goal. Television, regrettably, has removed failure from our consciousness.

But if this goal seems daunting, there may be achievable intermediate steps to be taken by those like Mano who are interested in researching the interrelationships of television and print literacy. I can only suggest here that the insights of modern semiotics offer one promising approach. Applying to television some of the conclusions of Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theater and Drama* (1980), one might study with students the relationship of text and performance. Most students (and perhaps teachers) have never even seen a television script, much less have studied one. To do so might reveal why in television priority is nearly always given to the performance text over the written text, which is constrained and determined by its very need for performance. Discovering the written discourse that television

actors materialize through performance may be a better way to lead students to critical awareness of the medium.

And on the subject of case studies, we might benefit from one on the professional television writer. It is he or she who is likely to tell us what, if anything, can be transferred from writing for television to writing for print.

While we await such scholarship, one can only hope that Mano's article will not find its way to the desk of a television executive at one of our Los Angeles stations. For he – and it is almost invariably *he* – will delight in having found an academic rationalization for his commercial enterprise. He will no doubt schedule a "surprising" revelatory report for the eleven o'clock news during the next ratings sweep period. Of course Mano should not object if the results of her two-year study are truncated to two minutes and cut into suitably appealing sound bites. Such is the fate of those who have gone over to the "enemy."

NOTES

[1]It should not be injudicious of me to point to colleagues who on the one hand reject Hirsch and on the other bemoan the cultural literacy of their students. The Spring 1987 Freshman Composition final exam at the University of Southern California called upon students to consider the issue of U.S. Presidential ethics. I talked to no colleague who was confident that his/her students knew enough to produce a literate response.

[2]See Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston, Northwestern, 1984) for a strenuous defense of Hirsch on the grounds that Hirsch's theory concerning authorial intention is essential to the scholarly editor. Parker himself is the Norton editor of Herman Melville. Parker's book is useful if only for one of the very few sympathetic readings of Hirsch. Parker also offers a reasoned and thorough review of post-modern composition theory as it impinges on editorial practice.

[3]For a report and discussion of the results see Keith Henderson, "Children, TV, and Creativity: Can They Mix?" *The Christian Science Monitor* 20 April 1987: 29-30. The four control groups in order of their creativity scores: 1.) Children who watched no television and interacted with an adult. 2.) Children who watched the Rogers show with an adult. 3.) Children who watched the Rogers show alone. 4.) Children left to play by themselves.

[4]The study has been published as a book. See Tannis MacBeth Williams, *The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities* (New York: Academic Press, 1985).

[5]See Smith's introduction to *Awakening to Literacy* (Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann, 1984) v. Smith states, "Whatever I might still feel about the value of literacy personally, I can no longer regard the benefit of its acquisition as axiomatic." I applaud Smith's willingness to be self-critical of his own values, though I have met no adult illiterates who do not desperately want to read and write. Smith is fortunate that his own literacy is what enables him to articulate and examine his own values.

[6]Far from devaluing literacy, television has always sanctimoniously supported literacy and reading programs. Ubiquitous public service announcements and such continuing features as the CBS "Read All About It" series are cases in point. Recently the major networks pledged their commitment to a major drive to support adult literacy programs. If television isn't attacking literacy, who in our culture is?

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FLUX: THE SHIFTING ROLE OF THE COMPOSITION TEACHER

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I was a farmer by birth, as was my father. We came from generations of farmers who toiled in the sun to glean the often meager living the earth afforded. Farming, the actual work of preparing land, sowing seed, caring for a crop through unpredictable spring weather and summer heat, and then trying to harvest it in the fall before the rain and wind ruined the year's work, can dissipate the strength and break the will of the heartiest individual. The physical labor takes a toll on the body, and the anxiety of such a huge investment exposed to the forces of capricious nature preys on the mind. This is the most visible side of farming, the one concerned with survival, of lasting through the current year and hoping that the next one will be more forgiving. But farming has another side, a capacity for revitalizing the dispirited, a potential for rejuvenation seemingly unconnected to the mundane, day-to-day tedium of working the fields. What gives farming this hidden value is the sense of universal proprietorship, a kind of mutual holding of the land and its potential for life in trust that one acquires when he works closely with nature.

And here is the most important lesson my father taught me about his profession. For him the greatest reward from tilling the soil came not at the end of the year when he harvested his cotton and soybeans, selling them for what was seldom enough to cover the expenses incurred over seasons of unpredictable cold snaps, rain storms, and dry, dusty Augusts. For my Dad the true value of farming had little to do with tangible gain but came from a sense of personal worth he received from participating in a process larger than himself, because he was part of an immense, perpetually enduring cycle in a very personal way. A farmer functions as protector of and in communion with nature in its broadest context. His province is the nurturing of life.