

LOVE?

by Bette-Jane Raphael

For some couples, television violence is what goes on in front of the screen.

Has anybody else noticed an ominous parallel between the divorce rate and the sale of television sets? Both have skyrocketed over the last thirty years, a fact that one of my friends sees as proof positive of a Japanese plot to undermine American family life and thereby finally get revenge for World War II.

My own theory is that as highly advanced a form of home entertainment as the TV is, it's less a boon to mankind than a bone of contention between man and womankind. The fact is that for many couples, television violence is what goes on in front of the screen.

My neighbor Susan and her husband, Ted, are a case in point. Susan believes that there is no intellectual reason for the television set to be on in their apartment at night. Ted sees the television as essential background noise, like Muzak in an elevator. Susan complains that his favorite shows, all of which seem to involve combat between space ships using laser weaponry, interrupt her reading of Edith Wharton. She accuses him of resenting her intellectual pursuits and

of actually preferring that she had no intellect whatsoever, except for the minimal amount of brain-to-mouth coordination needed to pronounce the words, "Anything you want, darling."

I listen to this story thinking that Susan and I ought to change partners, since my own lover categorizes my viewing habits with the statement: "Bette will watch anything." Our arguments on this score usually commence with the same opening salvo: He walks into the bedroom, glances at the set, and asks, "What's that junk you're watching?" This remark, like "Do you still beat your wife?", is a trick question, insofar as it always does the trick where my temper is concerned.

The fact that most couples have the television set in their bedroom, makes the problems surrounding it turn more intrusive. When, for instance, one of you wants to sleep and the other wants to watch, oh, *Earthquake*, well, I'd call that a definite conflict of interests. This was the actual situation of one couple I know, the husband complaining that he finds it difficult to drift off to dreamland with the sound of Los Angeles turning to rubble behind him.

No matter what the hour, the sound level

of the TV is often a subject of dispute. One man I know believes that the decibel level needed for his girlfriend's listening comfort is the same as that used to shatter glass, while she says that in order to follow the plot lines of her favorite shows she has had to learn to read lips. A kind of guerrilla warfare has broken out in the household of this acoustically mismatched pair, with one of them waiting until the other leaves the room for a moment before jumping up to adjust the sound level to his or her specification.

I tell my friend he should consider himself lucky. At our house I am apt to return from getting a snack to find that the television set I distinctly remember as being on when I left is now most definitely off, a fact that becomes immediately apparent to me upon reentering our bedroom, where You-Know-Who is now sitting comfortably reading a newspaper. "Did you turn off the set?" I ask suspiciously. "Yes," he answers, bold as brass. "You were not watching it." "I wasn't watching the commercial," I say. "There's a difference between not watching the commercial and not watching the program." At this he looks up curiously. "There is?"

One friend tells me her husband has taken to writing down how many times she has watched the reruns of her favorite sit-com. He uses a special yellow legal pad for this sadistic bit of audio-visual bookkeeping, carefully noting not only the number of times she has seen a particular episode, but also the dates of each viewing. "Aha," he says with relish, jumping out from behind the drapes or a closet door just as she is settling down to enjoy the show, "That's six times for the 'Felix and Oscar Win a Trip to Hawaii' episode. The last time you saw that was on December 21, 1981."

Often, the problem is simply that the two of you want to watch different things. He wants to watch some dopey ball game (basket, base or foot), while you want to watch a really wonderful made-for-television movie about a woman who gets divorced after twenty years and becomes a marathon runner. And you find that even if you get to watch your movie, the would-be athletic supporter sitting next to you gives an unsolicited running commentary on the defects of the film as he sees them, something along the lines of, "This is garbage!"

One solution to all this was hit upon by the parents of a woman who told me the following: "My mother has one TV set, with an ear attachment, on her side of the bed, and my father has another set, with another ear attachment, on his side." She assures me that this works wonderfully, but the idea of totally tuning out on one another strikes me as a less-than-perfect solution to marital strife.

More courageous, it seems to me, is to get rid of the television entirely. Then the two of you can live the way your pioneer ancestors did—fighting over the radio.

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