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They Want Their Mean TV

By KARAL ANN MARLING

The traditional network TV season peters out every spring shortly before the school year does, and from where this professor sits, television has been O.K. this year — a B or a B-plus. But why trust me? I'm in that pathetic demographic nobody pays any attention to — the "early geezers" that advertisers write off or consign to a bleak celebration of incontinence products and denture cleaners beginning with the nightly news.

For what it's worth, though, I thought life was rosy on the major-network prime-time dramas that I follow, much to the amusement of my cable-savvy students. Except when somebody's contract expired, necessitating an off-camera exit via brain tumor, "E.R.," "N.Y.P.D. Blue," "West Wing" and my other old favorites were satisfying because the formula guarantees speedy resolution of all life's problems. At the end of the hour, the Constitution, common sense or good science has restored order. Life goes on, with a reassuring feeling that things always turn out fine in a nation governed by laws, rules and human kindness.

But for that other group of viewers, the younger ones, the channel-surfers, the 56 percent of American kids with sets in their own bedrooms — my students and their siblings! — must-see TV apparently doesn't cut it. They're made of sterner stuff; they tell me they prefer to troll on the dark end of the dial, where the larger numbers appear and where the bottom-feeders play.

Where, for instance, "Jackass" subjected a guy wearing a cup to a series of kicks and whams in his most tender area courtesy of his so-called friends. "Don't try this at home!" read the disclaimers, aimed at preventing seventh-grade fans from maiming one another just for the fun of it. (Despite the copious disclaimers, copycats have been injured, seriously in at least one case. Undeterred, the show — now in reruns — will spawn a major motion picture this summer.) Or where the syndicated "Blind Date" has couples



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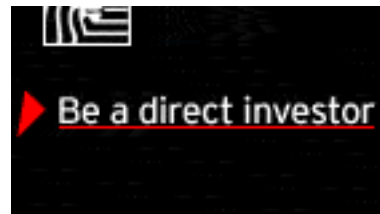
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engage in mean-spirited post-mortems about each other, for a scintillating balance of sex and verbal violence. Dating shows are a particularly rich vein of this modern maliciousness: "Change of Heart," "Dismissed," "Elimidate Deluxe."

And there is worse lurking in between the home shopping pitches and the infomercials for devices to refill your printer's ink cartridges: an unbridled meanness that represents the flip side of the entertainment of optimism purveyed to those who follow "E.R." But why? What have we of the Geritol set done wrong?

It is no news that humiliation — other people's discomfort — is pleasurable stuff. Back in the "golden age" of TV, inane game shows like "Beat the Clock" made human contestants do stupid pet tricks for prizes, long before David Letterman applied the idea to poodles and parakeets. The Nielsen ratings for the second week of May show that this meanness has begun to creep into the major network's prime-time lineups. The most recent incarnation of "Survivor" was in seventh place (behind "E.R." and "Law and Order"), with "Fear Factor" and "The Amazing Race" in the top 50.

These so-called "reality" shows are about watching ordinary — albeit cute-in-a-swimsuit — people sweat, fret, scream, scheme, eat bugs and diss one another in nastily amazing ways. And the younger members of the Nielsen families seem to look on with real interest, or with the same sort of horrified fascination that makes local TV stations speed to the scene of traffic accidents. They admit to loving the insect-eating and the trash-talking. They're mesmerized by the cable aesthetic, though a little puzzled, too. Why do the "contestants" do it? For the exposure, say some, with dreams of minor stardom in mind. For the money. For the fun?

I think reality TV may be symptomatic of a broader trend toward cultural nastiness that crept up on us with the advent of Jerry, Maury, Ricki, Montel and the other professional talkers who specialize in bleeping and screaming, as "guests" are subjected to verbal assaults from former spouses or secret gay admirers. (In the notorious Jenny Jones case, an actual off-camera murder ensued.) The tears and curses and venomous exchanges make any outlandish soap opera plot pale by comparison. But the question remains: what makes Americans watch? Is it a kind of bizarre revival of slapstick, a banana-peel joke raised to a surreal pitch? Is it an offshoot of the politics of accusation, exposé, sleaze and attack ads that dominated the Clinton years? Is Monica Lewinsky the mother of Fox? Is this what TV is all about for today's undergraduates?

The fact that the panels of combatants aren't stars in full makeup is important: it's easier to wish ill to an un-pretty, un-famous face with missing teeth and acne scars. There's a class bias at work, too. Clearly, these shrieking, incest-ridden families are not our kind of people. They're "trailer trash," with home-bleached hair and cheap nose jobs: Tonya Harding and Paula Jones, who recently duked it out on Fox (only because the courts wouldn't let Amy Fisher appear), don't have Ivy League diplomas and they don't shop at Talbots. And voyeurs everywhere can feel superior to Paula — whereas it's not so easy to put on airs in the televised presence of, say, Jennifer Aniston or Sarah Jessica Parker.

Coinciding with the end of the TV season have come the results of an opinion poll conducted by the New York-based research group Public Agenda. Of the 2,013 respondents, 70 percent decried the collapse of courtesy and respect for others in real life, out there on the highway where road rage prevails, in public places where trumpeting one's private business into cell phones is the norm and on sidewalks where the elderly and the infirm are routinely mowed down by the hurrying mob. The adults polled were quick to blame television for what they saw as a surge in bad behavior, and it is hard to disagree after an evening of "hilarious" home videos, with a studio audience in stitches when the bride trips and splats into the wedding cake. Or when Dr. Phil, the TV psychologist, rivets the attention of Oprah's followers by telling overweight guests that they really want to be that way. It's all their fault, in other words; they're dumb and lazy. Meanness in the name of pop psychology is still meanness, even if Dr. Phil smiles like a crazed alligator while calling down anathema on the unhappy people who seek his help.

The medium might be the real message here: nasty television produces nasty audiences. The undergraduates I teach often behave in what we fogeys regard as a boorish manner, reminiscent of the residents of the "Big Brother" house. They wear their hats indoors. They chomp noisily on snacks during class. They fiddle with their backpacks, snicker with their friends, let their cell phones ring and their watches beep away the quarter hours. Now, none of this is meant to be irritating or disrespectful; indeed, they are indignant if I point out that I'm not a TV set but a sensate, hard-working professor who is looking right at them. They have forgotten that a lecture is not a spectacle, a talk show minus commercials (a surprising number have to answer a call of nature about 20 minutes into a 50-minute class). That life is not viewed in one's living room, where mindless activity — rustling, rib-poking — rather than quiet attention seems to be the norm.

It's unconsidered spectatorship, I think, that fosters the birth of these good-natured barbarians in my lecture hall. The young are perpetual onlookers to

their own lives, thanks to TV: they have no responsibility for the yelling and the bloodshed — no stake in the mayhem, which makes it all too easy to enjoy wickedness from a distance. Merely watching things happen absolves the viewer of any responsibility for them. Those are somebody else's troubles on the screen, and, as such, of no real consequence to the kid with the bag of Doritos in the third row of my morning class, the lumpy kid with the Minnesota Twins cap on backward. The hurts of the chubby lady talking to Dr. Phil are no more real than the agonies of Wile E. Coyote, flattened by a steamroller. It's all TV. In a culture of images, we watch and we judge, and call for a pizza and wings, delivered. With a mouthful of Doritos, it is hard to empathize.

AT the same time, the genteel, predictable, feel-good fare offered by the major networks (with more to come next season, to calm post-9/11 trauma) is not of much interest to Generation Y or Z, or so their members tell me. For the clear-eyed young, the familiar dramatic conventions of conflict and resolution offer neither comfort nor stimulus: even in the bosom of the university, life is tougher than that, less predictable, and pretty nasty — at opposite poles from old-fashioned, denture-wearing, "Leave It to Beaver" TV-land, where everything turns out fine every time the clock ticks off another hour between 8 p.m. and 11 p.m. If questioned closely, my students will confess a passion for "I Love Lucy" reruns. They hate "Friends," but they like the fact that the solutions to the problems posed every episode by Lucy's zany insistence on a show-biz career are so bogus. They like the fact that Lucy will forever go on stuffing chocolates down her dress and making herself sick on patent medicine — that her life will always be a mess, until she divorces Desi, dies and finally turns up in a highly rated CBS special emceed by her children.

Ever since Newton Minow, the F.C.C. chairman, called much of television a "vast wasteland" in 1961, Americans have been blaming it indiscriminately for every social ill, from the rise of the hippies to the bad manners of people who talk in movie theaters. But old-fashioned hourlong drama can, perhaps, be indicted for being so predictable, so formulaic, so comfortable that young viewers go looking for a little edge — and wind up in the clutches of Mean TV, Naked TV, Innuendo TV, Splat TV and the other channels where passing gas is a mark of sophisticated drollery. Meanwhile, the fogeys nod off over their glasses of constipation remedy, believing that it's prime time in America, so everything must be fine.

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