The Voluminous Impact of Television in the Fiction of Raymond Carver

Author: Marc Oxoby

Date: 2008

From: New Paths to Raymond Carver: Critical Essays on His Life, Fiction, and Poetry

Publisher: U of South Carolina P

Reprint In: Short Story Criticism(Vol. 236.)

Document Type: Critical essay

Length: 5,660 words

Full Text:

Raymond Carver’s short story *After the Denim* opens on a scene of Edith Packer sitting in front of a television with its sound turned off. The image is a deceptive one, for the TV, by its very presence, speaks volumes, as it does in many of Carver’s other stories. Carver’s work rarely, if ever, seems directly about television, but by virtue of its attention to life in modern America, it does engage this medium that seems so ever-present in many Americans’ lives. Indeed, although the lives of Carver’s characters may not revolve around the TV, it is striking just how often it makes its presence felt. None would claim that Carver writes about television, but as an object it appears in Carver’s short stories with a frequency at least equal to that of alcohol and cigarettes. Garnet Henderson’s cover of one edition of Carver’s collection seems telling. While the proverbial judging of a book by its cover carries some risks, the painting nevertheless reflects the presence of television in Carver’s work quite well. It depicts a man seated at a table, cross-legged, cigarette in one hand, drink in the other, glancing backward at a television screen glowing with a picture of a cathedral. Clearly it is a depiction of the collection’s title story, but Henderson’s television is emphasized in a way that the medium is rarely discussed in Carver criticism. The TV, shining with blue light, which bathes the entire scene, glows from a black background. It is unclear what kind of surface the TV sits on; instead, it seems to float in the darkness. There is something almost mystical about the television in this depiction, and while very little comes across as mystical or otherworldly in Carver’s work, TV does, nevertheless, seem to be an almost constant presence, casting its light on the figures who occupy his short stories. The characters are often only passingly aware of its presence, but their sometimes brief interactions with the medium resonate with the common themes that appear repeatedly in Carver’s work.

It is by no means the intention of this essay to suggest that television is the driving force of all, or even any, of Carver’s fiction. Rather, my argument is that television serves as a more significant character in his work than most critics have noted. Indeed Carver’s fiction takes great pains to consider human relations in the modern age, and by that logic television, a defining object of modern living, likewise plays a defining role in Carver’s work. I am not the first to explore this aspect of Carver’s work, and this essay should be seen as an attempt to build on the opening salvo fired by Bill Mullen, in a study of Carver’s fiction which has unfortunately gone largely unanswered. Mullen, in *A Subtle Spectacle: Televisual Culture in the Short Stories of Raymond Carver*, suggests that, while television does not provide a key to understanding Carver’s fiction, it may be read as a polyvalent sign in Carver’s fiction that is important to its being readable as both formal minimalism and a variety of social realism in the tradition of working-class or proletariat writing (101). He also suggests that Carver’s fiction, particularly in its structure and tone, may be read in part as a critique of televisual culture, yet one grounded primarily in television’s capacity to dull or eliminate awareness of both class consciousness and class inequities in contemporary American culture (101).

Mullen’s essay provides an excellent starting point for the examination of TV in Carver’s fiction, but, as good as the essay is, it is merely a starting point. As such, it is an essay with at least two limitations. The first one is that in its focus on *When We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, it fails to take into account Carver’s later fiction and, by extension, fails to fully consider the evolution of television’s presentation in his work. While this volume features many of Carver’s best-known stories, and by its spareness represents what many see as the archetypal Carver style, a full understanding of the author’s treatment of television’s cultural impact must also take into account the evolved style of Carver’s later work. Second, it is my contention that television does, despite Mullen’s claim, provide a key to understanding Carver’s fiction. It is by no means the key, to the exclusion of all other approaches to this body of work. Nor should it be thought of as providing all the answers to all of Carver’s fictions; it is not, typically, a central focus of his stories. However, its presence does dovetail very well with significant themes and preoccupations that repeatedly appear in his work.
Mullen offers close readings of several stories, including *After the Denim*, *Mr. Coffee and Mr. Fixit*, and *Why Don’t You Dance?*, in the latter of which the focal characters find themselves sitting in the unnamed protagonist’s front yard watching TV. This story, the first in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, does indeed provide an excellent example of how TV manifests itself in Carver’s fiction. The story’s protagonist, we suspect, has recently seen his marriage collapse, and the movement of his bedroom furniture to his front yard is, it would appear, a response to this collapse. It is telling that the story opens with the protagonist looking at the furniture on the lawn from his kitchen, presumably through a window, evoking a frequent device in Carver’s fiction. Indeed, *Why Don’t You Dance?* bears considerable similarity to the story *Viewfinder*, which features a narrator suffering in much the same way as the former story’s protagonist. Among the stories in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love* that make no direct mention of television, *Viewfinder* nevertheless offers a fine example of some of Carver’s preoccupations that mesh with concerns about the impact of TV on American life. While it is true that neither of the stories’ characters are depicted watching the tube, the act of speculating, as the title suggests, is vital to how human relationships are treated in Carver’s fiction. The story tells of the interaction between the narrator and a man who attempts to sell the narrator a photograph of his own house. The conversation between the two is casual, friendly, but not without elements of reservation. Within the first page, the photographer, who has chrome hooks in the place of hands, refuses to explain the loss of his extremities, and the narrator, who indirectly offers coffee (only implying an offer with his statement “I just made coffee”), holds off offering any of the Jell-O he also made (11). The conversations that follow are laced with the same kind of reluctance seen in this early exchange. The narrator, trying to defuse the photographer’s defensiveness, tells him, “I was trying to make a connection” (13), but making a connection is something with which the narrator, who we discover has been abandoned by his wife and kids, has considerable difficulty.

The problem of forging personal connections is not something that necessarily need be associated with the notion of mediated experience, but in *Viewfinder* it is difficult to see it otherwise, whether there is a TV on stage or not. Consider, for instance, how the characters first see each other. The photographer captures the narrator through the camera, while the narrator has been watching the photographer through the window. In each case one character is watching the other, and each is doing so through a device that frames the other, a camera’s viewfinder or a window’s frame. The mediation, in this case, can be seen as a limitation on how extensively the characters may connect, in the words of the narrator, or sympathize, in the words of the photographer. This is even more pronounced when the narrator examines the photo of the house and sees my head, *my head*, in there inside the kitchen window (12). More than simply being separated from the photographer by the window pane or the viewfinder, the narrator now finds himself double-framed, looking at himself from the outside. The mediation, therefore, disrupts not only interpersonal relationships but also *intrapersonal* ones, so that the narrator seems to feel an abject distancing from himself, apropos of the radical alteration of his life brought on by the dissolution of his family. The protagonist of *Why Don’t You Dance?* similarly looks from kitchen to front yard and sees his life from outside of it, just as he watches the young couple dance. Mullen makes note of this, writing about plot, structure, and narrative strategy. Carver’s stories suggest constantly that people are paralyzed by their personal dilemmas as if they were seeing them happen to someone else (103).

Although it is presumptuous to claim that these devices of mediation are the same as television, it is worth noting that many television critics—Jerry Mander, Bill McKibben, Neil Postman, Marie Winn, and others—have written of the medium in much the same way as the window frame and viewfinder are depicted in the story. We might consider, for instance, Mander’s claim that the process of removing images from immediate experience and passing them instead through a machine, human beings lose one of the attributes that differentiate us from objects, what Mander calls *aura* or, after Walter Benjamin, aura (*Four Arguments*, 287). The television, in short, makes those broadcast on it merely hollow images. Unlike Mander, however, Carver’s characters do not need a device to make them feel hollow. They have, after all, plenty of other problems to do the job, whether a dissolving marriage, alcoholism, or death of a loved one. Instead, then, the mediation is by television, window frame, camera viewfinder, or other device works principally metaphorically. And yet, these are devices that need to be considered in light of the society about which Carver writes what has been characterized as a spectator society by figures such as the French situationists, especially Guy Debord in his book *Society of the Spectacle*, and later refined, if perhaps overstated, in the work of Jean Baudrillard, particularly *Simulacra and Simulation*, in which he explores how mass media calls into question the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object (30). Baudrillard frequently comments on how the lines between viewer and viewer are blurred, just as the *Viewfinder* narrator is both watcher and watched. Much of Carver’s fiction deals with this notion of watching and being watched, both of which, it might be argued, attribute to Carver’s minimalism, which gives but sketches of characters, incomplete conceptions, as often as not based merely on the visible image and actions of these characters. Certainly, in light of the spectator society, driven to such a state largely by the proliferation of televised images, the connection of TV to these other framing devices is not a particularly inconceivable stretch. This is certainly a connection that Mullen makes when he notes that the young couple of *Why Don’t You Dance?* is framed in the windows of neighbors like actors in a television drama (107).

Clearly, these concepts of a spectator society, of mediated experience, of television as an impediment to personal, human interaction, paint a rather dire picture of TV in Carver’s fiction. And perhaps there is some truth to this, especially for a collection such as *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*, in which, as Mullen points out, *People watch television because they have nothing more productive to do, lack the intelligence or motivation to do otherwise, or wish to repress or deflect the ennui and alienation of their class-bound lives* (102). Likewise, Arthur A. Brown’s contention that television is one thing that substitutes for communion and is used by Carver’s characters to block out the realization that they are dissociated from themselves and from others, especially those with whom they should be most intimate (*Raymond Carver*, 126), is clearly manifested in some of Carver’s stories. However, it is perhaps too simple to look at television as a strict negative in Carver’s stories, and this is particularly true of the later stories, in which the author exhibits a growing ambivalence toward TV.

Much has been made of the increased stylistic complexity of Carver’s later fiction. The stark minimalism of his early work gives way, by the time we get to *Cathedral*, to a richer, more detailed style. Although they can still be considered minimalist, the stories are not pared down to the level of those in *What We Talk about When We Talk about Love*. Instead, as Bruce Weber has noted, they are fuller, more generous and more optimistic (*Raymond Carver*, 96). Carver claimed that these stories felt *finished* in a way I rarely felt about my stories previously (**McCaffrey and Gregory**, *An Interview with Raymond Carver*).
The differences, in terms of plotting and style, are quite striking in these stories, and in considering the role of television in these later stories, we must consider the changes in Carver’s approach to his fiction. Mullen clearly associates Carver’s style with the style of broadcast television, writing, “The flavorless monotone of television language reverberates in both the numb monosyllables Carver’s working-class characters speak in and the flat, deadpan expository authorial voice” (104). However, Mullen is writing primarily of the early, bare-bones stories. What, then, are we to make of the richer voice of Carver’s later work? Are the Cathedral stories less concerned with the role of television than the earlier stories are? It would seem not. Mullen, writing on What We Talk about When We Talk about Love, television receives direct mention in only six of the seventeen stories, though as I have suggested in my consideration of Viewfinder, television aesthetic can be seen as reverberating throughout this book’s pieces. By contrast, televisions appear or receive direct mention in all of the stories in Cathedral save one (Chef’s House). Moreover, in some of the twelve stories, TV provides more than a counterpoint to the action and in fact becomes a central plot or thematic element.

In the opening story of Cathedral, Feathers, for example, television almost seems to constitute an additional guest at the dinner party depicted, one that seems more welcome than the pet peacock that intrudes on the scene. Upon arriving at the party, the narrator and his wife, Fran, find their host, Bud, watching a stock car race, which they leave on as they drink their aperitifs. Even more interesting than what is on the screen is what sits atop the appliance, an old plaster-of-Paris cast of the most crooked, jaggedy teeth in the world (12). The object, a cast of the teeth of Bud’s wife, Olla, before he paid to have them fixed, is worth considering in light of the story’s interest in physical appearances, which, one could certainly argue, is also television’s stock-in-trade. The horror-show teeth on top of the TV (14) play into the contrast between the splendor of the peacock’s feathers and the ugly visage of Bud’s new baby. The narrator imagines Bud’s thoughts: “So okay if it’s ugly. It’s our baby. And this is just a stage. Pretty soon there’ll be another stage. There is this stage and then there is the next stage. Things will be okay in the long run, once all the stages have been gone through” (24) in such a way that could be compared to how television programming passes, with one moment having little connection to that before, as Raymond Williams would have it, a single irresponsible flow of images and feelings (Television, 92). Randolph Paul Runyon notes how questions of sequence are garbled in Feathers, just as they are in Williams’s evaluation of American TV broadcasting. Runyon writes, “The more closely we examine these teeth, the more slippery the notion of before and after becomes. The mold, of course, is just a copy of the original: Olla’s teeth as they were before the treatment began. So the before is a copy, while the after is the (revised) original (Reading Raymond Carver, 139).

Television also plays an important role in Careful, which early on presents a scene in which the protagonist, Lloyd, sees his landlady lying on the floor of her living room: She seemed to be asleep. Then it occurred to him she might be dead. But the TV was going, so he chose to think she was asleep. He didn’t know what to make of it (112). Runyon writes, “It’s hard for us to know what to make of it either, for nothing happens later in Careful to integrate it into the story (161). There is indeed a kind of disjunction between this scene and the story, and in fact there is also a disjunction within the logic of the passage. What is it, after all, about the TV that should suggest that the woman is alive? As the story unfolds, as Lloyd is increasingly plagued by a buildup of wax in his ear, there does seem to be some connection drawn between the activity of the television and that of life. Indeed, Lloyd, unconcerned with the electricity bill, for which he is not responsible, frequently leaves the TV set on all day and all night. But he kept the volume down unless he saw something he wanted to watch (113). For Lloyd, in the throes of alcoholism, essentially evicted from his house and forced to move into a confining apartment, the TV serves as company, bringing a kind of activity, a kind of life to an existence otherwise increasingly lonely and isolated. The soundlessness of the TV set is part of a trifold presentation of silence in the story. It obviously parallels Lloyd’s loss of hearing resulting from the wax, but it also duplicates the lack of communication between Lloyd and Inez, his wife. The rift between them, forced by his alcoholism, is exemplified by Lloyd’s reception of Inez’s final words to him before leaving his apartment. Inez has helped Lloyd clear his ear of the wax, but nonetheless, he didn’t listen. He didn’t want to. He watched her lips move until she said what she had to say (123).

While television’s presence is especially strong in Feathers and Careful, a quick gloss of some of the other stories in Cathedral shows that its presence is not exceptional; in fact, it permeates the collection. In Preservation, for instance, TV is part of the paralysis that afflicts the husband, who had been on the sofa ever since he’d been terminated three months ago (35). In Vitamins the narrator asks a returned veteran, “Is all that shit about Vietnam true we see on the TV?” (104), drawing attention to the way social and historical understandings are developed, in part, by media representation. In Where I’m Calling From the narrator, confined to a drying out facility, imagines on New Year’s Eve that his girlfriend is probably at home watching the same thing on TV that I’ve been watching (143), suggesting the commonality of televisual experience. In A Small, Good Thing, Ann, whose son lies comatose after being hit by a car, thinks in terms of television. After telling the doctor that she cannot leave her son alone in the hospital, she thinks how unfair it was that the only words that came out were the sort of words used on TV shows where people were stunned by violent or sudden deaths (81). It is almost as if Ann (and perhaps Carver?) is apologizing for the sentimentality of her response, for the melodrama that is so commonplace on TV and yet also can exist, or so Carver seems to suggest, on the other side, the reality side of the screen. All of these examples show the complexity of Carver’s treatment of television in this later work. There is no singularity to its use as there seems to be in the early work. Instead the purpose served by television changes given the circumstances and the characters.
involved. The stories, when taken as a body, are ultimately encoded with a decided ambivalence toward the medium.

This ambivalence toward TV is nowhere stronger than in the title story, *Cathedral*. In this story television’s purpose seems to shift: even as it threatens to impede communication, as it does frequently elsewhere in Carver’s fiction, it also serves as a kind of communal device. The story opens with the narrator explaining that an old friend of his wife’s, a blind man, is coming to visit. He quickly reveals his trepidations about the visit, as well as his prejudices about the blind: “I wasn’t enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies, the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to” (209). That the depiction of the blind in movies is a driving force in the narrator’s preconceptions is striking in a story in which the related medium of TV plays such a large role. Mass media, to a great extent, feeds the narrator’s prejudices, quite appropriately for a character who is depicted as a consistent consumer of media. He watches TV while waiting for Robert, the blind man, to arrive since he feels he has nothing else to do in the interim (214). Then, when he feels that the uncomfortable after-dinner conversation has run down, he leaves the table and turns on the TV, which provides a kind of escape from his discomfort, irritating though this act might be to his wife (218).

The narrator’s embracing of visual media is given a sharp counterpoint in the form of his wife, who, it is revealed, has a kind of affinity toward the written and spoken word. We are told, for instance, how the wife first met Robert working for him as a reader of case files and reports at his office. The significance of this is not lost on Brown, who notes, “That her job was reading and her work with the blind man was performing a kind of social service are details that show that Carver wants us to be aware of reading and its humanist possibilities (134). Additionally we are told that “She was always trying to write a poem. She wrote a poem or two every year, usually after something really important had happened to her.” By contrast, the narrator, after revealing to the reader his dislike of his wife’s poem about letting Robert touch her face, explains, “Maybe I just don’t understand poetry” (210).

From these details, one could argue that *Cathedral* is yet another story that simply dismisses television as an impediment to communication and human relationship, a metaphor for disconnect. However, *Cathedral* does far more with the medium than this. Television actually serves as common ground between the narrator and Robert. This begins when Robert tells the wife that he has two TV’s: “I have a color set and a black-and-white thing, an old relic. It’s funny, but if I turn the TV on, and I’m always turning it on, I turn on the color set. The narrator is left speechless: I didn’t know what to say to that. I had absolutely nothing to say to that. No opinion. So I watched the news program and tried to listen to what the announcer was saying (218-19). Ironically the inability to respond, to speak, provides the opening for the communion between the narrator and Robert that occurs at the end of the story. The narrator’s expectations of the behavior of a blind man, created in part by messages conveyed by the media, have been undercut by the reality that even a blind man can watch a TV, and that this particular blind man does so, by his own admission, quite often. Television, the device if not the programming into which the narrator retreats, then, serves almost as a kind of Socratic dialogue, forcing the narrator to confront the falseness of his assumptions.

The story is brought to its climax when Robert joins the narrator in front of the television, watching, for lack of any other engaging program, *Something about the church and the Middle Ages*. Not your run-of-the-mill TV fare (222). Carver devotes more verbiage to describing the images of cathedrals on the TV screen, complete with the motion of the cameras capturing the images, than he typically does describing the real-world settings of his stories. He is certainly able to describe the cathedrals in more detail than does his narrator, who finds himself quite limited in his attempts to explain to the sightless man the experience of seeing the pictures on the TV. His descriptions are partly undercut by a simple lack of knowledge, as when he is unable to answer Robert’s question about whether the paintings on walls are frescos. That’s a good question. I don’t know, he responds, revealing that seeing is not analogous with knowing (223). Finally the narrator gives up, telling Robert, “You’ll have to forgive me. But I can’t tell you what a cathedral looks like. It just isn’t in me to do it. I can’t do any more than I’ve done. The truth is, cathedrals don’t mean anything special to me. Nothing. Cathedrals. They’re just something to look at on late-night TV. That’s all they are” (225-26). Yet, they come to mean considerably more, when Robert has the narrator draw a cathedral, Robert’s own hand riding the narrator’s in order to get a sense of the shape. It is here that true communion occurs between these two characters, by way of human touch. It is also true that the television is instrumental in leading the characters to this point of contact.

Notably, as they draw this image, the TV station goes off the air for the night, and yet the drawing and the communion continue. The analogy between the concluded television programming and the narrator, who shuts his eyes at Robert’s instruction, is obvious. Beyond vision, be it televised images or biological processes, there is still human contact. Perhaps nowhere else does Carver’s fiction seem so optimistic. Turning away from the comfort of vision ends up being a liberating experience for the narrator, but it should also be noted that there is no way that television can really be seen as any kind of villain in this story. The story seems to argue that television ought not be a substitute for human interaction, it can in some cases be an enabler. This is parallel to the evolution of food in Carver’s works, as cited by Brown: food is an obstacle to communication in *The Idea* (from *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*) and a means to communicate at the end of *A Small, Good Thing*, in which the formerly sinister baker reaches out to Scotty’s parents, proclaiming, “Eating is a small, good thing in a time like this” (88). Television, *Cathedral* suggests, can also be a small, good thing if employed appropriately. *Cathedral* is by no means a celebration of TV’s greatness; instead, the ambivalence of its treatment demonstrates that the television is ultimately powerless when faced with the power of humans’ ability to reach out to one another, which is something that characters in Carver’s fiction often fail to do. The TV is instrumental in the forging of the bond between the narrator and Robert, but by the same token, it is something that is clearly in the hands of the characters, that does not simply manipulate but is itself used as the tool it was first developed to be. Thus does Carver undercut the simplicity with which many critics treat the media; media is no more simplistic than the enormously complex topic of human relationships.

Most of the writing that has been done on the topic of television’s impact on literary fiction has focused on the high postmodernists, writers of outlandish fictions such as those of Vonnegut, Barth, Pynchon, and their literary descendants, including Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. Certainly it seems fair to suggest that the relatively recent rise of TV technology in the world has had some effect on the wild experimentation employed by these writers. It has been less easy for critics to consider through the
same lens the kind of neorealism employed by Raymond Carver. He seems more in the tradition of Stephen Crane, Sherwood Anderson, or Ernest Hemingway (often cited as an influence and the author with whom Carver is most often, perhaps unfairly, compared) or that of the Russians Chekhov, Tolstoy, Turgenev for whom Carver frequently expressed his admiration. Carver can, in fact, be seen as part of the reaction to postmodernism's experimentation, which substituted the surreal and the fantastic for realism and which mixed the weird and the far-out with a relentless and sometimes disquieting nihilism (Carver, No Heroes, Please, 148). In his own literary criticism and interviews, Carver clearly favored the realism of the prepostmodernists, though he acknowledged the skill of many postmodern writers. Moreover, Carver, by revealing his preferences so clearly, gave credence to those who considered the author a kind of strictly realist writer. Yet, it is vital to recall that Carver was writing in the postmodern age, the television age. The new aesthetics that came with the proliferation of media, it seems, must certainly have had an influence on his fiction, an influence strong enough for television to receive considerable attention in his work, and consequently to deserve the attention of critics considering the role of TV in American fiction. The more flamboyant manifestations of televisual aesthetic in high postmodern writing might be eschewed in Carver’s fiction, but enough remains that we can clearly identify Carver, his themes and rhetorical approaches, with the age into which he was born as a writer.

Not surprisingly, a few critics have seen beyond the surface of his fiction and treated Carver as a postmodern writer, if a different kind than, say, Thomas Pynchon. This seems apt, given that Carver’s work, like that of other postmodern writers, often makes use of television but always seeks to transcend it, to become something distinct. In the essay Steering by the Stars, Carver makes a direct comparison of literature and here he is discussing bad writing to media’s approach to communication, disparaging the use of language only to convey some kind of fast-forward information better left to the daily papers or the talking heads on the evening news (No Heroes, Please, 132). In light of this critique, it is clear that Carver has no interest in merely emulating television language in his fiction, but the parallels, as detailed by Mullen, are nevertheless quite interesting when we consider the frequent appearances of TV in these stories, as an object and a conveyer of information. Could it be that Carver’s style lifts a part of its technique from the language of the media age in order to offer a commentary on that age? Certainly, if Carver’s fiction does indeed draw from such language, it does so not in imitation but rather attempting to do considerably more.

Works Cited


Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2017 Gale, Cengage Learning

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)


Gale Document Number: GALE|H1420122419