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The Word and the Machine

MUCH thought is now being given to the possible effects of television. To be seen correctly, the problem must be placed in relation to radio and the cinema; and this was done recently by Dr. Ifor Evans, whose comments to the Library Association were reported in a cable message from London. There is a danger, he said, that British people will become a nation of lookers and listeners instead of readers. We are "moving from the age of the written word into an oral and visual age." Dr. Evans conceded the educational value of cinema, radio and television; but he said that they made a "different contribution" from that of the printed book. "The book was still the most important (medium), but it was no longer the most attractive."

An oral age would not be entirely new in human experience; and if the *Odyssey* is an example of what can come out of it we need not sink prematurely into despair. But the earlier Greeks were a long way from industrial civilisation; and their eyes were used for the work under their hands or for noticing the world around them—one reason, perhaps, why so many of them could respond easily to poetry. True, they came to be "lookers" when Attic drama grew to its noble climax; but the people who watched a play by Aeschylus were more concerned with words than with action. The story was in the poetry, and was filled out by the imagination of the onlooker. When Agamemnon was murdered the deed was reported, whereas on the screen it would be shown in gruesome detail. Words on films are in the flow of action, and presumably are used in the same way on television. In radio the value of the word was restored, so that we seemed to be drawing closer to literature. But the scientific revolution, once under way, could not be stopped; and television must

somehow be fitted into the cultural pattern.

The pessimistic view, which is seldom the right one, holds out little hope for books. We are all expected to become "lookers," and the reading habit will gradually disappear. If that happened, however, the writing habit would also atrophy, since nobody is going to write books that can never be published. And if men ceased to write stories or plays there would presently be a shortage of imaginative material for television. Like the cinema before it, television is not a creative medium, but merely a technical instrument for projecting what can be provided by the arts, and especially by the art of writing. Further, the people likely to supply its largest audience, except when outdoor events and great occasions are being screened (we would all be lookers if we could see the Coronation), are those who read only the lightest fiction. And it would not be a bad thing for readers and writers if some of the rubbish now being printed could lose its public.

In the meantime, some transitional difficulties are being reported. Publishers complain that it is becoming too risky to bring out first novels, or even serious novels by established authors. But other publishers, especially in the United States, are uneasy because richly endowed University presses are invading the commercial market. There is an unsatisfied demand for good writing, and if it cannot be met in one way it may be met in another. The reading public is still very large, and may become larger instead of smaller; but it may also be more discriminating. Social habits are changing. Yet it seems unlikely that the imagination, a faculty unevenly spread, but very tenacious and influential, will be out of employment. Dr. Evans reminded us that modern civilisation is based on literacy. The foundations would be weak indeed if they could not stand against machines which have no power without the words that drive them.

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