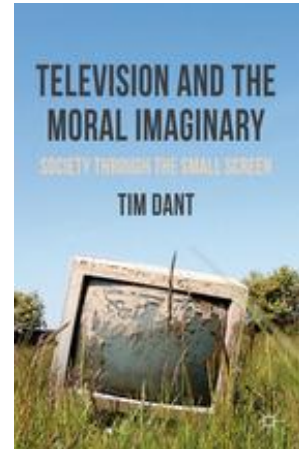Tim Dant, **Television and the Moral Imaginary: Society Through the Small Screen,** London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 239 pp., $85.00 (hardcover).

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In **Television and the Moral Imaginary,** British sociologist Tim Dant exhibits a formidable grasp of sociological and philosophical theory, including Durkheim, Sartre, Lacan, and Kant, and combines this knowledge with cultural, media, and television scholarship, including John Thornton Caldwell and Raymond Williams, to reconsider the cultural value of television. Through these theoretical frameworks, Dant describes how our phenomenological experience of television, which he redefines as television spectatorship rather than reading, appeals to what Dant refers to as our moral imaginary. This concept, which Dant explains in great detail, might be best defined as the unique transmission of the golden rule delivered through the small screen via imitation and affect rather than formal pedantry.

In Chapter 1, Dant sets forth his rather provocative proposition that "television has become the prime medium for sharing morality and dispersing the mores, the general ways of being and acting throughout a culture" (p. 2). The author suggests that television communicates these mores less didactically and more effectively than other media. Via television's unique style and flow of content, these mores are "absorbed without conscious understanding" (p. 3), primarily though the mimetic capacity of television to depict "possible ways for humans to act and to be, that may be both right and wrong, depending on the context and the situation" (p. 5).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Dant incorporates philosophical and sociological theory to frame his thesis. From classic philosophy, Dant considers Aristotelian virtue, Kantian deontological ethics, and Millsian utilitarianism to illustrate how "television *shows* us examples of the moral consequences of human behavior" (p. 41). Dant further rejects Durkheim's dystopian notion of the "moral order" as threatened by media; rather, Dant argues for a "mediated solidarity" in which "values are shared through the media which communicates enough common ground to connect societies . . . to put it another way, the conscience collective finds expression through the media" (pp. 47–48). Citing Graham Sumner and Morris Ginsberg, Dant describes how television "exposes people to a greater range of moral systems and situations than they would ever experience in their everyday lives" (p. 61). Dant references the sociological value of interaction as described by Erving Goffman and as depicted by television to counter Zygmunt Bauman's modernist critique of media. According to Dant, "television actually contributes to a postmodern morality" (p. 67). By reducing morality to only human interaction, Bauman, per Dant, disregards the potential of television to depict multiple perspectives from which viewers can generate their own moral positions.

In Chapter 4, Dant directs our attention toward media theory to discuss television's unique style and programming. Dant segues from the early work about film spectatorship to consideration of John Thornton Caldwell's work around televisuality, which describes how television style operates aesthetically to engage audiences. Referencing Raymond Williams, Dant also factors in the unique nature of television flow, contiguity, and seriality, which distinguishes the medium from film and shares more in common with the nature of newspapers and print media.

> If the flow of contiguous, but different, elements creates a capacity of television to present viewers with a range of moral situations and possibilities in each viewing session, televisuality creates an ambiguity and ambivalence in the outcomes of actions and in the moral worth of characters that opens up different provocations to moral sensibilities and different contributions to the collective moral imaginary. (p. 93)

Dant then sets forth in Chapter 5 a provocative description of the process of television viewership, which he refers to as the phenomenology of television. Television provides a "photorealistic quality of the flow of imagery and the synchronized audio realistic sound of what is seen" (p. 103) along with the "continuous present" through its incorporation of cinematic representations coupled with the "liveness" of television. This experience offers a unique dimension for generating empathy through the process of appresentation, which he borrows from Husserl, whereby viewers "engage with the lives of the characters (whether fictional or real) . . . perceiving them as people with minds who engage with the world in more or less the same way as we do" (p. 115).

In Chapter 6, Dant boldly places television alongside language, education, law, and politics as a force of socialization. Citing Habermas, Dant argues that

> the medium of television offers a *different* form of the public sphere, one that is better able to communicate feelings, emotions and practical consequences. Even more importantly, those included are not restricted to certain sectors of society, and anyone can join the viewers who listen in and watch. (p. 134)

Dant conducts a brief metacritique of critical scholars, who have either overlooked, demonized, or overprivileged television as a homogenizing force, arguing that, unlike formal education, television has the potential to reach learners of all ages only in nondidactic, mimetic ways that both engage and inform viewers. "Television does not socialize its viewers into the changing moral order through instruction but through showing new possibilities and engaging attention and interest" (p. 144).

In Chapter 7, Dant includes the obligatory critique of television production, placing the onus on television producers and programmers to assume responsibility for the transmission of moral education to audiences. In making said claims, Dant embraces John Ellis' conception of the medium as "witness," which means the capacity to show the lives of others in a way that allows viewers to "participate in a moral culture that accepts the equivalence of others" (p. 178).

In Dant's penultimate Chapter 8, he further distills his conception of the moral imaginary, as informed by the small screen. Television, through its irrational, if culturally determined, appeal to our imagination, positions the viewer not as a reader but as a spectator; however, Dant repudiates Debord's claims regarding spectacle as distraction and negation of life, which Dant considers too deterministic. To argue his case, the author traces prior discussion of the imaginary through the lens of Sartre's perspective of phenomenological psychology and the dream state, Lacan's psychoanalytic discussion of the imaginary, symbolic, and real, and Castoriadis and Taylor's discussion of a shared and collective "social imaginary." Combined, these theories indict modernity, which privileges rational modes of action while "the imaginary and its underlying symbolic elements are overlooked or suppressed" (p. 194). In this regard, Dant critiques those social scientists who would make reductive claims regarding media and effects, as well as critical theorists and political economists who would discount the communicative value of media content. "The interests of capital may control the channels that feed our small screens, but they do not have a coherent interest in morality beyond simply maintaining a moral order" (pp. 183–184). In conclusion, Dant submits that television, through its unique use of sound and image, has "become a key resource in contributing to the moral imaginary of modern societies" (p. 207).

Dant concludes his book with an appeal to academic critics to re-evaluate their approximations of television and television viewers, although in a somewhat contradictory manner. On the one hand, Dant privileges the television viewer, with whom the responsibility lies to "engage consciously with the small screen by thinking about the morality that is being promoted or undermined" (p. 208). Yet, in the multichannel universe, the massive array of niche audiences, further amplified by new media content, risks ghettoizing viewers within their own self-imposed moral positions. In this respect, social elites serve a vital role in maintaining a diverse and mediated public sphere, although Dant believes these elites ought to be limited to the media professionals, without interference by political interests or market forces that pursue solely commercial interests. According to Dant, "for television to continue to play its part in shaping late-modern societies, it must be free of any dominant form of moralizing" (p. 215).

Dant's mission is noble, provocative, and iconoclastic. Setting forth such a positive view of the small screen, Dant is challenging the overwhelming corpus of critical television scholarship that would only present television in the worst light. From outside the epistemological foundations of critical theory and political economy as well as communications and media effects scholarship, Dant challenges his readers to move beyond the valuable but often reductive claims around material culture to reconsider television as a "medium of communication that has sociological importance" (p. 9).

Dant's work is the latest contribution toward, what I would consider, an imaginary and affective turn in literary, cultural, and media scholarship. Peter Brooks' (1976) groundbreaking *The Melodramatic Imagination* helped reclaim melodrama as a reputable form of excessive expression designed to emotionally engage readers. Latching on to this work, feminist media scholars applied his theories to reconsiderations of the work of filmmakers such as Douglas Sirk. Similarly, in *Cultivating Humanity* (1996), philosopher Martha Nussbaum describes the "narrative imagination," whereby individuals and societies, through all forms of storytelling, are able to comprehend the choice, motives, and suffering of others. Meanwhile, within queer studies, scholars such as Eve Sedgwick (2003) have developed comparable theories around affect, pedagogy, and performance. Combined, these phenomenological

approaches have helped a new wave of media scholars develop alternative theories about media reception that transcend positivism and critical theory.

Although Dant introduces an impressive and expansive set of interdisciplinary theories through which to consider television in a more progressive way, his frameworks remain trapped in the realm of high theory. As theorized once again from 30,000 feet, Dant's positions offer little insight into the way that television is produced. (In fairness, as both a media practitioner and scholar, this reflects my own personal bias.) Dant might have benefited from the emergence of midrange theories around media production to better understand how media producers and creators may deliberately and consciously make moral appeals in their work. Yet, even at these heights, Dant cannot help but offer advice and criticism for how media producers ought to produce media in more ethical ways.

In addition, although Dant embraces all forms of television content, or, rather, embraces the volume and flow over narrativity, television "entertainment" remains, once again, loosely defined and casually dismissed while news and documentary content is privileged for its capacity to bear witness and depict the "real." Nonetheless, according to Dant, the mimetic force of television content, any content, is "able to *show* rather than just tell what people do, and what the consequences of their action are" (p. 2). Although Dant does not make this explicit, his work reclaims the value of entertainment as a rhetorical and discursive pedagogical strategy, one that avoids didacticism and embraces affect, with the capacity for both education and transformation.

In the Amazon.com description for *Television and the Moral Imaginary*, the following question is posed: "Just how bad is television?" This rhetorical question is a bit misleading because, as reflected in this review, Dant's book sets forth a far more positive, if provocative, approximation of the value of television. Curiously, on the publisher's Web page for the book, the description asks, "Is television a good thing?" This further illustrates how deeply and culturally entrenched these deep-seated hostilities remain toward television, even among booksellers like Amazon. Nonetheless, Dant's *Television and the Moral Imaginary* represents a welcome contribution to television studies and serves as a bit of a palliative for the decades of television scholarship that would reduce the medium to the Rodney Dangerfield of media platforms. In fact, Dant's appreciable work represents what's good about emergent television scholarship in the digital age.

References

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