

Jolts for dolts

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Anyone who says there is no difference between Canadian and American culture has never watched television. In *JOLTS: The TV Wasteland and the Canadian Oasis*, ex-*Saturday Night* columnist Morris Wolfe argues that a profound difference between the two cultures is reflected daily in television programming.

Wolfe, a teacher of film history at the Ontario College of Art, wrote a column on television in *Saturday Night* for ten years.

When *Saturday Night* editor Robert Fulford first asked Wolfe to write a monthly TV column, Wolfe felt hurt.

"I thought of myself as a serious person," he writes, "and that writing about television was beneath me. What would my friends think?"

But Wolfe soon realized reviewing television was far more difficult than writing about books or films where the reviewer's knowledge is specialized.

"A television critic can't function that way. He or she has to be interested in, and knowledgeable about, a wide variety of subjects," Wolfe writes.

At the end of his reviewing days Wolfe admits that he did not come to care about television the way he cares about books or films. However, he did gain a respect for the medium.

"A day didn't go by when I couldn't find at least one and usually more programmes worth watching and writing about," he writes.

During those years, Wolfe found himself interested in exploring the differences between Canada and the United States.

Wolfe summarizes the cultural differences in what he calls *The First Law of Commercial Television*. The more jolts per minute, the less likely a viewer will find the programme boring and change the channel. Wolfe defines a jolt as verbal, physical or emotional violence, and level of decibels.

Wolfe illustrates this point by analysing an *A-Team* episode where he found eight scenes in which guns were fired; six scenes in which guns were shown; four fist fights; two car chases; two car crashes; four illegal acts; eight acts of violence; one scene of sirens and flashing lights; four sudden noises; seven threats; and five insults.

Replacing *A-Team* is *Miami Vice* which uses rock music to accompany tightly edited visual material having nothing to do with story development.

"All that matters is the tension built up in the viewer through the beat of the music and the editing. The programme plays with the viewer's nervous system," Wolfe writes.

Wolfe compares these modern day television hits with *Dragnet*, an equally popular hit series in the '50s where, in the first sixty episodes, fifteen shots were fired and a total of six punches were thrown.

Wolfe claims television began to speed up in 1968 with *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, a comedy show on one liners and sight gags for its humour.

In the early '70s Norman Lear produced a string of sitcoms — *All In The Family*, *Maudie*, *The Jeffersons*, and others — whose "basic building blocks" were insults. "About twenty-five per hour," Wolfe claims.

Later, sex provided an alternative story base with jiggling breasts and bottoms in shows like *Charlie's Angels* and *Three's Company*.

No area of television is safe. In children's programming, there is *Sesame Street* where the child is exposed to an educational clip for no longer than three minutes before the show moves on to something else.

The typical game show usually features a good looking male host — Richard Dawson excluded — his sexy female assistants and audience of genial fools who all play the part of cheerleaders for the consumer society. Lights flash people applaud, expensive items and thousands of dollars are given away as each contestant is given his/her fifteen minutes of fame.

Not even the conservative hard hitting realistic world of journalism is safe from the jolts per minute (jpm) phenomenon. Any-one watching news briefs from Rochester over a long period of time would wonder if there is a building standing in that city that hasn't yet been destroyed by fire.

It is coming to the point "where violence becomes a structural rather than a story element," Ken Sobol writes in a submission to the Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communication Industry. "It's there automatically, before the story, not as a result of it."

It's not hard to understand why the number of jolts per minute is increasing. Television companies rely on revenue from commercial air time. The larger a programme's viewing audience, the more commercial air time costs. And the best way to increase a programme's viewing audience is to increase the jolts per minute.

In contrast to this 'American Wasteland' we have the 'Canadian Oasis'. Our programmes are more compassionate, thoughtful and reflect a sense of realism, be they drama, *Charlie Grant's War*, sitcoms, *Seeing Things*, or public affairs, like *The Fifth Estate*.

In an interview last year, Bob Homme, the Friendly Giant, said he was attracted to Canadian TV because of its interest in children's programming that tries to expand a child's attention span.

Further to *The Friendly Giant*, we have *Mr. Dressup* and *The Polka Dot Door*, all programmes emphasizing games and activities children can participate in, in comparison to American children's programmes where the child is to sit attentively and be bombarded by images of the letter K.

The one exception to American children's programming can be found with *Mr. Roger's Neighbourhood*, but this exception is proof for Wolfe's conclusions. That show is funded by Public Television and thus protected from the laws of commercial television. Wolfe's book is a defence for public television, specifically a defence of the CBC. Coincidentally, there is no better time than now for a book like Wolfe's to be published, as the Conservative government has appointed a commission on television programming in Canada, and the vice-president in charge of English programming at the CBC, Denis Harvey, is asking for more money to fulfill the CBC's mandate as Canada's television channel.

Wolfe ends *JOLTS* with a few recommendations for the CBC, with more money figuring prominently in his list.

Although we do have other 'Canadian' channels such as CTV, Global or City-TV in Toronto, Wolfe says these channels are commercial and therefore susceptible to the trends of American television.

Global and City-TV survive on reruns of *Happy Days* and *Laverne and Shirley*. CTV is a more interesting case because it does try to produce its own programmes. However, these are often poor imitation of American

style programmes.

"CTV's sole contribution to Canadian drama in recent years has been *The Littlest Hobo*, an atrocious reincarnation of a popular American TV show of the 1960s," Wolfe writes.

If we are to maintain the level of quality in Canadian television, the only solution is to have more government funding, and not to succumb to the magic of the free market.

At times, Wolfe's arguments against American television sound extreme. He seems to forget many popular American sitcoms are based on British counterparts. *All in The Family* sprouted from the British hit series *Until Death Do We Part*, and *Three's Company* is based on *Man About The House*.

I haven't seen the British version of *All In The Family*, but I do remember seeing *Man About The House*, the sexual innuendos and jiggling bodies were all there. In fact, I can remember a *Three's Company* show that directly ripped off a *Man About The House* script.

The British were using sex as jolt maker long before American television grabbed hold of the idea. A peek at an old *Benny Hill* or a *Two Ronnies* rerun proves this.

While Wolfe is correct in pointing out that there are too many jolts on TV, he doesn't differentiate between jolts for jolts' sake and jolts as a product of plot. The former may be inexcusable, but the latter can be tolerable for the sake of believability.

In today's sophisticated viewing audience, a 1950s *Dragnet*-type programme wouldn't cut it, not just because it wouldn't have enough jpm's, but because it wouldn't be considered realistic.

While Wolfe's theory predicts a high jpm show as the number one hit show, he is wrong. The most popular television show now in both Canada and the U.S. is *The Cosby Show*, a low jpm programme.

Wolfe's arguments against American television have their flaws; however, his observations on Canadian television in comparison to American television are somewhat accurate. We do seem to produce slower paced programmes for a more thoughtful nature, at least for those programmes done by CBC. And if we are to continue producing these shows, the CBC will have to have a great deal more money.