

Biophilia-Necrophilia and Television

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A sample of 500 mothers of high school aged children in Palo Alto, California, were surveyed on their deep emotional attitudes in relation to their TV viewing habits.*

The survey explored the relationship between TV viewing and biophilic (life loving) vs. necrophilic (death loving) tendencies as measured by a factor based set of objectively scored projective questions.¹ Individuals were told that the purpose of the survey was to learn about their values.

The dimension biophilia-necrophilia was developed theoretically by Erich Fromm.² While biophilic and necrophilic tendencies are blended in most people, one or the other is usually dominant. Biophilic individuals are attracted to that which is alive, which grows, which is free and unpredictable. They have an aversion to violence and all that destroys life. They reject being mechanized, becoming a part of a machine-like organization. They enjoy life in all its manifestation in contrast to mere excitement or thrills.

At the other pole, necrophilic individuals are attracted to that which is dead, mechanic, and rigidly ordered. They feel that people must be regulated and controlled by force. Feeling bored (dead) inside, they tend to look for thrills as a source of excitement. It seemed probable therefore

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Professor Alfred Braum of Stanford organized the survey and is repeating the study elsewhere.

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cf. M. Maccoby, "The Psychoanalytic Study of the American Public: Biophilia vs. Necrophilia" (unpublished manuscript).

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E. Fromm, The Heart of Man, New York, Harper and Row, 1964.



that necrophilics more than biophilics would be attracted to TV, and especially to programs showing violence.

The results of the survey show first of all that necrophilia is significantly correlated with the number of hours spent watching TV. Seventy-three percent of the mothers who are more biophilic (with scores less than one standard deviation from the mean) watch TV from 0-7 hours a week. In contrast, 61 percent of mothers who are necrophilic (with scores more than one standard deviation from the mean) watch TV from 8 to 56 hours a week (see Table 1).

The product-moment correlation between necrophilia and hours of TV watched is $r = .29, p < .01$. This means that the relationship between necrophilia and TV watching is statistically significant.

It may be argued, however, that biophilic attitudes result from education and that we are really only saying that educated people watch TV less than do uneducated people, a finding that has been reported by a number of investigators. In fact, level of schooling (high school, college, post-graduate) is significantly correlated with both hours of TV watched ($r = .27$) and with necrophilia ($r = .31$). However, we controlled the variable of schooling in order to see whether the more necrophilic on each educational level watch TV more. This is the case. The partial correlation of necrophilia and hours spent watching TV is (with education controlled) $r = .23, p < .01$.³

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Does advanced schooling really mould a biophilic attitude? Although we do not have the evidence to prove it, we would postulate a more complex relationship between biophilia and schooling. Most children are naturally biophilic; the born sadist or necrophilic is exceptional. The child most likely to become necrophilic is one who is exploited or beaten down. Necrophilic attitudes may be formed by repressive institutions, among them certain schools. It is possible that many of the most extremely necrophilic individuals are too depressed to continue their schooling beyond a minimum. On the other hand, some extremely biophilic individuals actively seek stimulation from higher education and resist the dehumanizing pressures.



The second finding is that biophilics and necrophilics prefer different kinds of programs. Of the mothers whose favorite programs were those offered by the educational TV station (KQED), 52 percent were biophilic and 5 percent necrophilic. In contrast, of the mothers who most preferred western and spy programs, 36 percent were necrophilic and 21 percent were biophilic.⁴

In the interpretation of these results, we are faced with an obvious question. Are necrophilics attracted to TV because it appeals to their love of violence and deadness or does TV watching make people more necrophilic? Although our evidence does not allow us to answer the question, both factors may be at work. Necrophilic people feel lonely, bored, and dead inside and seek TV for vicarious thrills.

At the same time, many TV programs stimulate necrophilic tendencies. One can observe the connection between the passion for advanced electronic techniques and necrophilic destructiveness in programs such as "Mission Impossible." In this program, complicated gadgets are handled by dead-faced people who kill their enemies in "the national interest." It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss possibilities for a different kind of programming, a question which is taken up in other parts of this report.

We should point out that TV programs do not always preach necrophilic values of compulsive cleanliness, (although this is a common theme in advertisements for soap) the sanctity of property over life, or force as the solution to social unrest. TV commentators and TV programs often express more liberal values.

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Only 3 percent of the mothers stated a preference for these programs. It is possible that some necrophilic mothers would have been embarrassed to admit it. It is also possible that necrophilic women are attracted to daytime dramas which emphasize illness and tragedy. However, we failed to ask about these programs.



However, in a sense somewhat different from that of Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message. The medium is one of addiction to vicarious thrills and pseudo-intimacy. Those who feel lifeless turn on TV in order to be "turned on."

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Table I

Biophilia-Necrophilia and Hours Spent

Watching TV (percentages)

Hours of TV Watched Per Week	Biophilic (22 percent)	Mixed (57 percent)	Necrophilic (21 percent)
	1-7	73	56
8-14	21	26	31
15-56	6	18	30
Total percent	100	100	100

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