

9th October 2008

Entertaining ourselves to death

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I was chatting with a friend the other day and I asked her what she had planned for the afternoon. She said that as she'd been working all day she had no plans except getting home and relaxing.

Fine, I thought, and how are you going to relax? She said, the way I always do ... lie on the sofa and switch on the telly. I asked what was on telly that evening and she didn't know, but she didn't really care.

It's amazing how the idea of chilling out, kicking back, taking it easy have become synonymous with the television. Reading a book is too much like hard work. As is playing an instrument, going for a swim, to the cinema, theatre, a gig, going for a walk on the beach with a friend and having a bit of decent conversation, all of which are perfectly acceptable ways of relaxing. So why the television?

Have you watched television lately? There is so much nonsense; quiz programmes that demand the intelligence of a monkey, moronic soap operas and of course the celebrity chat shows, parading what must be the lowest common denominator when it comes to 'entertainment'. So why are these programmers bombarding the viewers with such rubbish?

I recently spoke to a friend who works for the American network ABC and asked her about this 'dumbing down' of television content. She argued that they weren't dumbing down, but giving the people what they want. Viewers want entertainment so we entertain them.

Around the time of WW2, a pair of new books, George Orwell's 1984 and Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, shook the world with their visions of the future.

Both warned, in their own way, that we would end up being manipulated and oppressed by authoritarian regimes. Let's have a look at some key points:

Orwell warned that we would be dictated to by the oppressors, who would punish us if we didn't obey. Huxley predicted that we would come to love our oppression and accept it willingly.

Orwell warned that the authoritarians would ban books and that this would eradicate meaningful conversation. Huxley predicted that there would be no reason to ban a book because there would be no one who wanted to read one.

Orwell warned that the oppressors would play on man's fear of pain and punishment and that people would be controlled by the threat of inflicting this pain. Huxley predicted that our leaders would use our almost infinite appetite for pleasure and distractions and control us by inflicting this very pleasure.

Orwell warned that what we fear would destroy our ability to think for ourselves. Huxley predicted that what we love would deprive us of our autonomy, maturity and as a result our capacity to think.

Orwell's world was, of course, a caricature, but his vision was so frightening, that it remains the standard image that commentators like to use when accusing our leaders of depriving us of our liberties.

But while we've kept an eye out for Orwell's big, bad world, we have moved easily and unwittingly into Huxley's. Through our own compliance, our implicit agreement and our need to be entertained, we have allowed the brainwashing that, had it been explicitly imposed, we would never have accepted.

In 1949 Huxley wrote to Orwell, predicting that "Within the next generation I believe that the world's leaders will discover that infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient, as instruments of government, than clubs and prisons, and that the lust for power can be just as completely satisfied by suggesting people into loving their servitude as by flogging them and kicking them into obedience."

So what's on telly tonight?