

Reading TV



The same television that packages and delivers much of our news and entertainment continues to transform our daily lives and landscape. For many people, especially young viewers, it is a major source of information as well as a frame of reference for interpreting experience and the world. But what do we really know about television and how it works?

Reading TV brings together five provocative explorations of themes central to any inquiry into television. This introductory resource for media literacy education provides opportunities to think more critically about what we see on television and to develop a better understanding of the most influential, widely disseminated medium of communication.

The user guide on the inside of this video jacket features discussion topics and activities for group or class screenings.

Reading TV compilation includes the following titles:

WATCHING TV (4:56) Director: Christopher Hinton/Producer: Marcy Page

TV SALE (10:23) Director: Ernie Schimdt/Producers: Don Worobey, John Taylor

THE BRONSWICK AFFAIR (23:35) Directors: Robert Awad, André Leduc
Producer: René Jodoin

TOYS (7:46) Director/Producer: Grant Munro

TV TANGO (3:44) Director: Martine Chatrand/Producer: Thérèse Descary

A National Film Board of Canada Production

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Reading TV



VHS
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ABOUT *ReadingTV*

The same television that packages and delivers much of our news and entertainment continues to transform our daily lives and landscape. For many people, especially young viewers, it is a major source of information as well as a frame of reference for interpreting experience and the world. But what do we really know about television and how it works? *ReadingTV*, an introductory resource for media literacy education, provides opportunities to think more critically about what we see on television and to develop a better understanding of the most influential, widely disseminated medium of communication.

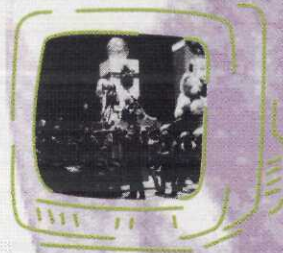
ReadingTV brings together five provocative explorations of themes central to any inquiry into television. The medium as a marketplace for products and ideas comes under

scrutiny in *The*

Bronswick Affair, a lively spoof of television journalism exposing the excesses of consumerism fostered by a steady stream of commercials, and in the animated film *TV*

Sale, a channel-surfing tour de force. Two other

animated titles, the fast-paced *Watching TV* and the quietly expressive *TV Tango*, focus on the issue of television violence and its impact on impressionable viewers. In *Toys*, a commentary-free fantasy about the merchandising of values, a diverting window display of children's playthings takes on ominous overtones.



USING *ReadingTV*

Combining different styles and approaches to its subject, *ReadingTV* can assist in launching a closer look at the format, content, conventions and techniques of familiar television programs. As a learning tool for sharpening critical viewing skills, it can also help raise awareness of how mass media select, organize and interpret information and experience. Used with intermediate and senior high school students, its separate sections can be successfully integrated with cross-disciplinary or communication studies and with media-related units in language arts or social studies.

Because individual backgrounds, interests and needs vary so widely, teachers or discussion leaders are encouraged to preview *ReadingTV* before showing the tape to a group. Previewing, which is essential for making decisions about selections and sequence, will also suggest the most appropriate screening strategies.

ReadingTV's effectiveness will be enhanced if your screenings become active experiences that engage viewers from the outset. The VCR's replay, freeze frame and slow motion functions make it possible to call attention to specific portions of the tape by examining key images closely. Use of your remote control's mute feature is especially valuable for demonstrating how sound tracks affect viewer response. Playing any of the films in *ReadingTV* from beginning to end without interruption, or for that matter postponing discussion until your screening is over, may not be desirable, even for a first viewing.

The discussion questions and exercises that follow draw on viewers' prior knowledge and personal experience for skill-building and new learning. Approach them as suggestions that can be tailored to meet your group's needs and program objectives. Additional topics and activities will no doubt come to mind as you use *ReadingTV*.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

What causes television viewers in *The Bronswick Affair* to go on buying sprees for products they don't need? Have you ever purchased anything you didn't need that was promoted on TV? If so, how might what you saw have influenced your decision? Did the product live up to the claims the ad made for it? Why do commercials appear on television?



As you were viewing *The Bronswick Affair*, what kinds of television programs came to mind? What made you think of these programs? Watch the tape again and note as many techniques as you can that remind you of television news programs, investigative journalism and documentary reports. Why do television producers choose to use the following features: testimony from "experts"; interviews with eyewitnesses; frequent visual references to dates and times; archival footage; simulations or dramatic re-enactments of events? How do we as viewers normally respond to them? In *TV Sale*, a variety of programs, people and products cross the screen as the salesman clicks away with his remote control. What programs or products do you remember best? What characteristics of commercials and programs are parodied? Does *TV Sale* present an accurate picture of what can be seen on television today? How is it similar to or different from what you might find on your set? What is missing from *TV Sale* that you would expect to find on TV?



Explain the meaning of the title *TV Sale*. What connection do the different programs, people and products have with the title? Compare the depictions of television in *TV Sale* and *The Bronswick Affair*. Why do you think the filmmakers used humorous satire and parody to spoof TV content and conventions? Compare the satire in these programs with satirical treatments of TV you may have seen on live-action television comedy programs.



Recall the sequence of events in *TV Tango*. Describe the children's play activities and behavior before television enters the picture. What happens when television becomes part of the children's world? Why are some people concerned about the kinds of programs young children watch and the amount of time they spend watching them? Explain why you agree or disagree with the message of the film. What are some positive effects or benefits TV programs can have for children?

What role does dialogue or narration play in *Toys*? How do you know what is going on even though there is neither? What images and sound effects do you find most striking in the film? How do they entertainment programs you usually watch, what do you remember about the music or sound effects? How do they make you feel while you are watching the program? Why do you think the producers use that kind of music or those sound effects?



How do the war toys affect the children in *Toys*? How do you know that something is happening to them? Compare the influence of the war toys with the impact of television on the children in *TV Tango*. Which style or treatment do you prefer and why? Describe some programs you have seen that use animation techniques. What features do you especially like? What types of stories or situations do you think are best suited for animation?



Did you find yourself laughing during any parts of *Watching TV*? If so, what made you laugh and why? What parts of *Watching TV* if any, disturbed or upset you? Why did you find some images more disturbing than others?



Why do you think "Action News" and the Ladyslayer shaver commercial are part of *Watching TV*? What are the major features of "Action News" and the Ladyslayer shaver ad? What kind of messages do they communicate? How are "Action News" and the Ladyslayer commercial similar to or different from television newscasts and commercials you have seen?



What are the final images and sounds in *Watching TV*? Compare them with the earlier sections of the film. How do you interpret the ending, when a television with a blank screen followed by a doll, drifts by into outer space?



What do *Watching TV* and *TV Tango* have in common? Compare and contrast what the two films show us about violence and television. Why do you think the issue of violence on television receives so much attention? Do you agree or disagree with the view that constant exposure to violence on television makes us less sensitive to real-life violence.

RELATED ACTIVITIES AND EXERCISES

Have students keep individual journals in which they log the number of hours spent watching television daily for an entire week and review the programs they have watched. Journal entries, which can include program ratings, should note why and how students selected each program and what they liked or disliked about them. Results can be shared and discussed by the group to compare and evaluate viewing habits.

Have students name their favorite television program and the program category to which it belongs (e.g., sitcom, crime or hospital drama, soap, game show, talk show, nature documentary, etc.). If you had to describe this program in only a few words to a friend who had never seen it, what words would you choose? What types of characters regularly appear? What kinds of situations, actions or stories are usually depicted? As students identify the typical characteristics and conventions of different genres, have one member of the group list them on the chalkboard under the appropriate program headings. Students can then review the lists and decide what features may be missing.

Ask students to look for specific examples of television ads aimed at their generation in after-school or evening programming, including music television, and to pay special attention to the kinds of products advertised and how they are promoted. What images are used to persuade us that these products are worth buying? Why do you think these images were selected for the ads? What other messages do they communicate? After comparing their findings in group discussion, ask students to identify the major elements or themes common to these commercials. As a follow-up activity, students can similarly analyze television ads targeting specific groups or other generations during prime time programming.

Make small groups of students responsible for evaluating the Saturday morning line-up of children's programs on different television stations. Ask each group to be prepared to report on the kinds of programs scheduled, program content, how quickly or slowly the action or stories seem to move, program tie-ins with toy promotion, and the nature and frequency of commercials. In a follow-up project, have students research recent national developments in the controversy surrounding children's television programming. The competing arguments for and against more rigorous regulation can be presented as a mock debate in which students assume the roles of industry representatives, parents, educators and legislators. As a culminating activity, students can be asked to come up with recommendations or guidelines for children's television programs.

Have students view a half-hour evening TV newscast at home while using a watch with a second hand to time and record the length of individual news segments and commercials. In class, as a group, students can compare notes from their home viewing assignment to determine the average length of commercials and news items in a newscast as well as the ratio of ads to news stories. In group discussion, students can consider: how this relationship influences what is selected for reporting; what information they found missing from the news stories they saw; what types of stories were not covered; and what sources might provide the missing details or cover the kinds

of stories omitted from the newscasts. As a follow-up activity, students can compare how a daily newspaper and a television newscast cover the same story, differentiate between fact and opinion in both treatments and identify the advantages and drawbacks of each medium.

In group discussion, ask students how they would define violence and what kinds of physical and non-physical behavior, events and situations would be covered by this definition. Have them consider whether or not the programs they normally watch include such actions, events or conflicts and how often violence occurs as a problem-solving device. For a home viewing assignment, students can monitor their favorite dramatic shows or cartoons to note how violence is presented in them, the forms it takes, and the frequency of violent events or actions within a single show. They can also think about whether or not the story would make sense without the violence as well as other ways of depicting conflict and solving problems. After reporting their findings, students can be asked to provide specific examples of programs in which violent acts or behavior are central to character or plot development, theme or meaning and those in which violence is non-essential and primarily used for sensational effect.

Ask students to imagine how they would respond to a favorite sitcom, drama or MTV program if they were visitors from another planet with no previous exposure to television. What are the main impressions of daily life and experience an E.T. would receive from the televised images, situations and characters? What roles do teenagers, women, people of color and older people play in these programs? What kinds of work do people do? What things are important to them? How do the television images and situations compare with your own experience or that of your community? What is missing from television's picture? What would you include if you were creating a program? As a culminating group or individual activity, have students outline a sitcom that is based in their community, neighborhood or town.

MEDIA LITERACY ORGANIZATIONS AND INFORMATION RESOURCES

In the United States:
Center for Media Literacy
1962 South Shenandoah
Los Angeles, CA 90034
(310) 559-2944

National Telemedia Council
120 East Wilson Street
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 257-7712

In Canada:
Canadian Association for Media
Education Organization (CAMEO)
300 - 47 Ranleigh Avenue
Toronto, Ontario
M4N 1X2
(416) 488-7280

The Media Awareness Network
179 Rideau Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0M9
(613) 992-5380
Web-Site: <http://www.schoolnet.ca/MediaNet>