

Remote control: The ethics of watching

by [Gordon D. Marino](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

A century ago the bone weary must have come home from their labors and relaxed by watching the flames dancing in the hearth. But since the invention of the television, weary Americans have been sinking their self-consciousness into the riot of unpredictable images flitting across their television screens. I am no exception. The other night I came home in a haze of weariness, did a swan dive onto the couch and hit the power switch on the clicker. On came one of myriad pseudo-documentaries in which the viewer rides along in the back seat of a police car, fire truck or--in the latest--the coroner's van.

On this particular night, the peep show allowed me to join two young policemen as they walked into the late rounds of a domestic squabble. Peering through my cathoid keyhole, I spied a warring couple in their early 30s. Apparently, the woman had stabbed her husband in the arm in what she claimed was self-defense. As she wailed, one of the policemen urged the disoriented man to press charges against her. The woman bellowed, "I was only defending myself . . . I don't want to go to jail." Clearly confused, the half-clad man finally shrugged that he would press charges. One of the policemen grabbed the woman's arm and smugly remarked, "You're going downtown." Sobbing, she begged, "No, please don't take me to jail, please don't take me to jail." As though he didn't know or care that he was on camera, one of the cops sadistically assured her, "That's exactly where you are going." The husband looked on as his wife was handcuffed and taken away. That was when it finally registered. I was entertaining myself by watching two lives unravel. Better late than never. I came to my moral senses and clicked on a baseball game.

Even the staunchest defender of Christianity will agree that Christians are rather selective about which of the words of the Lord they take seriously. For instance, while I have heard many homilies on the Sermon on the Mount, I have never heard anyone preach on what Jesus says near the end of his endlessly reverberating

sermon, namely, that when someone steals something from you, don't protest. Let him have it. Similarly muted is Jesus' invocation to purity. Most people who think of themselves as followers of Christ lose track of Jesus' admonition to keep an eye on what we keep an eye on. After teaching his followers how to pray, he talks about the lamp of the body:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of life, but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matt. 22-24).

A person keeps his eye sound by refraining from visually sipping on the darkness. Jesus enjoins us to think about what we look at. Americans furrow their brows and pound their foreheads about all the sex and violence that children are absorbing in the movies and on television, but it is as though we believed that the character of adults has set, so that it doesn't matter what they watch.

In his masterful meditation on his experience of war, philosopher John Glenn Gray reminds us of the lust of the eye:

From the simplest soldier who gazes open-mouthed at the panorama of battle in his portion of the field to the trained artist observing the scene, there is, I believe, only a difference of degree. The "seeing" both are engaged in is for them an end in itself before it becomes a spur to action. The dominant motive in both cases appears to be neither the desire for knowledge . . . nor the need to act. . . . Their seeing is for the sake of seeing, the lust of the eye.

According to Gray, the soldier's eye is not as repulsed by the poetry of mass destruction as the soldier's mind. The sages of the West have all envisaged the struggle to become oneself as a struggle against the appetites, impulses or whatever you want to call the biopsychological force that Freud named "the id." Even in this era, aptly characterized by Philip Rieff as one in which it is forbidden to forbid, we retain a semblance of the moral idea that it is important to learn how to control our appetites. Though we spend much of our lives in front of monitors and screens, we have, ironically enough, forgotten that we even have an appetite to look, let alone that we need to control that appetite.

Plato was not so forgetful. In the midst of offering his theory of the soul, the author of the Republic has Socrates recount the following story:

Leontius, the son of Aglaion, was going up from the Piraeus along the outside of the North Wall when he saw some corpses lying at the executioner's feet. He had an appetite to look at them but at the same time he was disgusted and turned away. For a time he struggled with himself and covered his face but finally, overpowered by the appetite, he pushed his eyes wide open and rushed towards the corpses saying, "Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight."

Today we would be inclined to judge Leontius's struggle with himself to be unnecessary or perhaps prudish. Though we may frown on people who actually chase ambulances, we seem to believe that it is morally acceptable to chase them with the remote clicker. Matthew's Gospel says that Jesus said, "If thine eye offend thee pluck it out," but if we have plucked out anything, it is the very idea that the eye can offend.

Today there is a great deal of talk about taking responsibility for our actions. While I do not want to add to the burden of our superegos, which may already be overburdened, I suggest that we have too narrow a conception of what counts as an action. Although we spend more and more of our increasingly virtual lives choosing what images to impress upon our psyches, the moral consensus seems to be that looking is not an action, not a potential transgression.

Seeing is ordinarily understood as a passive experience, but we have a good deal of choice over what we look at and what we continue to look at once we have registered what it is that we are watching. To return to my original example, once I knew the television program I was staring at was about a domestic meltdown, it was my choice whether or not to go on watching. The consensus is that we are only responsible for our concrete actions. But as Kant and more poignantly Kierkegaard argued, we are also accountable for the states of mind we work ourselves into. What I feel deeply influences my behavior. What I choose to watch deeply influences the way I feel. If I know that watching "bloodfest" films leaves me feeling benumbed, then I bear some responsibility for the chilly lack of feeling that blows over me after watching a film like *Pulp Fiction*.

The reevaluation of values that marks the midnight of modernity has devalued the ancient ideal of purity. As the largely unconscious reasoning goes, purity is a flower of the ideal of sexual chastity. Since we all now know that chastity is neurotic, purity has been "put to bed." If the ideal survives at all, it is only in a displaced form, as a reverence for, if anything, pure air and water. Accordingly, were anyone to keep a third eye on what he watched, he would be judged as priggish as someone who fretted about keeping himself pure.

Though we live in an age when the image is regnant, we falsely imagine that the content of our character is neither formed nor mirrored by the content of the appearances that we conjure up and gawk at. It appears that we believed that seeing is somehow outside the purview of ethics, as though it were never wrong to watch *anything*. Forgive me for observing that appearances can be deceiving.