

# Philosophy on television

**Ben Watson**

**M**arx remarks somewhere that all true philosophy begins with the criticism of religion. If he had lived through the postwar era, he would have added: and the religion of a triumphant capitalism is television. Just as the medieval cathedral was the apotheosis of feudalism, television is the techno-exemplification of bourgeois market relations. Television's promise of democratic, anti-hierarchical accessibility turns into its opposite. Free competition at the molecular level arrives at totalizing monopolies and ideological domination. Today, any philosophy that fails to deal with television simply hasn't got started.

For First World populations, television grants domestic bliss at the price of mute passivity (the great debate about 'dumbing-down' in the mass media rarely mentions that a one-way medium makes us, quite literally, dumb). News reports we cannot interrogate tell us how lucky we are to be safe at home watching television, while the rest of the globe suffers war, pogroms and starvation. Social-democratic apologists claim that switching channels is tantamount to voting, whilst the exhausted and alienated subject knows only the ineluctable drift towards late-night Channel Five, which at least provides a libidinal jolt, even if its non-interactive imaginary only leads to masturbation and sleep. The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, updating Marx's equation of religion with opium, remark somewhere: 'television – drug of the nation!'

Whether or not this situation demands censure depends on your philosophy, and your estimate of the potential for alternative endeavour. Certainly, the joys of radical philosophy – logical rigour, conceptual shock, bracing scepticism – rarely breach our television screens. Minds grappling with Marx, Adorno or Debord invariably find the media grotesquely vacuous. The kind of attention addressed by television is not funded, full-time, febrile and neophyte; it's exhausted and after-work, imagistic balm for frayed nerve-ends, an accompaniment to alcoholic relief. Production is driven by viewing figures, not intellectual pride. Television's current documentary style – an impressionist flux of musical reference, location shot and winning personality – has none of the clarity of constituents that makes philosophical reason determinate, so attractive to ardent souls impatient with illusion and fuzz. So there is something unavoidably quixotic about Alain de Botton's television series *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*, six broadcasts 'inspired' by his book *The Consolations of Philosophy*.\*

Of course, there are other vehicles for those seeking to mediate between philosophy and mass society (one might cite agitational newspapers, street petitions, anti-capitalist riots, the desecration of statues...), but Alain de Botton's series has the advantage of placing the two great antagonists – philosophy and television – in unavoidable proxim-

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\* Alain de Botton, *Philosophy: A Guide to Happiness*, Channel 4, April–May 2000; Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2000.

ity. When de Botton is mentioned among philosophers, his name is greeted with hoots of derision – presumably because his programmes were so patently *unphilosophical*. Put bluntly, they reduced six hallowed names to lifestyle advice. Is there any point in hearing ‘no pain no gain’ from Friedrich Nietzsche rather than Jane Fonda?

Broadcast on Sunday evenings, de Botton’s series occupied a slot reserved, in less multicultural times, for Christianity. Surprisingly, having invoked consolation, de Botton never mentioned Boethius (480–524 AD). In the Roman’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, the pure reason of Plato and Aristotle comforts the Christian author while facing execution, providing a key text for Europe’s historic negotiation between pagan rationality and Christian revelation. In contrast, de Botton’s consolation – Seneca’s anger-control fatalism explained to a white-van driver, Schopenhauer’s biologicistic resignation about love-object choices explained to a brokenheart, Socratic convention-defying principles explained to an employee who fell foul of corrupt bosses – reeked of bedside manner and patronism. Far from plumbing the depths of the turbulent ideological currents that sustain common sense, de Botton remained on the surface, content to charm and flirt rather than interrogate.

Note, too, the unBoethian plural of de Botton’s book title – *Consolations* – which conveys postmodern disdain for any singular ‘master narrative’, instead laying out an array of consolatory philosophies like so many potions and therapies at a New Age fair. So is de Botton simply guilty of commodifying his philosophical wares? Can the student of philosophy dismiss him as a clown, Autolycus the Pedlar rather than Autonomous the Intellect? Such an *ad hominem* response would be inadequate. To be more than a parlour game for alienated intellectuals, philosophy must go beyond dissing a celebrity. It needs to understand the ideological pressures brought to bear by the visual.

### **The purpose of work**

A glance at de Botton’s book is instructive. It begins casually and intimately, an account of contemplating paintings of Socrates’ execution on an aeroplane trip. De Botton is a fluent and seductive writer, expertly drawing the reader into his line of thought, however trivial. Yet the conclusion he comes to is not trivial at all. Meditation on Socrates, his persistent refusal to credit common sense and his challenges to convention, results in an intriguing passage of self-criticism:

In conversations, my priority was to be liked, rather than to speak the truth. A desire to please led me to laugh at modest jokes like a parent on the opening night of a school play. With strangers I adopted the servile manner of a concierge greeting wealthy clients in a hotel – salival enthusiasm born of a morbid, indiscriminate desire for affection. I did not publicly doubt ideas to which the majority was committed. I sought approval of figures of authority and after encounters with them, worried at length whether they thought me acceptable.

The heroic and unpretentious way Socrates faced his executioners during his final hours forces de Botton to reconsider his own life. In today’s society, challenging conventional ideas is condemned as ‘bizarre, even aggressive ... It would scarcely be acceptable, for example, to ask in the course of an ordinary conversation what our society holds to be the purpose of work.’ To which he appends a black-and-white photograph of densely-packed employees in front of serried ranks of VDU screens (a Japanese or Korean telephone exchange?). Quite unexpectedly, the mild, upper-class de Botton (who on television, and in the rest of the book, reveals quite straightforward bourgeois assumptions about the direct link between property and well-being) delivers a blow worthy of a situationist tract, or something montaged by John Berger.

The point is that philosophical television – a critical contrast of word and image and sound – *is* possible. John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, Guy Debord’s filmic tracts and Patrick Keiler’s *Robinson* videos prove that. And with his reference to work, even de

Botton rises to it: an occasion where an image makes the viewer face with sober senses their real condition of life and their relations with their kind. Why did de Botton's awakening to the burning task of philosophy, its challenge to everyday inertia and ideological submissiveness, fail to make it to television?

From my own experience of mass-media editing, I guess it went like this. Producer [lover chianti and *melanzana parmigiana* close by Broadcasting House]: 'Well, it's a great book, Alain, but I'm still not sure it's a television series...' AdB: 'I did conceive it in six discrete chunks; they could make separate programmes.' P: 'I see where you're coming from, but Seneca, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche... If you could give me a slogan to summarize the philosophy of each guy, to differentiate them... I mean, all these guys sound the same to me – couldn't you catch the essence of each in a phrase you could explain to a taxi-driver, a chef, a broken-hearted Sloane? ... Hey, what an idea! I gotta write that down...'

Whether or not it occurred like that (or whether it was over sushi and sake), de Botton's televised version certainly reduced his six philosophers to life-guidance soundbites, and in so doing abandoned the Socratic quest that initially inspired him. (In the penultimate programme, Socrates was invoked by Frank Sinatra singing 'My Way', a worldly boast miles from the critical



gadfly that was Socrates.) Proffering an array of philosophical options has something servile and waiterly about it (de Botton's 'salival enthusiasm'), a posture Socrates never stooped to. On television, everyday life – our actual mode of survival, our relationship to the means of production, the scourge of work – was spirited from view; philosophy was reduced to various ways of managing the vicissitudes of our leisure time. There was little to distinguish between the commercials in the breaks – replete with grandiloquent advice about how to live our lives – and de Botton's 'philosophical' ruminations.

But de Botton's original project can serve to remind us of the task of philosophy, perhaps even to reunify a science ever threatening to fall asunder in a cloud of dusty -isms. Philosophy was not always a matter of footnotes and bibliographies – or of location-shots and television broadcasts. De Botton describes Socrates via Plato:

Whenever anyone comes face to face with Socrates and has a conversation with him, what invariably happens is that, although he may have started on a completely different subject first, Socrates will keep heading him off as they're talking until he has him trapped into giving an account of his present life-style and the way he has spent his life in the past. And once he has him trapped, Socrates won't let him go before he has well and truly cross-examined him from every angle.

Such a description exceeds the brief of academic philosophy, and even that of political literature. It puts me in mind of Martin Bennell, a hospital porter at St James's in Leeds and a socialist activist, who has never to my knowledge written anything more

ambitious than a postcard, and yet whose persistent interrogations about my own life – and my relationship to the class system – made me a socialist.

The last thing I expected from *Radical Philosophy's* request for a retort to Alain de Botton's television series was a reminder (albeit a reminder by omission) of the philosophical origins of the dialectic – unprofessional and streetwise, improvised and oral – on which all radical thought ultimately relies. De Botton's initial reflections on Socrates, as recorded in his book, garnered truths denied the docusoap 'immediacy' of the television broadcasts: nothing so insidious as mediated immediacy, or – in non-technical language – naivety stage-managed for the masses.

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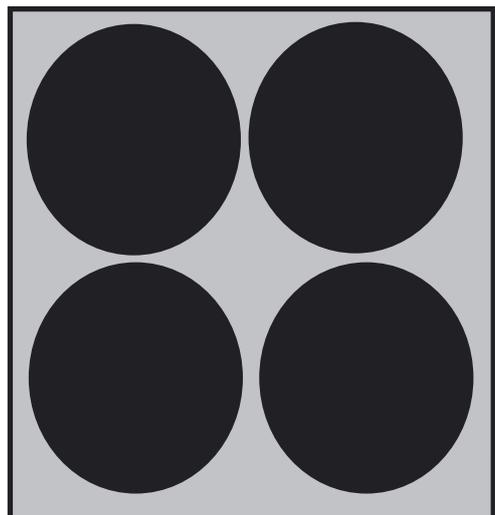
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