

A defence of TV-programs as a means to save the world

The human mind is fundamentally incapable of truly comprehending large-scale situations (such as wars and climate change) based on facts only. Throughout the hundreds of thousands of years our primate brain has adapted through evolutionary processes in order to ensure our species survival. During the majority of that development, it has simply never been necessary or even helpful to grasp the severity of 1 million human deaths or the looming threat of a deadly crisis that might come to reality many decades after the individual actions causing it. Simply knowing of such events and threats cannot aid us in comprehending such events either though. This is obvious when considering that the threats climate change brings with it are well-known to the majority of the European population, and yet, there is neither a widespread panic, nor a willingness to take action. However, there is hope: where hard facts cannot change our deeply held wants, needs and habits, literature can. The philosopher Gottfried Gabriel has argued for the thesis that there is not only one form of knowledge, namely propositional knowledge which can be communicated in logical arguments, but that there is also non-propositional knowledge, which we can gain through literature and art. Looking at war photography, for example an image of a severely malnourished child in Gaza, we gain an intuitive emotional understanding that no hard facts – no death toll and no number of days humanitarian aid has been stopped – can evoke in us.

This essay will treat the quote by Giovanni Sartori in three parts: In the first part, the premise that the image on TV offers, by itself, almost no intelligibility will be analysed under account of a Kantian understanding of rationality, as well as a more modern, pluralistic approach by the philosopher Angelika Krebs. Based on those two theories, in the second part it will then be analysed whether the conclusion of Sartori, saying that an image must be explained, is appropriate. Furthermore, it will be treated what such an explanation must entail, if it is indeed necessary. Finally in the third part, the claim that the explanation given on TV is insufficient will be critically analysed and it will thus be concluded whether the “act of seeing is atrophying the ability to understand”.

I.

In order to judge how much intelligibility the image on TV offers, one relies on a definition of what it means for something to be intelligible – thus such a definition shall be given: intelligibility means offering understanding accessible to the viewer. Understanding in this context shall be understood as the ability to rationally assess a situation. Thus, we see that intelligibility is fundamentally based on two factors: whether the preconditions for a rational assessment of the situations are given, and whether the audience has access to those preconditions. The second part will not be treated in this essay due to time reasons.

To assess the first point, two different theories of rationality shall be used to find the preconditions of rationality. Immanuel Kant argued that rationality is based on our ability to reason, which is based on the rules of logic and fundamentally excludes all judgements based on emotions, as emotions are neither universal nor innately justifiable¹. To fulfil Kant’s definition of rationality, the image on TV would thus have to offer all the facts necessary as a basis to evaluate the whole portrayed situation with the help of logical arguments. Additionally, the image must not cause the viewer to have emotions potent enough to spark judgements, which would interfere with a rational assessment of the situation.

¹ This is, of course, a very broad definition of the Kantian understanding of reason. The goal here is not to offer an understanding of Kantian philosophy to the reader, but simply to use the aspects related to the topic of this essay. Due to time limitations, Kant’s justifications for these statements will also not be treated in this essay and instead the reader is kindly asked to look them up themselves in the work “Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft” by Immanuel Kant.

The modern philosopher Angelika Krebs, on the other hand, argues for a fundamentally different role for emotions within rationality, which she understands to be pluralistic. According to Krebs, a rational decision must be based on a synthesis of multiple sources of knowledge and judgement – two of them being reason (which is based on logic) and emotion (which is capable of offering (a different kind of) knowledge too, as Gottfried Gabriel already argued for). In order to arrive at a rational understanding, all of those sources must act in a balance appropriate to the situation, with no source overpowering any other. Different situations require different balances; for example, arriving at a conclusion for a scientific experiment requires very little to no emotional judgement, whilst Krebs thinks in moral dilemmas, our sense of logic is overly reductionist to accurately take the intricate details of most moral dilemmas into account. According to Krebs, to be considered rational, the image on TV must thus both offer the facts and the qualities evoking the right emotions necessary to achieve a balanced synthesis of those sources of knowledge. What specifically is required depends on the balance and thus on situation the image depicts. Since TV generally offers a wide variety of portrayed situations reaching from documentaries on scientific discoveries to news about human rights violations in war situations, this conclusion shall be simplified to state that the image needs to contain both facts and emotion-evoking qualities.

It is trivial that the images on TV are, generally speaking, incredibly potent at evoking emotions. In fact, most of what is shown in TV is selected specifically because of its potency to make people feel something. Studies show that over 90% of news shown on TV treat crisis, threat and suffering, broadly overrepresenting bad news. Seeing soldiers fight for their life and the dying a gruesome death, seeing babies being severely malnourished and seeing crying mothers mourn at the graves of their children simply makes us feel a significantly more essential emotional connection to the people portrayed. Thus, this is simply the most effective strategy for TV-companies to keep viewers engaged and, due to that engagement, profit off of ads. The fact that this business model works, and moreover that TV is much bigger of an industry than radio (where the main difference is the lack of the image) is proof of the fact that the image on TV has the potential to evoke strong emotions, and very often actually does so.

What is more critical is whether an image can portray facts properly. I argue that, whilst it can indeed reveal to the viewer true events happening during the time when the picture is taken (for example, the image of a malnourished child in Gaza does offer a true glimpse into the reality of the life of that person), images are very limited in portraying all the necessary facts to understand a situation as a whole. This is partly based on the factor that usually things shown on TV do not simply portray one single moment (to which an image is limited), but instead an event happening during a longer period of time. Additionally, what the TV-show is trying to portray is often not a single instance that fits on the sensor of a camera, but instead the combination of many similar instances happening at different places at different times. Whilst an image is, for example, capable of portraying the malnutrition of a single child, or even of a hospital room full of children, due to its fundamental limitations it is incapable of showing the true extend of malnutrition during the whole war in all of Gaza.

If one judges the intelligibility of an image on TV from a Kantian perspective, one must agree with Sartori regarding the judgement that the image, by itself, offers almost no intelligibility, as the image is fundamentally incapable of portraying the entirety of facts necessary for a proper understanding of the portrayed situation. If one uses Krebs' definition of rationality instead, the image offers one of the two factors generally necessary for intelligibility. Thus, generally speaking, it does not meet the two criteria for intelligibility and thus one must generally agree with Sartori from Krebs' perspective as well. However, there are some situations portrayed on TV which to be considered intelligible require a specific balance between emotions and facts which the image is capable of meeting. For example, sometimes movies are streamed on TV. Some of these movies, instead of treating specific events, are rather intended as an artistic piece offering an intuitive, emotions-based understanding of certain aspects of humanity – for example, there might be a silent movie treating loneliness being streamed on TV, in which case no facts are

necessary for it to be intelligible. Thus, following Krebs' philosophy, one should rather conclude "most images on TV give, by themselves, no intelligibility" instead of the premise Sartori has stated in the quote. For the rest of this essay, only the perspective of Angelika Krebs will be used, due to the time limit.

II

In the previous part, we have come to the conclusion that many images on TV do not fulfil the necessary criteria in order to be considered intelligible. Sartori implies in the quote treated here that this is criticisable and that, due to the inherent intelligibility of the Image, an explanation is required. This statement implies that the TV serves a purpose which requires intelligibility, which can be criticized from various perspectives. For example, a lover of the western-european literary era of symbolism might argue that the TV offers a possibility to experience art by making artistic movies, recorded theatrical plays and possibly even stills of paintings accessible at home. Such a convinced symbolist might even claim that this is supposed to be the primary purpose of a TV. Following the principles of symbolism, one would conclude that any form of explanation is both impossible and unnecessary: the sole purpose of art according to symbolism is itself ("l'art pour l'art", "art for the purpose of art") and thus there is no hidden meaning that needs to or can be explained through any means separate from the piece of art itself.

However, I would counter such an argument with the fact that TV are also a possible means of leading to human understanding: a good documentary with both meaningful, thought-provoking and emotional images, paired with well-structured explanations of the portrayed situation and the necessary facts to grasp the severity and scale of the events has huge potential when it comes to, for example, making people understand what is happening in a war on the other side of the earth, what its causes and its effects are. The structure of the education system in large parts of the world seem to agree with this statement, as documentaries are a commonly used and cherished way of teaching pupils about important historical and contemporary political events. This point shows, that TVs offer the possibility for furthering humanity's understanding of past and present events, and thus, if TVs are instead used for symbolic portrayals of art, it is true that there is less understanding in the world than possible. This kind of understanding is a worthy purpose of TVs as an understanding of history makes it less likely that a population repeats previously committed mistakes, and an understanding of current events (especially if the understanding also happens on an emotional level, for example by evoking empathy and thus a motivation to help people out of their suffering) can cause people to act morally by investing resources into the alleviation of the problematic situations portrayed.

Whilst this argument emphasizes the importance of educational TV programs, it is not aimed at claiming no art or other things should be streamed on TV. As Gottfried Gabriel claimed, art can lead to a fundamentally different kind of understanding of the world, which is according to Angelika Krebs a necessary aspect of human understanding of the world in total. Thus, both art and educational material should be visible in TV, in a balance which would need an entire other essay to be evaluated. What the argument simply tries to show is that educational content which needs to be intelligible is an important part of what a TV should stream.

Since, as proven in part I, the image alone cannot lead to the intelligibility of such shows, it is necessary to have some sort of explanation of the situation in addition. Such an explanation must provide the lacking aspects needed for the intelligibility of the show – meaning: the necessary facts to put the image into perspective and context must be provided in some way.

III.

In the first two parts, we have concluded that some images on TV lack the facts necessary for them to be intelligible. Furthermore, it was said that at least some of those images should be on TV, and that the

necessary facts need to be provided in some way other than the image. In order to now conclude whether, as Sartori claims, TVs fail to do so, let us consider two examples:

A few years ago, Fox News streamed a show featuring a debate on whether gender-affirming medical care should be accessible to children. In the debate, at first one expert on such treatments was asked one single question and their response stated that transgender children should receive such treatments because it makes them feel seen in their struggles. For the rest of the 45min-long show, two detransitioners were interviewed. They stated that they were young children with suffering from body dysmorphia, just as many cisgender children do, and that they then were convinced by the “leftist LGBT-agenda” that the problem was their gender. Furthermore, they stated that access to medical procedures was easy. They both said that they later on severely regretted having gone through irreversible procedures due to being confused and that they are now suffering from the consequences of having such easy access to those means to permanent change. However, what is not mentioned in the debate is any statistic on medical care for transgender people. For example, studies prove that only between 0.5 and 1.5% of the already small minority of transgender people who actually do any medical procedures feel regret about them at any point afterwards. Additionally, the main reason for regret is not having been confused about their gender, but the backlash they received from parents, friends and society in general for going through with their medical procedures. The show did not even highlight the advantages which gender-affirming care offers to transgender children – amongst others, studies show having access to treatments significantly reduces the suicide rate, which is otherwise at over 40% for transgender children.

In conclusion, whilst Fox News did paint an incredible emotional picture where viewers feel deep pity and empathy for the detransitioners suffering under the consequences of their past decisions, the show portrays their suffering as the typical consequence of laws allowing children to get gender-affirming care – and it achieves this by leaving out crucial facts necessary for intelligibility.

On the other hand, there are movies such as “Schindlers Liste” which portray abhorrent crimes committed by Nazis under Hitler, as well as public figures resisting the oppressive regime. Many of those movies manage to spark fundamental understanding for what happened during this dark period of history. They do not do this by putting all the necessary facts in the movie though – instead, they rely on the level of education their expected viewer already has. If someone knows absolutely nothing about the Holocaust, they will not be capable of understanding the fundamental message of “Schindlers Liste”, however, this is simply not the case for the vast majority of viewers due to our educational system teaching these things.

Under consideration of these examples, we can conclude that, whilst knowing the necessary facts is always required, there does not need to be an explanation for every program within the TV show itself. If it requires information already taught at school, this explanation is the school’s responsibility. What is absolutely crucial, though, is explanations within TV shows themselves, if they treat a niche subject where the majority of viewers cannot be expected to know the required facts already. Thus, whilst TV sometimes fails at providing the framework for understanding a portrayed situation as a whole, in some instances where this happens it is not actually the fault of TV but rather of a failed education.

With that in mind, the statement by Sartori, that the act of seeing images on TV as they are portrayed nowadays hinders understanding, can be critically examined. It is true that a lack of facts which put an image into perspective can be fundamentally misleading (as in the TV-show by Fox News) regarding the whole situation, because without proper putting-into-perspective, the viewer gains only understanding of one aspect of the situation and mistakenly believes it to be representative of the situation over-all. However, the images on TV, together with other forms of art, such as literature, do not generally work against understanding, but rather critically advance it – the intuitive form of understanding critical situations which those sources of knowledge offer us according to Gottfried Gabriel are fundamental to solving a diverse range of problems, ranging from humanitarian nature to the global climate crisis.

