

TV listings: 16 reasons to turn on the tube

PHIL ANDERSON/SPECIAL TO *UTNE READER*

Watching television has always been a matter of choice. But finding TV shows worth choosing has usually been a matter of luck.

And now, technology and rampant capitalism have compounded the problem by bringing us a wider selection. Cable, satellite, independent stations, home video and/or pay-per-view TV form a dense media wilderness in which quantity is often confused with quality.

Nevertheless, it is possible to hack through this wilderness and find some rare gems of programming—even some endangered or hitherto undiscovered species. You need to wield a remote control with abandon; you may need to know how to program your VCR.

Even without this fancy hardware, you can find some broadcast TV offerings that are a bit off the beaten track, such as David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and *thirtysomething*. Yet many say that these shows represent not fundamental TV evolution but a facelift; that TV is simply coming to resemble radio, offering more variety in different-shaped chunks, "boutique" programming for specific audiences by channel.

Actually, TV is turning into something more like publishing. Anyone with even basic cable (a monthly payment but no premium channels such as HBO) and a VCR is now comparable to someone visiting a well-stocked bookstore—one in which fishing magazines share rack space with literary reviews, or where cheap mysteries are across the aisle from Sam Beckett. Granted, TV still features *Waiting for Bass* more than *Waiting for Godot*, but it's getting there.

So you don't have to be guilty about watching TV. Having a mute button on the remote control helps; having a sense of perspective helps even more. Remember that we watch TV for different reasons: entertainment, armchair travel, information, nostalgia, quick impressions, camp irony. Realizing that depth is better than irony, here are some possible landmarks in this new wilderness. Some are easily found, some are available at the whim of a local station's or cable system's budget.



1 Turner Network Television, The Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel, Bravo, Arts & Entertainment Network: These come with a basic cable subscription (although in some areas Bravo costs extra) and take up some of the slack from PBS's under-funded mission of appealing to history, curiosity, and/or an enlightened intellect. TNT owns an enormous library of '30s and '40s films from MGM, Warner Brothers, and RKO and presents them in a somewhat curatorial fashion (especially the

great MGM and Warners cartoons, on weekday afternoons). Discovery offers non-fiction programming, some of it dated, but some downright inspired—e.g., eight hours of live Soviet TV (including a popular audience-participation feature, "I Play the Accordion"), or a weekend's worth of live explorations around the Red Sea.

While The Learning Channel often offers tedious instructional material, they've also carried some series on independ-