



television

Reaction Saturation And Sunday Night Television

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Consider what goes on in your brain when you, for instance, you watch an episode of *Mad Men*.

First, you have a reaction. "That's weird" is a reaction. So is "yuck." So is "wow." "This doesn't make sense" is a reaction, "that's a great dress" is a reaction, and "WHAT?" is a reaction.

Next, you might choose to push on your reaction until it matures into a thought. "I didn't buy that conflict because I don't think Joan would take that position on this issue, based on past events" is a thought. Or "in the context of this story, that amount of violence seems gratuitous."

And finally, if you like, you wrap up all your thoughts and try to come up with a conclusion: "This season is going downhill." "They don't write well for this character." "That was a brilliantly written episode."

The great thing about communal viewing with the assistance of social media is sharing reactions. Sunday nights — when *Game Of Thrones* and *Mad Men* air, and when at other times of year *Girls* and *The Good Wife* and *Breaking Bad* air — are reaction avalanches. The bad thing about it is ... the same thing. Twitter, in particular, is a fantastic reaction bucket. If you want a place to put all those "I'm so tired of this story" moments, Twitter will do the job, and it can be absolutely fascinating when people react the same way you do and even more fascinating when they don't. It's also fun, and often very funny. But Twitter can also magnify and elevate initial reactions so much that they're mistaken for thoughts — or, worse, for conclusions.

When something is unusually opaque on first viewing, as Sunday night's *Mad Men* was, there tend to be a lot of reactions very quickly, all of which are valid, few of which are especially enlightening and

none of which should be mistaken for actual thoughts. There's really nothing wrong with that in and of itself, and you can't argue much with how a scene hits another person — it's like arguing about whether something smells good or not.

Before TV viewing got so social, you would probably only be exposed to a handful of reactions to a show or a movie during the time when you were trying to process it. Now, you can choose to be absolutely saturated with reactions. And when enough people have the same reaction — in the case of last night's *Mad Men*, it was perhaps "Whuh?" — it can start to look like a conclusion. *Everybody was confused, therefore it was baffling, therefore it was bad.*

But that's wrong. Maybe it was bad and maybe it wasn't, but everybody saying "Whuh?" is still just the big reaction bucket, no matter how many people are throwing into it. And if we're thinking about *Mad Men* as art and not pure diversion, most of the value of reactions to art of any kind comes from interrogating them enough that you can progress to a thought or two. The fact that a reaction is widely shared doesn't make it more than it is. Coming up with thoughts sometimes takes a little time, especially if disorientation is part of what happens initially. I had lots of reactions to that *Mad Men* episode, and I stand by them (it struck me as kind of self-indulgent, and I'm generally very bored by stories about characters on drugs), but I'm still not sure what I'll wind up thinking about it.

Some things, after all, improve the more you shift from the gut to the more contemplative mind, while others suffer. I enjoyed Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* when I first saw it, but the more I thought about it, the more it fell apart for me. The entire value of good writing, when I'm acting as a reader, is that good writers take their reactions as a starting point and work forward. Or backward. Or up, down, the point is to go *somewhere*.

There's a constant public conversation about whether Twitter and "everybody has an opinion" means there's no future for writing about culture, but that misses the point. Social media has affected the reaction market enormously, but the critical thought market much less. *Reacting publicly* and being seen by a lot of people is easier than it's ever been, but doing something interesting with those reactions still takes work and thought. Social media has helped lower the barriers to entry for people who are terrific writers, certainly, who can now be

found everywhere. But a thousand context-less thumbs up or down don't replace the act of moving down that line from reaction to thought to conclusion, whether it's being done by a professional or an amateur, in print or in a comment section.

One of the things that made Roger Ebert such a hugely influential writer was that he could make transparent the way he processed his own reactions, and he understood that interrogating them meant acknowledging that they exist and that they're the beginning, not the end, of a conversation. And that's *always* what reactions are, even when millions of people have them at the same time.

There's a lot of lamenting of the culture of quick reactions, given the way a cascade of negativity (or positivity) can harden into something that seems to defy further examination except by contrarians. That culture is not going away, but it doesn't have to be a menace if we can all agree that there's more to life than the 140 characters that you can put together at 11:04 on a Sunday night.

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