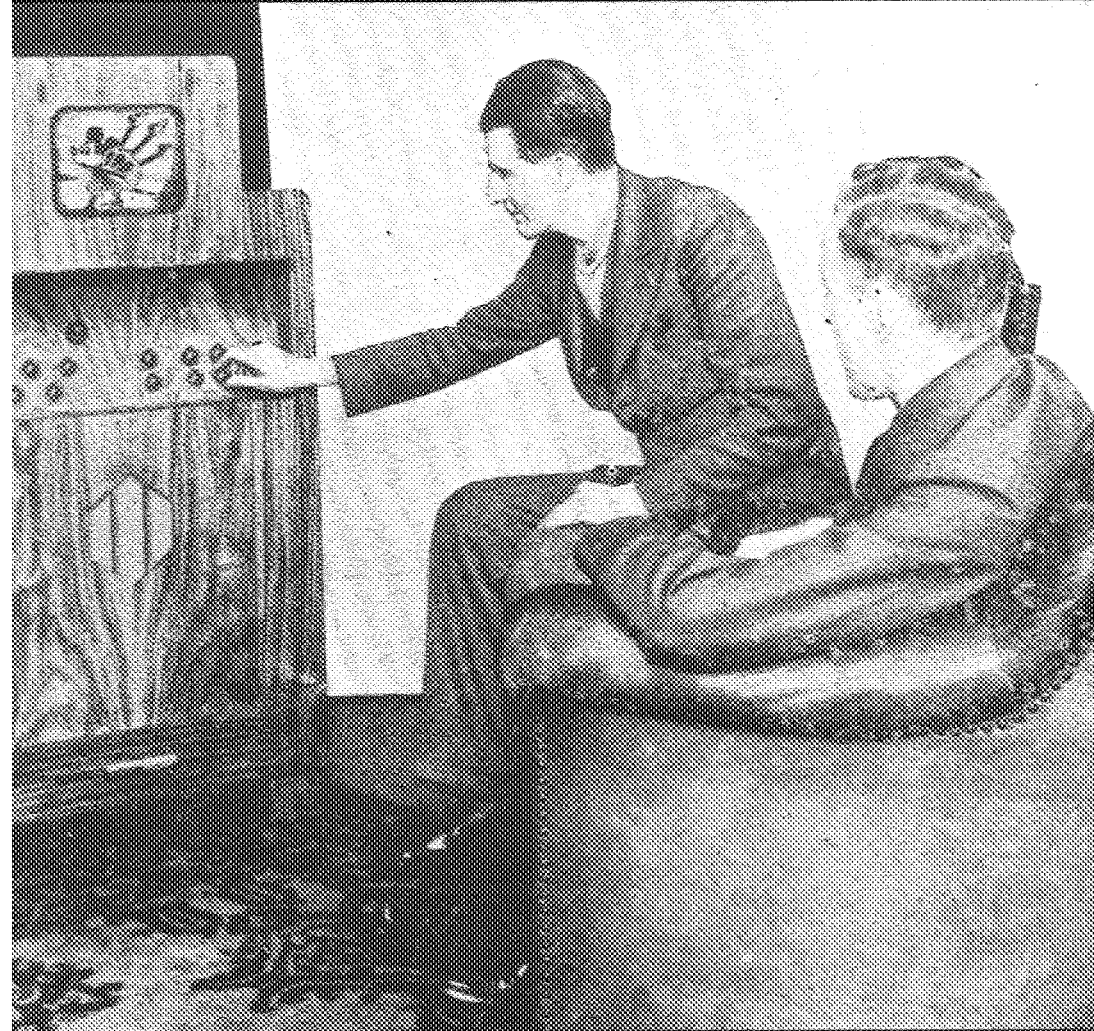


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Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers



**Gorer's Gaze: aspects of the inauguration
of audience studies in British Television**

Gareth Stanton

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By Gareth Stanton

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...serious criticism of broadcasting was rare, mainly because serious people did not take broadcasting seriously.¹

Being comparatively new, TV is bound to have its detractors. The home screen, they say, is making us into a nation of watchers sprawled in armchairs. The art of conversation is dying out. The piano is silent, and no longer the focal point for happy family gatherings – if, indeed, it has not gone altogether to make room for the television set.

(*TV Mirror Annual 1956*)

Introduction²

This article is intended for anthropologists, but not solely for them. The main focus is on television in Britain in the 1950s – something which, at the time, we might have thought anthropology had little to say about. In this regard we would be wrong, as I shall attempt to demonstrate. Specialists of various persuasions were attempting to come to terms with this new domestic technology. Indeed, general interest was such that intellectuals who engaged in popular debate

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We hope that the Goldsmiths Anthropology Research Papers will provide a platform to communicate some of the work that makes the Goldsmiths Department distinctive. It will include articles by members of academic staff, research fellows, PhD and other students.

GARP Number 1.

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Image: courtesy of H J Barton Chapple, *Popular Television*, 1935.

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¹ This is a quotation from Gorham's 1952 study *Broadcasting and Television since 1900*, quoted by Andrew Crisell (1997: 40)

² I would like to thank Sam Lay for the assistance she gave in the writing of this paper. Thanks must also go to Dorothy Sheridan and the staff at the Mass-Observation archive at the University of Sussex, where the Gorer papers are lodged. Versions of this paper were presented at third annual AMCCS conference in Sheffield and at the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Reading. My thanks for invitations and comments on both occasions. I should also like to thank various people who have looked at this paper in various stages of its development: David Morley, Tim O'Sullivan, Christine Geraghty and Bill Schwarz. I have given a number of seminars at the Department of Anthropology at Goldsmiths and have always encountered a friendly and stimulating response. With this in mind I felt privileged to be asked to contribute to their new series of working papers in anthropology. My thanks to the department and to the editors of the series for their helpful comments and interventions.

were asked to contribute their own views and thoughts on the matter. This paper will look at such an intervention and examine one of the first sustained efforts to study the effects of television in the British context. This study was commissioned by the *Sunday Times* who invited the anthropologist and intellectual Geoffrey Gorer to write a series of lengthy articles on the relationship between the English people and television.³ This work was informed by detailed survey and questionnaire work carried out by a commercial polling company.⁴ Gorer himself played a large role in organising the design of the various surveys conducted and of selecting the regions for scrutiny. In Gorer's mind it was crucial that such research should take place as, he argued, the growth of TV viewing had a totally different evolution from the experience of the United States and might therefore be expected to reveal some important facts concerning the appearance of such a new medium. These articles, originally published in 1958, provide a fascinating insight into the concerns and preoccupations of a country faced with the fact of television becoming for the first time a 'mass' phenomenon. They also give us an insight into the mind of Gorer himself.⁵

Sunday Times Recognises Dawning of New Age

It is April 13th, 1958. The masthead of the *Sunday Times*, then a Kemsley paper, declares itself to be the 7039th issue. At only 5d, it carries at the top left a small ad for Fells manzanilla sherry, which provides a whiff of 1950s British sociability. In fact, the advertising is remarkably prominent. This industry which constantly reinvents itself in new, ever more striking forms, leads us to forget its own historicity. Lord Chandon, chairman of Associated Electrical Industries Limited, tells us that new industries are swelling output. Western Credit Limited out of Plymouth (Directors including the Rt. Hon. Isaac Foot) boast that group assets exceed two million pounds. Some of the advertising seems, from the standpoint of the present, to have an exceedingly industrial feel. Noral, the Northern Aluminium Company (slogan

³ It is with a certain irony that I note that this paper was in the process of construction when the *Sunday Times* ran a damning piece of reportage on the teaching of media studies at Coventry University under the heading 'All the Madness of Media Studies' (6th December 1998). If anything by commissioning the Gorer report they climbed onto this particular bandwagon a generation ago.

⁴ I am not trying to suggest that this is the first work of this kind. The Listener Research Department of the BBC, for example, was created in 1936. For a fascinating account of its beginnings and the ideological climate in which the desire for this sort of knowledge was born see Chaney (1987).

⁵ In the Gorer archive at the University of Sussex the records of interview material are still stored. Here we have the authentic voices of a generation confronted for the first time by television. When Tim O'Sullivan (1991) came to write about the viewers of the fifties this generation was already dead.

'Always taking a weight off somebody's mind!') is advertising its latest technological developments:

By taking a 'sandwich' of Noral aluminium alloy sheets, roll-welded face to face, and then hydraulically inflating various predetermined channels and cells inside the 'sandwich', you have *Noralduct*, possessing the remarkable advantages of sheet and tube in one.

Filon advertise 'structural sheeting for lightness and strength'. Visit the Oil Fuel Centre at the Earl's Court Factory Equipment Exhibition. The Dunlop company is also advertising its frighteningly named Semtex carpet cushioning with which every carpet lasts '106% longer'. Featuring as art work a reproduction of Roy Nicold's painting 'Communications', Mullard are advertising their progress in the field of electronics. The advert is oddly headed 'Taxi! Taxi!', odd that is until we realise the content: 'The newer applications of electronics in industry, medicine and commerce have tended to overshadow the tremendous advances made in radio communications.' Mullard valves, we are informed, contribute to the radio-equipped taxi, the walkie-talkie of the fire brigade and railway marshalling yard, the air traffic control system, the ship-to-ship telephone, the newspaper photograph radioed from New York. And that's only page three. The adverts continue, dating the period, and giving us a feel for the material culture of the day: Olympia Business

Machines; Dunlop sports shoes, Vite-Weat [sic] crispbread 'for slimness and vitality'; Yardley shaving soap 'for men of good counsel', a barrister's wig sits next to the offending soap, lest we miss the visual pun, 'Men of Judgement sit in judgement of themselves'; Harvey's choice Bristol sheries; the Halifax; Abbey National; 'For taste and flavour', Bachelor tipped, 'They're good – very good'.

This is a new world of travel. The Spanish National Tourist Office tempts the reader with 'the living breath of history' in the regions surrounding Santander (which, of course, includes the cave paintings of Altimira). 'For a holiday that is *really* different see Santander this year – it's so near by modern travel'. The British Overseas Airways Corporation is also advertising with its snappy jingle 'You know its true – BOAC does take good care of you'. 'Let's go Continental' announce French Railways, for speed, comfort and punctuality.

Supermarkets of the 1950s, it would seem, are simply reinventing the taste for exotic meats. George Anderson from London SW7 writes in response to the question posed by the columnist Atticus – what has become of the one-time trade in kangaroo tails? 'Fifty years ago', our correspondent writes (and we can't be sure whether it is his age or his memory which we are to admire), 'one could obtain these in Leadenhall Market for 1s.6d. each, the taste being very much like ox-tail'.

The review pages are graced by the likes of Raymond Mortimer and Cyril Conolly. The author of *Enemies of Promise* is reviewing Sylvia Townsend Warner's translation of Proust's *By Way of Sainte-Beuve* – 'compulsory reading'. Mortimer would have been better off with the Proust. He has been set to work on the now forgotten phenomenon of John Lodwick (although there are whispers of resurrection, see Wright, 1994). Dragged from the company of Dr. Johnson, Boswell, Goldsmith and their ilk, Mortimer finds it depressing 'though no doubt salutary, to find myself in the modern world at its most odious...'. Mr. Lodwick, Mortimer informs us, has written sixteen novels, 'none of which I have read'. On the face of it this is not the ideal reviewer. Spurred on, however, by praise for Mr Lodwick's fiction from such as John Betjeman, who rated Lodwick's command of words equal to that of Evelyn Waugh, he makes a start with the Heinemann published (18s.) *Bid the Soldiers Shoot*. After a brief dip Mortimer concludes 'My aging eyes failed to detect here a command of language – or anything else to remind me of Mr Waugh.' And yet. And yet. Despite writing which is slipshod Mortimer concedes that we are faced with a form of expression that gives us a vivid account of remarkable experiences:

I guessed that Mr. Lodwick must be one of those modern romantics who idealise toughness [...] Though only some twenty years my junior, as a character he seems to me more puzzling than the men who lived two hundred years ago.

Publishers are advertising their goods. Hodder and Stoughton have John Creasey and W.E. Johns who a modern reader might be expected to recognise, André Deutsch boast V.S. Naipaul and Terry Southern, Collins have Taylor Caldwell. Allen and Unwin are pushing *Kon-Tiki*-author Thor Heyerdahl's latest speculations on ancient migrations, *Aku Aku*. Faber are attempting to cash in with their Nigerian discovery Amos Tutuola's 'fabulous new story' *The Brave African Huntress* (also 18s.). Hamish Hamilton offer Camus' short story collection *Exile and the Kingdom* (only 15s.). For gritty topicality Michael Joseph is offering *Teddy Boy*, Ernest Ryman's account of life in an approved school is 'Always interesting, humane and often very funny' a Telegraph reviewer is quoted as saying in the copy (Only 13s.).

The great theatre critic, Harold Hobson, reviews two one-act plays by another, perhaps more familiar Mortimer (John) then being performed at the Lyric opera house, Hammersmith. 'Out of solid bricks of realistic detail', Hobson writes, he 'blows a bubble of fantasy as odd as anything in Ionesco.' Godfrey Smith interviews Rex Harrison, flush from the Broadway success of *My Fair Lady*.

On the motoring page Ian Nickols tests the new Vanden Plus Austin. Cornhill Insurance offer 50% no-claims bonus for motorists. While the Bentley '5' series saloon offers itself as a combination of silence and luxury with safety and speed.

It is on page ten, however, that we get our first inkling of the new world to come. Tomorrow night at 9.00 p.m., the announcement reads, *Should every picture tell a story?* is to be screened. Associated Television (ATV) are attempting to drum up viewers for this discussion between Sir Kenneth Clark and John Berger (with contributions from Somerset Maugham and Graham Sutherland). On the same page we find television critic Maurice Wiggins holding out great hopes for the new Vision Electronic Recording Apparatus. A great improvement, it was hoped, on telerecording: 'the crude system of recording studio productions by photographing the image on a cathode ray tube.' With the appearance of video technology the television age is truly upon us and the *Sunday Times* is about to recognise the fact with its own special investigation into the role of television in the lives of the English which also appears on this day.

Introducing the Survey

It should be pointed out that the published results do indicate that the combination of Geoffrey Gorer and the research department of advertising agency Mather and Crowther Ltd are looking only at a representative selection of English homes. The premise for the work is the recognition that television has altered the way of life of millions. What difference has this new age of television made on people's homes, domestic routines and hobbies? We can see immediately that the questions are not aimed at the contents of TV. Rather, this is audience research. As Gorer emphasises at the outset, 'I shall not be dealing in any way with what actually appears on the television screen; my subject is the people sitting in front of it, and the ways in which the possession of this apparatus has changed the home-life and leisure. 'Television has altered the way of life for millions', the *Sunday Times* editorialises, 'Is this for good or evil? In order to answer this question and understand the difference that has been made to people's homes, their domestic routines, hobbies and the lives of their children research is required. Needless to say there is a certain amount of disingenuousness. Reading Gorer's own notes and correspondence in the Gorer archive it is clear that these were the issues which he thought were of prime importance. Anyway, in order to answer these questions, the editorial voice opines, the *Sunday Times* has organised in co-operation with Geoffrey Gorer and the research department of Messrs Mather and Crowther Ltd, the 'well-known advertising agency, 'an exhaustive

enquiry in a representative selection of English homes'. It is worth noting here that Gorer needs no introduction to the readership of the *Sunday Times*. He is a public intellectual in a sense that is perhaps absent today. William Empson, the master of ambiguity, didn't even need a name and stated in unambiguous terms in a letter he wrote to his old friend, 'The moment I saw the prose style I knew the piece was written by Gorer'. Enid Blyton merely wrote from the hotel where she was staying to thank Gorer for the clarity which he had brought to the whole complex matter of television. So who was Geoffrey Gorer? Some clues can be gleaned from pronouncements made in his own work. In his 1948 study *The Americans* he notes that he does not know 'enough about England (or any European society) to make consistent comparisons' (p.5). This seems an odd remark for an English Oxbridge-educated intellectual to make⁶ and what's more a writer who was already well known for an early work on the Marquis de Sade (1934) which demonstrated early psychoanalytic interests, a series of travelogues which includes the classic *Africa Dances* (1935), and an ethnography *Himalayan Village – a Study of the Lepchas of Sikkim* (1938). This progress into anthropology is made clear in his book on the Americans. Gorer had visited the United States in 1935 and received a training in social anthropology with Margaret Mead⁷ and Ruth Benedict. A field trip to the Himalayas resulted in the ethnography mentioned but also left a legacy of illness which meant he was unable to contemplate

any further trips. Instead he stayed on in the States having accepted an invitation from the Rockefeller Foundation 'to make a study of the impact of films and radio on American audiences from an "anthropological view"' (1948: 1). He engaged in further research in the States and acted in various capacities during the war. In 1955 he was to publish the book for which he is perhaps best remembered, *Exploring English Character*. Given the nature of his own avowed ignorance of the English and the anthropological tenets of his training which emphasised the 'difficulties of seeing one's own culture' (1955: 1) it is necessary to understand the mechanisms which led him to write this work.

⁶ Gorer was born in London in 1905. He was educated at Charterhouse and Jesus College, Cambridge.

⁷ With whom he remained close friends. In her autobiography (Mead, 1973) she describes Gorer 'whom I did not meet until 1935 but who has shared with me an understanding of the growth of anthropological theory and the adventure of making sense of the modern world.' (p.3-4). Their first meeting is described by Jane Howard in her biography of Mead (Howard, 1985). Mead was later to advise Gorer on American work on television when he designed the *Sunday Times* survey (see the manuscript letters from Mead to be found in Box 3, file a. of the Gorer archive).

The success of the American study led publishers to approach him about the possibility of an English version but his own lack of knowledge and the dearth of published studies⁸ led him to suggest a great deal of research would be required. This was enough to scare most publishers off but in 1950 he was contacted by the editor of the *People* who offered Gorer the services of the research department of Odhams Press. So it was that the project saw the light of day, sponsored by a popular Sunday paper.⁹ It was a similar approach made by the *Sunday Times* in 1957 which led to the television survey, but it is with the cosmopolitan view of the high-flying scholar that Gorer first approached the material fact of British television once he had agreed to take on the challenge put forward by the paper in 1957. The three pages of his 'Notes on Television 20/10/57' deposited among the Gorer papers at the Mass-Observation archive at the University of Sussex give us a first hint at what somebody in Gorer's position – that of a highly literate, anthropologically experienced and even psychoanalytically aware viewer – might bring to the study of television. Naturally our horizons are vastly extended now in terms of how we might approach the social fact of television and its audiences, but we should set our minds back to the 1950s. Gorer was, no doubt, well aware of Tom Harrisson's early insistence on observation and 'looking' in the Mass-Observation movement of which Harrisson was a co-founder.¹⁰ It is this view of the world which Gorer picks up on when he characterises television as a 'key-hole' or

hole in the wall. It is a desire-gratifying machine, satisfying our 'scoptophilic', voyeuristic, spying desires (it was almost two decades before Laura Mulvey (1975) was to characterise film in relation to notions of gendered gazes and desire). It is only as a non-committal spy-hole that Gorer suggests that television 'has any claims to be considered as a novel communications medium.' (p.1) In all other respects (outside the constraints of screen size), 'the technique of "entertainment" is strictly cinematographic.' (ibid).¹¹

Gorer does admit that television 'may have a slightly hypnotic effect' (p.2) and might in fact have the sedative effect which some commentators feared. But, he emphasises, it is not only on this psychosomatic level that television might have any direct influence. His argument prefigures the position of the French situationists or latter-day theorists of postmodernism. 'For the non-selective watcher', he suggests, 'the inconsequential sequence of programmes must, surely, result in the "devaluation of all values".' The constant switching of topic matter – from

⁸ Since Mayhew, he writes, there has been a certain amount of 'slumming sociology' but no studies 'of ideals or values or motives' (1955, p.2).

⁹ Which it is highly unlikely that Gorer ever read himself. It should be noted that it was the *Sunday Times* (under the editorship of Harold Evans) that, with prompting from Gorer agreed to undertake a survey of English sexual attitudes to form an update to the data on such matters contained in the original English character study. See Gorer (1971).

¹⁰ On Harrisson and Mass-Observation see Stanton (1997).

¹¹ Although I am not suggesting that Gorer makes the same points as Mulvey.

familiar to exotic, from serious to lightweight and so-forth – requires, in his view, an impossible effort from the viewer resulting in a 'detached view of everything as entertainment'. In this regard Gorer felt that television would actually be pretty unimportant (a conclusion he claims is supported by American research). On this basis, he argues that the BBC is a worse culprit than ITV. The latter's commercial breaks serving to allow viewers to change their focus or "set".

Fifties television, however, in Gorer's view, would result in the direction of a levelling to a "one class middle-class" society (John Major's vision of a 'classless society is, of course, a long way off). Television projects social models which contain little variation; 'people like us' seems to be the general aim. In conclusion he notes a number of effects- one relates to the general sense of television as entertainment and this he calls 'short time-span'. Television's influence is almost contemporaneous with 'recognition followed quickly by forgetfulness.' Another point is that 'material must be mediocre'. The whole of Shakespeare, he suggests, would not fill one week's broadcasting. Television is necessarily a 'thin and diffuse art'.

Another point is interesting – what he calls lowering of spontaneous fantasy. This is a direct reflection on his own experience. His dreams have become less interesting and elaborate since he started watching. The caveat to this, however (and this sets his whole view apart from more contemporary

research) is that the notes he has written are conceived after ten days of watching. He is not a habitual viewer, we must conclude. He has sat himself in front of the television for the occasion, mimicking the position of those he is investigating.

In a document in the archive dated 6/7/57 Gorer sums up his reading of Leo Bogart's 1956 study *The Age of Television*. All the material there convinces Gorer that the questionnaire that he is developing for the *Sunday Times* is covering the significant ground of the American research. The only absence is that in the US, the time at which the first television is purchased is a significant variable. In individual cases the 'new toy' effect means that viewing patterns intensify, but more significantly, for the population as a whole, the earlier the purchase the greater the attention to other mass media – a phenomenon for which the term 'media mindedness' has been given. For Gorer this is possibly the result of the fact that the first sets purchased in the US were the property of the prosperous upper and middle classes. In this situation the television habit percolated downwards through the social class ranks. Gorer does not consider feel that this process is repeated in the UK.

For Gorer, in this unpublished note, the main thrust of the American work misses the areas which he particularly wants to concentrate upon in the English study, namely changes in patterns of leisure, sociability and home routine, and the fantasy role of television personalities. With respect to the former

category Gorer speculates in a document dated 20/7/57 and entitled 'Television-possible changes':

1) changes in sociability with less pubs, cafes and public entertainment. He suggests there will be an increase in what he calls 'television-parties' and a concomitant decrease in contact with other people.

2) alterations in patterns of consumption; e.g. more bottled beer, less draft, more easy-to-prepare home meals (the American experience might already have prompted this observation, see Marling, 1995).

3) alterations in arrangement of the domestic space, especially the living room; the different evaluation of other household goods; alterations of time-schedules as shows develop a 'not-to-be-missed reputation' and new disciplinary regimes for children based around television as reward.

An other aspect of this new world he notes is the way television personalities became substitutes for 'real' people. Invoking a language which an anthropologist such as his mentors Benedict and Mead might have formulated, talking, as he does, of people 'living emotionally in a world of symbols'.

He also predicts changes in the world of hobbies (again we might contrast the work of Marling which shows that in the USA the 1950s saw a blossoming of certain hobbies such as the painting by numbers movement, even if many saw this somehow as a 'debased' hobby, but that might be the point – the television age ushers in debased hobbies). All this is the speculation offered by Gorer prior to conducting the survey but it gives us the flavour of his interests.

The Survey Itself

The major technique employed in the research was 'a series of long interviews with a carefully selected proportional sample of English people between the ages of sixteen and sixty five, as well as 'a considerable group of school children' (Sunday Times, April 13th, 1958, p.14).

The first published part of his series opens with great portent:

On a typical evening this last winter, two out of every five English people- forty-one out of a hundred – were watching a television set. With the possible exception of listening to broadcast news bulletins during the gravest periods of the war, it seems probable that never in recorded history have so many English people been so concentrated in a single occupation.

a 'Do-it-yourself device'. Using the popular anthropological trope of a visitor from another planet he suggests that such a person, viewing humanoids engaged with their television sets, would almost certainly regard it as a 'do-it-yourself device for producing light hypnosis or a mild trance, a mechanical tranquiliser.' At this point the anthropologist in him invokes some comparative evidence about the small minority in all human societies for whom trance states are easily induced. In some societies this can be a valued condition, whereas in others it is something to be hidden. All the evidence of the survey suggest to Gorer that 'exposure to a television set is capable of developing the potential for mild trance-states in a small, but not insignificant section of the English population; and that probably for nearly all viewers this instrument has a slightly hypnotic effect.' For most viewers he suggests this 'hypnoidal effect' is not significant. For them it is acting as no more than a mild sedative, simply making them more relaxed. Overall, however, it may 'make for a slightly more apathetic political electorate'. (Interestingly this speculation, or at least how it should be judged, he regards as outside his 'competence'. Nowhere, of course does he deal with any of the debates surrounding public service broadcasting and the Reithian legacy). The beneficial relaxant qualities of television, however, are to be seen as dependent on the individual's selective viewing. 'Whose hand is on the switch?' was a notorious headline (and predates the fascinating questions offered by Ann Gray (1992) in more recent times.) Failure to turn the set off can

result in serious problems; 'some watchers are entranced' and the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports cases of thrombosis in the legs of television watchers.

Gorer reports that 'there is considerably less addictive viewing in the London area than in the rest of the country.' Overall, however, the prognosis would seem to be gloomy: 'if the activities of addicts are contrasted with those of selective viewers one gets a picture of almost total inactivity, of lack of interest in anything except television.' The only activities which do not suffer are gardening in men and knitting in women (which is encouraged by television viewing). Addicts are more positive about television viewing. They admit that it has made them more sedentary, but it has given them more pleasure; what is more they are convinced that it is good for their children. They are convinced that they get new ideas from television and that television is not a time-waster. But Gorer goes so far as to draw the parallel with alcohol in that whether through principle or through anxiety there is a segment of the population who he describes as 'abstainers'. Television addicts are like the alcoholic 'lost in their gross indulgence' and family life if not wrecked is 'at least emptied of nearly all its richness and warmth'. Perhaps Gorer gives himself away when he suggests that there is a pool of potential viewers which includes people who have put off the moment of purchase until their children have completed their education: 'these admirable parents deserve more recognition than they are ever likely to receive publicly...'

In the second article in the series, Gorer continues along the theme of television as drug or stimulant, referring to television as a mechanical tranquiliser, given that by far the commonest response people gave to the question why they had bought a television was the desire for relaxation. Women addicts, as he puts it, emphasise the added pleasure that television introduces into their lives. However, half the elective viewers and a third of the 'addicts' 'consider that television has had little or no effect on their lives although 'as one goes down the social scale and up the age ladder the proportion of people who feel themselves so unaffected steadily decreases'. For Gorer the surprise finding of the survey as a whole is 'the very low intensity of television's impact on its viewers; it strokes rather than prods'. This lack of effect he sees in the fact that two out of five viewers surveyed will not name any programmes they dislike, they 'take what comes'.

Class preferences, he argues, are very marked, tastes of the middle and working-class viewers being almost an inversion:¹³ the middle-classes like topical programmes, discussions and brain trusts, serious music and ballet. Television addicts, in contrast, only like entertainment. Family viewing is largely a matter of 'give and take', but in those easy going times (contra Ann Gray) it is predominantly the woman, the wife and mother, who controls the tuning switch.' 'We usually agree on programmes – my husband is not allowed to watch sport' (as one middle-aged, middle-class London lady says).

Another striking point for Gorer is that the survey brings out 'the lack of emotional involvement of the viewers in what they see'. He bases this somewhat surprising remark on the fact that there is a complete absence of any mention of 'television personalities' in the survey. This is a great surprise to Gorer, who in the US some twenty years earlier had worked on similar surveys into cinema audiences where the Hollywood star machine was in full sway and as he puts it, in the big cities with their lonely crowds 'film stars took the place of the neighbours whom one shared with strangers...' The film star was the focus of as much love or hate as any person in 'real life' (for example 'the fantastic fuss' being made about the late James Dean). Despite what was in the newspapers of the time (the *TV Mirror Annual* of 1956 suggests that a 'star' system was being systematically developed at the time but viewers had not yet really taken it on board) the survey questions based on assumptions of some sort of star system had to be abandoned: 'viewers are almost completely detached emotionally

¹³ This is similar to Bourdieu's conclusions in *Distinction* which were also, of course, based on survey work. A somewhat opposed view was posited in an early business studies-oriented approach to the television audience. Goodhardt, Ehrenberg and Collins (1975) suggest that while AB social classes may watch slightly less television the overall viewing patterns are similar. They suggest that instead of being complex and differentiated, viewing behaviour and audience appreciation appear to follow a few general and simple patterns operating across the board. AB preferences for more 'serious' material are not revealed, they suggest, in their actual viewing practices.

from the figures who appear on their screens.' Gorer suggests that this detachment might be linked to the size of the television image and the familiarity of the watching environment. The mildness of impact is also to be seen in its role in daily conversation, where it can be compared with the weather as a topic for talk (an almost exact parallel, he suggests). Presumably he is thinking of Malinowski's description of 'phatic communication' here: 'for the majority it is a comfortable neutral topic to keep the ball rolling in some company'. Television then is sedative rather than stimulant. When the people surveyed suggest that television has given them new interests, what this means is that people find 'that they can watch, without too much boredom, programmes devoted to subjects or pursuits with which they were formerly unacquainted'. In order to further test the 'effect' on knowledge, recognition tests of television personalities were carried out. Photos of politicians such as Selwyn Lloyd or John Foster Dulles went unacknowledged, whereas Mary Malcolm came out as easily the best-known person, largely because a large proportion of women correctly identified her. Gorer notes, 'English women it appears – I have often had a vague suspicion – pay serious attention only to other women'.¹⁴ These tests bring out a more rounded perception of the 'addicts'¹⁵ (who are increasingly pictured as dupes in the sense of the Frankfurt school). They are able to make fewer identifications than the selective viewers of people who are in the news but not pictured on TV, a situation that is reversed when they are asked to identify

people who appear regularly on television as programme hosts or presenters. The addicts misidentified the politicians variously as actors, journalists, or pop singers. This material leads Gorer to conclude that attempts to use television for essentially educational or instructional ends are doomed to failure. It cannot function as an 'illustrated radio'.¹⁶

¹⁴ Gorer had something of a talent for such barbed remarks. In a note to his English character study he writes of the *New Statesman and Nation*, 'the organ of the left-wing intelligentsia, runs a feature entitled 'This England' which consists of short excerpts from the Press which can make its readers feel superior or amused' (1951: 49n).

¹⁵ It should be noted that James Halloran's report written in 1964 (Halloran, 1971) uses this term also, but the tone is more judgmental:

"When we study the addict (defined in purely quantitative terms – say over twenty-five hours per week) we find a distinct pattern emerging. For here are the people from a relatively low socio-economic position, having left school at fifteen or less. They show little or no discrimination. They are prepared to watch almost anything (it goes without saying what their choices are). They read the *Mirror*, *People* and *News of the World*. The addiction spreads across the media and the same people are likely to be high consumers of comics, pulp literature and the cinema" (p.20).

¹⁶ Postman (1985), in contrast, does concede that in certain places 'television is mostly used as if it were radio' (pp.87-88). Not, of course, in the USA.

The third part of the survey addressed 'Home-Life, Habits and Hobbies'. Here Gorer makes the interesting observation that television, psychologically speaking, should be placed amongst those household possessions termed 'consumer goods' (rather than durable). It is, Gorer suggests, a member of the group of 'nourishing' goods such as food and drink, rather than the labour-saving devices becoming important at the time (washing machine, phone, fridge). In fact, out of those surveyed, two-fifths who have television have no other form of durable good in this sense.

Gorer's questionnaire elicits responses about the geography of television use within the home, a topic which has become central to some of the later audience work dealing with the domestic context of viewing (exemplified in the shift in Morley's work from an emphasis on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to the domestic context of viewing, see Morley 1992 or Ang 1995). Only one in fifty (2%) site their television in the kitchen (now an increasingly popular venue for second sets), while the same number move it about on a trolley. One if five keep it in their 'dining-room', mostly middle class these, he remarks. The remainder keep the set 'in a room which is not used for cooking, eating or sleeping'. This room has a variety of names depending upon the interlocutor. Nearly half the professional and managerial class call this room a 'lounge', Gorer notes 'with raised eyebrow', but for most the name is more prosaic, sitting-room, front-room, middle-room and so on. To confuse us slightly, two out of three families

eat their evening meal in the room in which the set is kept, but half of these never switch it on while they are eating. For television viewing half the rooms have a special television lamp. One in fifteen switch off all the lights while the remainder keep the light on. For reasons that he does not make clear, he is surprised to find that the selective and addictive viewers show no variation in lighting.

In terms of hobbies, about which he has already given us some hints, two-thirds of women knit or do needlework at the same time as they watch. The addicts are more given to knitting which requires less attention than needlework. Some women also read or do the housework. Only a third just watch. When we come to the men we find that three out of four do nothing but watch. The remainder read or go to sleep. Some things don't change, although 'a very small group of men knit or make rugs'¹⁷. In relation to bedtime habits, Gorer suggests that on average those households with television go to bed slightly later, although in general this is a class linked trait: 'the higher the class, the later the time of going to bed, and of getting up in the morning for work'.

¹⁷ This might require some sociological unpicking.

At the present time, he suggests, the acquisition of television is the most important single reason for changing patterns of socialisation in the evening. More significant, two-thirds of the respondents suggest, than 'marriage, parenthood, bereavement, growing up, growing old, or moving to a new town'. In short the major changes can be summed up in a single sentence: 'people stay at home much more, and tend to abandon the pastimes, hobbies and other occupations which had previously filled their evenings.' The extensive questions, which Gorer had framed for the patterns of change in social life, remain contained in the archive. His own impressions, however, are recorded in the article. For the poorest households, he suggests, television is a real 'boon', especially those younger mothers left for long hours with children because of a husband's long working hours. Where one partner in a marriage, however, is an 'addict, television is 'a wrecker of domestic happiness'. Gorer's impression is that 'it is the husband's addiction which is more destructive to marital happiness.' More generally, however, he describes the diminution of family life, the decline of sociability. Particularly it is the 'disappearance of intimate family conversation'. Here he alludes to the findings of Young and Willmott. In their classic study of family life in East London they noted that:

The growth of television compensates for the absence of amenities outside the home, and serves to support the family in its isolation. Instead of going out to the cinema or the pub, the family sits

night by night around the magic screen in its place of honour in the parlour. (Young and Willmott, 1962 [1957], p.143)

They quote an informant as saying that 'The tellie keeps the family together. None of us ever have to go out now.' (ibid.) A respondent in Gorer's survey puts a slightly different spin on this:

There is no family life now: we watch television until it is time for bed. We used to talk to each other more – there's no conversation like there used to be. I'd like to see that family atmosphere again.

Television keeps the family together, but somehow erodes its intimacy. It keeps people at home and many replied that they preferred to be at home on certain nights without being visited. There is a slight contradiction in the replies here, Gorer argues. Some suggest they entertain more but go out less. Some television owners he surmises 'are unwilling to go out in turn to those desolate houses which have no television set.' Selective viewers still maintain such social diversions as card-playing but many now entertain friends by letting them watch television. Overall, it is the cinema and the pub which suffer from the appearance of television.¹⁸ It is those actively hostile to television 'who most frequently visit concerts, museums, evening

¹⁸ Christine Geraghty is pursuing the changes in the social space of cinema in the 1950s. Roughly speaking as family entertainment is increasingly captured by television within the home the cinema becomes a space of youthful rebellion and increasingly viewed as a 'dangerous' place.

classes, trade union and political meetings and whist drives'. These and the young 'who frequent coffee bars'.

In the fourth and final part of the Gorer's survey he considers television and the growing child. Once again he alludes to the East End study of Young and Willmott. In their study they describe an incident where a baby's pram is placed right against the television screen. While this is an extreme case in the East End study Gorer makes reference to it because in his limited sample of mothers who have young babies two-thirds do in fact place baby regularly in front of the screen, using it as a form of pacifier. For older children 'television is part of the routine of... normal life'. It sounds quaint but in Gorer's estimation the biggest potential threat of television lay in its potential for interfering with homework. A series of quotations from children themselves indicate the range of problems faced in doing homework in rooms with the television on. If anything the survey found that the differences in habits of children from homes with and without television were not as great as might have been expected. Contrary to Gorer's expectations there was no appreciable difference in cinema going for children.¹⁹ The beginnings of a complex youth culture can be seen evolving in the fact that:

The school children from homes with television, particularly the girls over 13, are more likely to be members of youth clubs, to visit espresso bars, go to dances, own record-players and collect records of "pop" singers.

While television seems to become less and less important as children grow up and acquire independence, Gorer does assert that the programmes which retain an interest for them are shows dedicated to youth. Scheduling of these, he suggests, may be 'presenting a pattern of appropriate teenage behaviour for youngsters in the working classes who previously had no model at all'.²⁰ With the exception of *6.5 Special*, however, 'it is a very rare teenager who will give up any other activity to watch a favourite television programme'. All in all, Gorer's assessment of the changes he documents is a balanced one. If anything there is a decline in children's hobbies, it interferes with their reading, keeps them at home and out of their beds. 'How these changes', he writes, 'should be viewed is to a great extent a matter of private judgement',²¹ although, he suggests,

¹⁹ This point is, however, in direct contradiction to the research of Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince who, in 1958, published *Television and the Child*. As Halloran suggests, their research found that young people frequented the cinema less when television provided an alternative form of entertainment (1971 [1964], p.14).

²⁰ This is an intriguing insight which suggests that it is television that actually opens up the space for thinking of youth culture as a working-class phenomenon.

²¹ It should be noted that there was something of an atmosphere of moral panic (in the sense developed by Stanley Cohen, 1972) over children and television. Gorer's was a sober voice of reason and the report was to be quoted in the chamber of the House of Commons. Some sense of this is to be gleaned from a feature film such as Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1962). The two central figures of this classic film are not the 'Teddy Boys' of outraged tabloid reports of the day, but instead 'Telly Boys' with the film harking incessantly upon the, to our eyes, rudimentary advertising of the day.

all this staying in might exacerbate the English tendency to shyness and lay the foundations of television addiction in later life. Certainly those children in houses with television will tend to go to bed later but as he suggests this matter of bedtime varies chiefly with class (the 'higher' the class the earlier the bedtime). This latter area of enquiry leads Gorer to send out one of his barbs when he suggests in an ambiguous deadpan that 'the English middle classes are almost unique, among the societies which have been carefully studied, in placing a high moral value on youngsters going to bed early.'

As this is the final piece in the series Gorer rounds up the survey with a few sentiments of his own. Far from any hysteria he is fairly sanguine about the spread and development of television. All participants in the survey were asked if television was a time-waster. Curiously, as he puts it, only one grammar school boy saw the 'implicit fallacy' in the question. 'Well you waste your own time,' he said, 'You don't have to watch the television. It isn't television which wastes time, it's you'. What else would the 'average watcher' be doing? Gorer ponders. Going out to the cinema, visiting a pub? Asides from the loss of sociability how serious is all this? One respondent suggested that television was a time-waster, but one which relaxed the watcher. Slipping into a clumsy vernacular Gorer concurs. 'You can't say fairer than that.'

End of Transmission.

Barwise and Ehrenberg (1990) have suggested that while punditry abounds on the subject of television, 'what often seems to be missing from these debates is any real reference to the audience, other than perhaps a mention of the ratings – the numbers of people who watch a programme' (p.3). This bizarre suggestion misses out a whole raft of work in cultural and media studies devoted to just this subject. There is even a ready-made and generally accepted 'history' of audience research which progresses through 'effects', 'uses and gratifications' until we arrive at the 'encoding/decoding' paradigm.²² As I have already hinted this new work itself gave way to what has been viewed as a more 'ethnographic' approach looking at the domestic context of viewing and even paying attention to the 'cultural' nature of audiences.²³ In some sense we have come full circle because Gorer was interested in many of the questions which are now being posed.²⁴ The answers he obtained may be different but then that might be a reflection of the time at which he was looking. It is hard to know what induces forgetfulness of Gorer and his

²² Stuart Hall conceiving of this last shift very much in Kuhnian terms, for a survey of these developments see Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998.

²³ The exact nature of 'cultural' is difficult to pin down. With identity politics and the notion of nation all being in flux we are left only with the rather fuzzy concept of 'culture' which is everything and nothing. History and politics have a tendency to fade away (see Hutnyk, 1996).

²⁴ There is perhaps a distant echo here of Curran's remarks regarding what he called the 'new revisionism' in media studies. See Curran (1990).

work. No mention of it is made in the first report of the Television Research Committee established by the government in July 1963 (Halloran 1971 [1964]). This despite the fact that its author, James Halloran, covers similar ground. Indeed he alludes to the relative failure, in some eyes, of the Pilkington Committee of 1960, and quotes Baroness Wootton in respect of the poor quality of the sociological evidence on offer.²⁵ While Gorer's research was being undertaken he fretted about the publication of rival work being conducted by the BBC's own Audience Research Department (as it had come to be known) under the direction of William Belson. It is in Belson's 1967 book *The Impact of Television* that we find the merest trace of Gorer. Relegated to Belson's selective bibliography we find at number 279 Gorer, G. (1958) *Television in Our Lives*, a report by the *Sunday Times*. Gorer had intended that the television work be published as a two volume study by the Cresset Press with whom he had been in negotiation. Nothing came of this and for the present the reasons remain obscure. Gorer gives us hints of his own. His own relative failure to produce academic work of the highest standard he puts down in the archive to his facility for journalism and reviewing which kept him away from the harder slog of monographs. So the larger television project was dropped, just as in later life his intellectual pursuits were given over increasingly to writings for the Royal Horticultural Society on the subject of rhododendrons and other plants for which he retained a 'Voltairean fervour' (Gorer, 1955: 2). Neil Postman quotes Huxley²⁶ and

his observation concerning 'man's almost infinite appetite for distraction'. Certainly Gorer's own appetites in this regard did not extend to television but he would have appreciated Postman's observation on the disappearance from public debate of the question, Does television shape culture or merely reflect it? As Postman notes 'The question has largely disappeared as television has become our culture.' (1987 [1985]: 80). I'm not sure, however, that Gorer would have liked it.

²⁵ It is hard to judge the impact of this report itself. Halloran writes of the analysis of television 'But what has the socialist scientist to offer?' (p.11). Although I quote from the fifth reprint of the report I feel that this was surely intended to read 'social scientist'.

²⁶ Not that he was the first to invoke Huxley's *Brave New World* in the same breath as television. See, for example, the opening remarks of Brecht scholar Martin Esslin's *The Age of Television* (1982).

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Apart from America in the previous decade, he suggests that no other time in human history can offer a parallel to the situation 'in which nearly half the adult population are exposed to the same stimulus at the same time.' On this Sunday evening of Gorer's imagination two thirds of the people with a television set were watching it, while quite a few others without would be watching the set of a friend. In terms of social class these watchers are a 'pretty representative cross-section of the English population'. People with children under the age of sixteen are particularly well represented. As he puts it, no other Sunday occupation can claim anything like the same allegiance, despite the immense popularity in earlier years of radio of shows such as *It's That Man Again* (from the *Daily Express* tag introducing any reference to Hitler). ITMA, the radio comedy built around Tommy Handley, was attracting weekly audiences of up to 15 million or almost 40% of the entire population at its peak (see Crisell, 1997: 58). Now, however, only 'one in ten was listening to radio' (while a further one in ten spent the evening reading). Readers were far more likely not to own televisions and indeed 'reading is particularly popular with the middle-aged members of the upper middle and middle classes'. Television, then, has 'quite a tendency' to interfere with social life and 'the public practice of religion'. However, it should be noted that 'television ownership was somewhat less influential among the people who visited pubs and clubs'.

For the Saturday night preceding Gorer's imaginary Sunday, practically the same proportion were to be found watching television but they were not necessarily the same people. Slightly more than half of owners of sets only watched for one of the two nights. About a quarter of the population, however, were watching both evenings:

It is within this group that are found the television addicts, the people for whom television has replaced nearly every other form of social and intellectual life.

It is, of course, interesting that Gorer should focus initially on the weekend, but this stems back, as he points out, to his own earlier study of the English. Weekend inactivity he suggests in the results of the Television Survey is covered by three main synonyms: "resting" (neutral), "lazy" or "idle" (overtones of self-reproach), or "relaxing" which he suggests carries some 'overtones of approval, as if there were some positive merit in inactivity.' For Gorer this new positive evaluation of inactivity is an important development on the earlier study and represents the 'greatest change in the psychology of the English'. This justification of 'sloth, to use the ecclesiastical term' as he writes, marks a major change. The earlier work suggested that a quarter of the population consider idleness 'to be one of their major faults'. Now they are relaxing 'and thereby vaguely doing themselves moral, physical and intellectual good'. For Gorer this new self-assessment is linked closely to the spread of television. Any

religious types seeking solace in the broadcasting of religious services and its possible relationship to the decline in church-going finds none in the survey: 'an almost infinitesimal group (less than two in a hundred) watched the religious services on television.'

The piece makes the important point that the nature of television ownership and distribution is rapidly changing with an increasing preponderance of 'working class' owners of television. On the basis of the changes which the survey reveals, Gorer supposes that the television audience in years to come 'will be at least two-thirds working class'.

A certain hostility, he suggests, is evident in the division between owners and non-owners of television, irrespective of their class origin. 'In general, the impression is conveyed that quite a number of those who do not have television feel defensively superior to the rest'. The owners themselves have their own theories, he reports. For some the fact that those without television think that they are a cut above the rest is just a form of snobbery. For some working-class correspondents, those without television are just misers, while others consider the non-owners plain stupid. As Gorer reports the finding 'about a third of television owners imply that there is something seriously amiss with the character and intelligence of those who do not exercise the possibility of acquiring a set...' One other explanation given by respondents is that those without sets already have too full a 'social life'. This was particularly the response from the younger respondents who see television as

the poor person's substitute for a full social life. Why acquire an instrument which 'exercises a bad influence on their children and dominates their home'. He quotes a 29-year-old surveyor from Leeds who suggests of people without television that 'they are sensible enough to want to do something with their time'. The note of distaste suggested here in an albeit minority of correspondents prompts Gorer to make an interesting suggestion:

It is as though they considered the television set an *uncanny* object, almost with a will of its own, in some way analogous to the "influencing machine" which is so regular a feature in the delusions of many mad people.

Given Gorer's own familiarity with Freudian literature, his italicisation of uncanny here invokes the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich*. He notes that this is also the fear of those without television sets. A middle-aged factory foreman from Clitheroe suggests "I think it eventually rules your life." These fears for Gorer are not entirely unjustified 'there is a group of television addicts whose lives are almost completely dominated by the machine' (we must also wonder at this choice of word, since machine is hardly usual¹²). In fact this usage signals his depiction of television as

¹² Although this too might be a Freudian reference. Jerry Mander (1978) refers to the 1919 article by a friend of Freud, Dr Viktor Tausk, 'On the Origin of the "Influencing Machine" in Schizophrenia.' For Mander, 'this "influencing machine" sounds an awful lot like television' (p.111).

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