

CHAPTER XVI

I Watch Westerns

MY WIFE AVERRED that there must be a touch of sadism in my unconscious; otherwise, why should I be watching those "shooting pictures" as she called them. She may have been right, because when she presumed to turn the dial when a western was on the screen I felt an inclination to commit mayhem.

Another amateur psychologist is a bit more lenient in his diagnosis of my case; he says my addiction to these horse operas is evidence of a retarded mentality. I have a bad case of "juvenilism" he asserts. He may have something there, for when I reflect on the substance of these blood-and-thunder dramas I realize there is nothing in them but entertainment. They add nothing to my fund of knowledge and are singularly devoid of "messages." I think I like to watch them for that very reason; my mind seems to have an allergy to the problems which disturb the socially conscious folks; which proves my "juvenility" I suppose.

And yet, as the saying goes, all things are relative. If I like westerns because of my lack of mental equipment, what kind of TV programs appeal to those who are better equipped? What are the admittedly mature watching? Looking into the matter, I find that they are partial to the polit-

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ical speech. They never miss an opportunity to listen to—and watch the face of—the President, a congressman or even the mayor of the town. Anyone who qualifies as “distinguished” will win their attention, and when he has delivered his speech or *obiter dictum* they delight in analyzing his oracular wisdom or in discussing his hidden meaning. Whether he has divested himself of his opinion on domestic or foreign affairs, they have their opinions of his opinion, and then they listen to the opinion of the speech delivered by a news commentator to gain support of their own opinion.

I found, too, that next in the order of preference by these mature persons is a panel discussion of current social and political problems, particularly if the participants are noted for their erudition. They dote on panels.

Now, I admit to some acquaintance with that kind of program. Politeness has sometimes forced me to suffer the political speech and the professorial palaver. But, if I am in control of the dial the ratings of such programs are invariably reduced by one. That is sufficient proof of my inadequacy, no doubt. On the other hand, can it be that the buncombe of political oratory and the fakery that characterizes the discussion of public affairs are on a par with the nonsense of the westerns I adore? If that is so, then the time and thought put into these programs by people with pretensions to intellectuality refute these pretensions. Can it be that they, not I, suffer from juvenilism?

In support of my claim to a measure of maturity, I point out that I am not deceived by my westerns. I know that horses cannot run as fast or as long as do those on the screen, and I suspect that the incredibly fast draw is made faster by some trick of the camera. The high cliff from

which the heroine hangs, in imminent danger, is probably not more than six inches higher than she is tall, and the ocean into which she falls and from which she is rescued by the hero is only a studio tank. Then, again, even as I thrill to the development of the plot, I know that in exactly thirty minutes (with time out for commercials) the "good" guy will overcome the "bad" guy and justice will triumph. Why, then, do I watch westerns? Because I find the action entertaining and diverting—which proves my juvenility.

Then, again, there might be another reason for my partiality to westerns. The characters are rugged individuals, ingenious in their ability to fend for themselves, under all manner of adverse conditions, and asking for help from nobody. Only "bums" will solicit the price of a drink, and these characters are looked down upon. But the settlers do not claim the "right" to be supported by society, and manage to make their way on their own steam. They represent the kind of character that has gone out of style in the country, and yet it is the kind of character we all would like to claim for ourselves. The stories are clean black-and-white stories, without psychological shadings, in which crime invariably is punished. Criminals take their punishment like men, never pleading "temporary insanity" to justify their crimes, and there never is a hint of homosexuality or other psychological quirks in the stories. Nobody tries to "uplift" his neighbor, nobody psychoanalyzes anybody else, nobody preaches "togetherness." Everybody is sturdy, self-reliant and self-responsible. Even the criminal element—the thieves, cardsharps and murderers—ply their trades with audacity and pay the penalty, when caught, like men. The watcher

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identifies himself with the hero, hates the villain and cheers when the latter is shot down.

Compare this with the humbuggery of political pontification on the screen. The politician who stands before the "mike" is not interested in conveying knowledge to his audience, only with creating an "image." Therefore, after asserting his undying antipathy toward sin, he proceeds with half-truths and outright lies to convince his audience of his wisdom and his unflinching devotion to duty. His purpose is to impress upon those who listen to him the fact that he is the indispensable man, the gladiator fighting for the interests of "the people," the knight in shining armor who battles the forces of evil. What is the purpose of his speech (written by a "ghost")? To win votes. If he believes his audience consists mostly of laboring men, he will tell them how he fights for the men who toil and against the "interests." If it is the votes of teachers he is after, he will stress what teachers want to hear. For the farmers he has another kind of speech. And the business man he soothes with promises of relief from taxes. And so on. The mind of the politician was delineated by Machiavelli several centuries ago, and nothing has happened since to improve upon or change that picture. What, then, is to be gained from listening to him? Certainly not wisdom, certainly not truth, certainly not knowledge—unless, indeed, one is interested in knowing how he performs, just as one might be interested in learning how a magician performs his tricks. To accord the political speech any serious consideration is, I believe, on a par with a child's belief in fairy tales; that is, it is a mark of immaturity.

Listening to panel discussions is equally silly. This will be seen when the conditions of the performance are considered. Four men and a moderator undertake to expound their view on a subject that could not be covered in less than a good sized book. They have thirty minutes in which to discuss the subject. With time out for commercials, and remarks by the moderator, each of the speakers has at most five minutes in which to put over his ideas. But, the moderator cannot allow five-minute speeches; that would be boring to the audience. So, he interrupts frequently to bring in another speaker, and the end result is a minute for each man, several times during the half hour, to make points. What can he do in a minute? Nothing but wise crack, make some pointed remark intended to show how much he knows of the subject under discussion or to place the others at a disadvantage. There cannot be any continuity of discussion, no orderly development of a theme, only a battle of wits. But, the intent is to give the audience the benefit of the wisdom of the four panelists, or food for thought on an important matter. If the listeners give serious consideration to the panelists, and continue the discussion on the basis of what they heard, they are like children playing house.

The subject matter of the panel discussion usually falls into one of two kinds: something affecting a foreign country, or a domestic policy. Since the majority of the listeners never were in the foreign country, or know little about it beyond what they read in the newspapers, anybody can qualify as an expert. The panelists usually consist of newspaper correspondents, whose knowledge of the country under discussion has been gained by a two-day or two-week residence in it, during which time they spoke to a couple of

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local newspaper editors or government officials, and came away with a notebook full of impressions thus gained; that makes them experts on everything from the economy of the nation to its political set-up. Usually, the correspondents carried with them on their visit certain preconceptions of the country and sought out confirmation of these preconceptions. This is what you get from the panel discussion.

If it is a domestic matter under discussion, you are likely to get a prejudicial view of the matter. If the moderator is a "liberal" (he usually is), he will get three panelists of his persuasion lined up against one conservative. The only chance for the conservative in this set-up is to be rude, to interrupt his adversaries, to admit nothing and to deny everything. If he is in the least fair or follows the rules of orderly discussion he will be swamped by sheer numbers, and the moderator will have gotten away with what he intended in the beginning. It might be some fun in watching such a performance, for the sheer delight of seeing a fencing match, but to give the discussion any serious consideration is silly; it is, in short, infantilism.

Returning to my westerns, I am fully aware of the fact that they are only tangentially historical, and I do not watch them to learn anything about the real story of the West. The facts about the "wild and woolly" have been recorded in a number of books, fully documented, and the picture they present is quite different from any stylized television tales. The outlaws, for instance, did not in fact have any code of honor, as they do in TV pictures, but were as grubby, venal, indecent, dissolute and unromantic as our own juvenile delinquents. And, like our delinquents, they were on the whole a cowardly lot, never giving the sucker a

break; they would shoot a man in the back and they were woman-killers if the occasion called for it. On the screen their behavior is sometimes excused on the ground of "bad breaks," even as our psychologists are wont to ascribe the disordered minds of delinquents to unfortunate upbringing; but history reveals them to be just a bad, inherently bad, lot.

The lawmen of the period were only a cut above the outlaws—usually they were "reformed" outlaws who frequently returned to type. The idealism with which the screenwriters endow the lawmen is pure fiction. The westerns which tell about sheriffs collaborating with outlaws are historically more correct than those which picture them as exemplars of the noble life. Even the "decent folk" of the West—including merchants, mayors and bankers—were not above doing a bit of "legal" cattle rustling, land grabbing and plain swindling; the disease of something-for-nothing was endemic then as it is now. The dance hall girls were not the lithe cuties, just out of a beauty shop, that the screen presents, but were the fat, homely, disgusting burlesque type of females—just whores. In short, the real West was coarse, uncouth and utterly unglamorous; it was no place in which to bring up children. The fact that the children who did grow up in that environment eventually did make a decent place of the country utterly disproves the theory of environmental conditioning.

Incidentally, the factual books on the West underline a fact that the script writers only touch upon: namely, that the West was cleaned up—meaning rid of outlawry—not by officialdom but by private enterprise. The public enforcement agent, even as today, was more interested in keeping

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his job than in doing it. He was quite averse to risking his life for the good of the community, at the going wage. Far more effective in bringing some sort of order to the West was the fact that every man carried his own government with him—in his holster. That was private enterprise with a vengeance.

Supplementing the private gun were the Pinkerton operatives and the railroad police—private enterprise. It was they who did what government is supposed to have some competence at doing, namely, the protection of life and property. Then, even as now, those who had something of value to protect were more likely to entrust the job to a professional policeman than to a political policeman. Which brings up a thought: would not the persons and the property of the citizens of New York be more secure if entrusted to a private police force? And would not the job be done at less cost to the citizenry?

Putting such questions aside, I like to watch these westerns, and my self-esteem does not suffer by my enjoyment. I feel quite content with myself as I watch the improbable antics of the impossible characters on the screen—and do a cross-word puzzle at the same time.

P.S. I forgot to mention the theory of a third psychologist who concerned himself with my case. He said that my watching westerns was evidence of "escapism." I was running away from something. But, he failed to say what it is that I am trying to escape. Maybe I am running away from psychology.