TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

SEEING THROUGH THE TUBE

BY FRANK D. McCONNELL

I begin with a true story. In 1974 I was having coffee in the English department lounge at Northwestern University when two of my colleagues—a younger, untenured man and an older, tenured woman—entered in mid-conversation.

"Oh, no," the woman was saying, "I just won't have a television in my apartment. I know there are *some* good things on it, especially on public broadcasting. But so much of it is just garbage!"

My younger friend laughed. "Joke's on you, then," he said. "It's got an off button."

For years I've thought that a brilliant riposte: If you don't like it, you don't have to do it. It certainly has all the bracing moral simplicity of our former first lady's insouciant slogan, "Just Say No." But now, having immersed myself in as many anti-TV jeremiads as anyone can digest, I wonder. The vast majority of media studies over the last 30 years, both anti-TV and, in a few heroic or quixotic cases, pro-TV, are unanimous on one point and one point only: that TV is not just a new medium but a revolutionary and cataclysmic alteration in the way humans perceive and process their world, destined to change forever the nature of consciousness and society itself. The consensus, in other words, is that, though "it's got an off button," the button doesn't really work. We are all creatures—or prisoners—of the Tube.

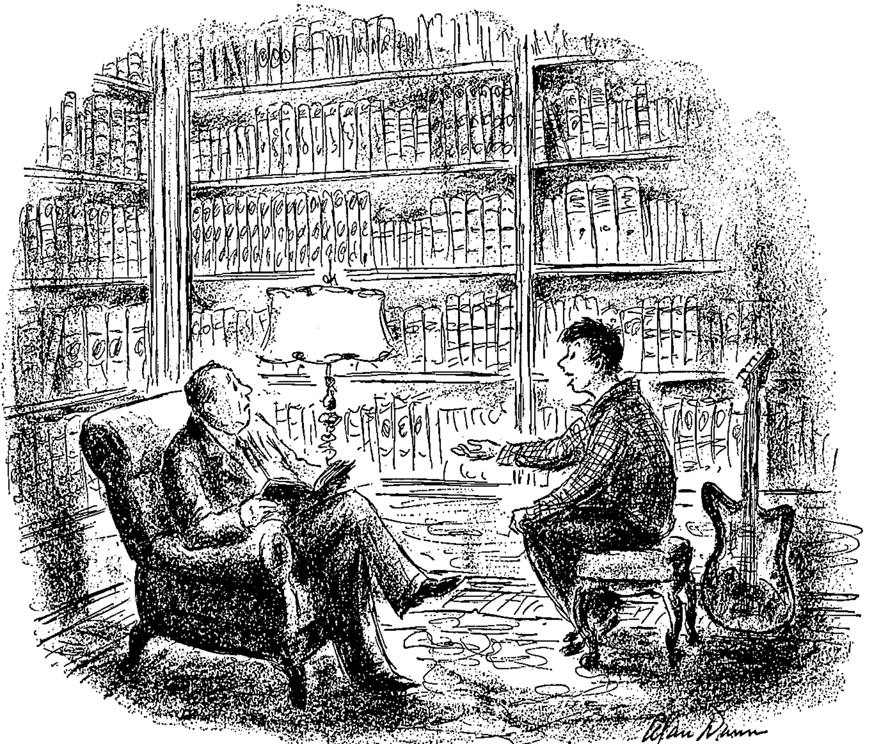
Now this is a fairly apocalyptic tonnage of significance to load on what is, after all, an entertainment or advertising or information medium barely 40 years old. Developed in the 1930s but largely dormant during World War II, TV blossomed only in the early years of the Bomb and the Cold War. As Robert C. Toll reports in *The Entertainment Machine* (1982), while in 1950 there were only about three million sets in the country, by 1953 the number had grown exponentially to 21 million. Today it is the rare American household that possesses only one set, and the atypical American who watches less than four hours of TV a day.

This much is statistical fact—a crucial *psy-*

chic fact of late 20th-century life. But the facts do not prepare one for the Druidic solemnity with which writers, many brilliant, have attacked TV as a kind of cultural succubus, seducing the Republic and draining it of its vitality.

In the 1976 film *Network*, Paddy Chayevsky, himself one of the great early TV writers, created a nightmare vision in which TV "news," driven by the ratings race, becomes a tawdry, debased, debasing, and ultimately murderous form of entertainment, pandering to the most prurient appetites of its audience. Recent, popular "reconstructed reality" shows such as "Hard Copy" and "A Current Affair," in which actors re-create tabloid "true stories," can seem a chilling fulfillment of Chayevsky's fantasy—as does the recent admission by NBC that, in a report on the safety failures of GMC trucks, the producers had "enhanced" the explosion of a truck by planting what were in effect bombs under the chassis. Novelists such as Don DeLillo (*White Noise*, 1985) and Thomas Pynchon (*Vineland*, 1990) use TV as a central metaphor for what they see as the Novocainized, universal moral stupor of present-day America. And media critics, from the populist to the high-culture mandarin, have argued that TV, *by its very nature*, reduces culture to the lowest common denominator, provides a false, substitute reality from which the viewer cannot escape, and is in fact little less than mind control.

But not only do intellectuals hate TV; TV seems to hate itself. A number of highly popular series since the 1960s—"The Dick Van Dyke Show," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and "Murphy Brown," to name a few—have orbited around the idea of writing for, producing, or selling a TV show. In each case, the assumption has been that the industry itself is well short of the respectable or the grown-up. In the vast range of the family sitcom—surely one of TV's staple crops—I cannot call to mind a single instance in which the image of a family watching TV together is presented as in any way a good thing. One example will serve. (And I note in passing that few of TV's most vituperative critics ever deign to discuss the specific details of a given show.) In "The



"You see, Dad, Professor McLuhan says the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village. Get it?"

Simpsons"—the widely praised cartoon sitcom about a preternaturally dense family which is itself a parody of the archetypal TV-sitcom household—each episode begins with the father leaving work, the mother coming home from the supermarket, and the kids returning from school, all of them arriving simultaneously and throwing themselves on the sofa, their glazed-over eyes fixed on the TV set.

Plato, notoriously, attacked the art of writing as an unworthy vehicle for wisdom—in, of course, some of the greatest writing the world has known. And Swift and Voltaire, among others, satirized the dangerous side effects of the proliferation of printed books—in, naturally, printed books of their own. We can even fantasize that, at the dawn of language itself, some anxious shaman delivered an eloquent speech to the effect that this newfangled thing, speech, would lead to no good.

Nevertheless, the salient fact about the birth of TV is the complexity of its historical moment. I have said that the industry began to burgeon in the late 1940s and early '50s, the age in which it first became thinkable that humanity, in possession now of the atomic bomb, could commit global suicide. The planet itself, again for the first time, began to align itself in two mutually hostile tribes—the "Free World" and the "Communist Conspiracy," to use the phrases that now almost elicit nostalgia. But that was not all. The moment of TV's birth was also the moment at which information itself began to be perceived as the only truly valuable commodity for the future. World War II, more than any previous conflict, had been a battle of and for information. The breaking of the Japanese code "Purple" and the German code "Enigma," and the instantly legendary Manhattan Project, whose secrecy was soon after revealed to have been penetrated by the Soviets—all of these information struggles were as crucial as any "real-world" military engagement in securing victory for the Allies. As much as TV, in other words, it was the war itself that guaranteed that ours would be a period obsessed with info-tech as its prime tool for survival.

In 1948—the year, by the way, that Milton Berle became the first TV superstar—Claude Shannon published his seminal book, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Shannon, a cryptographer during the war, was then working for Bell Laboratories, trying to devise a more efficient, static-free system of telephonic exchange. His monograph does not make for chair-gripping excitement, yet it may be one of the defining works of this century. For what Shannon, the sublime technologue, did was reassign the priorities: The *content* of the message sent, he argued, is less important than the *means* by which it is sent. Shannon could not have known in 1948 that his theories were mapping a phenomenon—TV—that would come to be seen as the third pivotal revolution, after writing and printing, in the history of communication. It would require Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* (1964), to translate Shannon's argument into what is certainly the slogan of the info-tech age: "The medium is the message." It was McLuhan who single-handedly raised the "question of media" to a level of philosophical and moral urgency it has not yet lost. And it is McLuhan who is perceived as the Great Adversary by virtually every later, anti-TV writer.

McLuhan, a professor of English at the University of Toronto, discovered the new world of media not through information theory but through his discipleship to a very remarkable man, Harold A. Innis. A historian

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and a humanist, Innis was concerned with the ways writing and printing technologies, "monopolies of information," influenced the growth of empires. In his 1951 book, *The Bias of Communication*, he argued that the print revolution, by making "texts" available to a hitherto ignored class of readers and by encouraging a new sense of *privacy* in the act of reading, contributed to the formation of modern, individualist, and democratic man. His argument has, by now, become all but dogma.

What McLuhan did was extend Innis's idea to include the technology of speed-of-light, audiovisual information: radio, and above all, TV. His two definitive books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964), contain his major argument, and they turned the man himself into something of a media celebrity—rare and heady for an academic! The conclusion of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* reveals McLuhan's prophetic fervor:

> The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such coexistence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person. Our most ordinary and conventional attitudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques. Familiar institutions and associations seem at times menacing and malignant.

There is something vaguely Nietzschean in the urgency of "new electric galaxy"—in its paradoxically apocalyptic optimism. McLuhan was unquestioningly sanguine about the effects of the revolutionary TV on human consciousness and culture. If oral society had been a media extension of hearing, he argued, and manuscript and print culture an extension of sight, then the new "electric galaxy" was, or would become, an extension of the central nervous system itself. TV would usher in a postliterate, immediate linkage of all peoples with all peoples, a hot line from self to self that would deliver us all from the bondage of literacy and establish us as a "global village"—humankind's long dream of one world, at last accomplished by the infinite crisscrossing of electromagnetic waves around the world.

It is easy for anti-TV critics to read McLuhan's great expectations as yet another excrescence of the solipsistic 1960s, like tie-dye T-shirts and macrobiotic cuisine. The TV set, around whose glow we gather in our darkened living rooms, becomes an avatar of the primal campfire around which the tribe would collect to share its grievances, its gossip, and its gospel. Does the phrase "Woodstock Nation" call up an embarrassing ghost here?

And yet, in ways McLuhan could not have predicted, we have become, thanks to TV, a global—or at least a continental—village. To take two obvious instances, it was indisputably TV coverage of the war in Vietnam that generated a massive public revulsion against that particular adventure, and it was obviously Ronald Reagan's superbly telegenic presence, more so than his policies, that made him the first two-term president in 30 years. More recently, in the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton and H. Ross Perot simultaneously contrived the "TV town meeting," an electronic question-and-answer session that gives the illusion, at least, of coast-to-coast intimacy with the candidate. This phenomenon, certain to be a feature of all future campaigns, is itself modeled on a genre that didn't even exist when McLuhan wrote: the "talk show," in which Phil Donohue, Oprah Winfrey, or Geraldo Rivera, guests, and audience all share a conversational space at once glaringly public and deeply private, one part group therapy to two parts tribal council. To give a final example, it is now a very real challenge in heavily covered court cases (the Rodney King beating trial, the William Kennedy Smith rape trial, the Amy Fisher assault trial) to find jurors fit to serve. If they have seen the TV coverage of the alleged crimes, how impartial can they be? But given the ubiquitousness of TV in our lives, if they haven't seen any coverage, how *awake* can they be? The global village, in other words, turns out to be a reality. The question is whether the

secret name of the village is Salem.

McLuhan's enthusiasm was for TV as a technology, a new way of perceiving, a new connectedness. What he did not take into account is that TV is also a *business.* Until very recently, three major networks held and enforced a crushing monopoly on what could be shown and what could be said, reducing the viewer to the passive status of a chooser-among-sames. Could the electromagnetic Eden of the TV tube be a return not to the primal garden but to the state of enslavement?

Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1977) makes this case. Mander is a former advertising executive who used his first book to recant his sins. Sometimes *Four Arguments* reads almost like an auto-da-fé. The common theme of his four arguments is an almost exact inversion of the Innis-McLuhan approach to media. Yes, TV is a new and startling way of perceiving reality, but it is a false, engineered "reality" thrust upon its passive victims in such a way as to isolate them from the reality of their own lives. Yes, TV is a unifying force, but it is a unifying force only insofar as it turns us all into eager consumers of the products it exists, above all, to convince us we need. TV, for Mander, is more than anything else a sales medium, its other functions (news, entertainment, etc.) serving only as a kind of narcotic foreplay for the Big Sell:

> Whenever we buy a product [advertised through TV] we are paying for the recovery of our own feelings. We have thereby turned into creatures who are the commodities we buy. We are the product we pay for and all life is reduced to serving this cycle.

This is a powerful indictment. Part of the enduring charm of Mander's book, in fact, is his brave sense of himself as a lone voice crying out in the wilderness against the final closure of the TV-addicted mind. Few, if any, later anti-TV tracts catch quite his pitch of anger or risk his uncompromising solution to the problem of TV, which is, to quote Voltaire on Christianity, "Crush the infamous thing!" Mander is a man on fire with a vision of a great wrong, and we cannot expect such men to speak always with complete realism. The conclusion of his book is ringing and poignant:

> How to achieve the elimination of television? I certainly cannot answer that question. It is obvious, however, that the first step is for all of us to purge from our minds the idea that just because television exists, we cannot get rid of it.

Between McLuhan's enthusiasm and Mander's apocalypticism, later discussions of TV occupy a moderate, perhaps more habitable space. The Mander final solution to the TV problem is "Luddite," as Neil Postman calls it in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* And Postman sensibly observes that this recourse is impossible. To date at least, the single indisputable fact about technology—any technology—is that it is not reversible. You cannot uninvent TV any more than you can uninvent the alphabet, the printing press, the wheel, the smelting of iron, or nuclear fission. As a species, just as individuals, our fate is to learn to live with what we have imagined.

Postman accepts, as Mander does not, the inevitability of the TV revolution, but he analyzes the negative effects of that revolution. Postman is not a disaffiliated adman but a distinguished professor of communication and rhetoric. And the debasement of mature public discourse caused by the "televising" of reality is the gravamen of his argument. Whereas Mander accuses TV of being primarily a narcotic, Postman's perhaps more damning position is that it is lethally trivializing.

What Postman claims here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. Our television set keeps us in constant communion with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable. The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject mat-

ter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.

Television then not only abstracts and etiolates experience, it compartmentalizes it—within the single compartment of entertainment. In a universe of discourse in which everything from tragedy to farce is presented simply as spectacle, both tragedy and farce and everything between become impossibly confused. Postman uses the example of the evening news. No one seems to notice, he remarks, the irony that the evening news on every channel in America is introduced with urgent-sounding signature theme music. The implication is that the events of the day, whether a plane crash in California or an international crisis, are all contents of a "show." A serious-looking anchorman or anchorwoman narrates, with video, the more ominous or violent events of the last 12 hours. After a break to advertise completely irrelevant products, a usually jocund weatherperson discusses what the weather might be like tomorrow. (In California, especially, this is virtually null information.) After another ad break someone appears to talk about sports; then, with perhaps a few local news items, the serious person with whom we began "wraps it all up," more often than not urging that one stay tuned for the sitcom or movie of the week that is to follow. The real and the fictional, the serious and the trivial, become hopelessly blurred, until only the uninterrupted, zombifying carrier wave itself is the "real" meaning of the transmission. The medium is not the message but, in McLuhan's best pun, the massage.

The political implications are ominous. Postman compares TV culture to the smilingly mindless dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In Huxley's novel the people are kept in happy servitude by the drug "Soma," which reduces all stress and makes the world look just perfectly all right. "Better a gramme than a damme," as they are fond of saying. TV, Postman argues, *is* Huxley's Soma: an infallibly relaxing drug that reconciles the individual to his or her own tyrannization.

Social critic Jonathan Kozol hailed Postman's book as a "prophetic vision." In his own book published the same year, *Illiterate America*, Kozol makes his case with at least equal earnestness. Kozol's own "prophetic" credentials as a passionate advocate of public education are impeccable. And while *Illiterate America* has relatively little to say about TV, what it does say is damning. On the much-touted use of TV as an educational tool, he writes:

> The television learner is entirely passive. The television mode is intellectual disjunction. The consequence of televised instruction is a deeper balkanization of the human consciousness than anything that academic fragmentation has engendered up to now. The mechanistic dangers are no longer metaphoric but specific when we learn from a machine. The separation of a skill from a reflective understanding of its ethical or anti-human implications is enhanced (and it is often virtually assured) by televised indoctrination.

Kozol, even more than Postman, understood that the ultimate extension of TV technology would be not the simple passive-receptive viewer entranced by whatever happened to be "on" at the time, but the burgeoning—now triumphant—technology of *interactive* TV: the video game, the computer-enhanced curriculum, and the soon-to-be-perfected "virtual reality." Kozol suggests that this particular brave new world is even more Huxleyan than its immediate ancestor:

> The learner manipulates the terminal that sits beside her television console; yet it is she who is manipulated by the button she selects. Her only option is to choose at which specific moment she will plug into the sequence of accredited information which has been approved by those who know what is best for her, and for themselves, and who have planned the literacy curriculum with sensitive anticipation of its probable results.

For Kozol, TV is a disease of republican-

ism. At the opposite pole from a cordial "global village," we face the specter of a semi- or largely illiterate population, TV junkies all, voting, reacting, feeling, and desiring precisely as the "virtual" or, better, *ersatz* reality of the Tube tells them to. Marxist cultural critics such as Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1962), Jacques Ellul (*The Technological System*, 1978), and Jean Baudrillard (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 1981) have argued along similar lines. They charge that the salient feature of "mass culture" in advanced capitalist society is that it infinitely forestalls revolution by making the concept of *revolution* just another form of show business. How to form an underground movement when the "underground" is immediately taken up and celebrated on "The Tonight Show"?

Not surprisingly, the major anti-TV arguments begin, after a while, to sound the same. All are aimed, after all, at the same target. But we can say, at the risk of caricature, that Mander's main objection is that the medium, as primarily an advertising tool, narrows the scope of experience to artificially implanted needs and wants; and that, as a corollary, the experience of TV watching is, neurophysiologically, a trancelike or comalike state that short-circuits rational thought. Postman's concern is directed more to the body politic than to the awareness of the individual watcher. To him, TV's worst effect is that it cheapens the quality of public discourse by reducing it to the sensationalism of the sound-bite, giving us the illusion of sophistication without the reality of experience. And Kozol is alarmed at the implications of all this for a public-education system that is manifestly in crisis. An illiterate underclass, dependent solely upon the Tube for its information, is perfect prey for totalitarianism. You need not be so crude as to burn dangerous books if you can simply render them unreadable.

What all these arguments have in common, even Mander's call for a jihad, is that they are written, as it were, by "metaphysicians" of television. These authors are not objecting (only) to this or that show, or to a particular kind of programming, or to a specific network. When they write about TV, the sum of the parts has almost nothing to do with the parts. They attack TV *as a medium*, almost as though it were a destructive metaphysical force. Or, put another way, in the land of television the important point is not that the individual citizens are bad or good but that the country itself is so corrupting and polluted that it scarcely matters who or what the individuals are.

In the various exchanges about television *as medium*, two arguments furnish the subtext for almost every discussion. The first argument is that TV is the next phase of communication, supplanting print. The second is that television creates an artificial reality—the world as advertisement, or entertainment, or passively viewed spectacle—which distances us from our real or "natural" surroundings. To attack TV in either of these two ways is to fault the medium not for how it works but for what it is.

Alvin B. Kernan is a distinguished literary critic and historian at Princeton University. In *The Death of Literature* (1990), he articulates the academic humanist charge against TV that has been uttered, though less authoritatively, ever since TV came to be: that it is evil *just because it is not literature*. Kernan is too thorough a thinker to be a rhetorician. Book reading and watching TV, he concedes, both involve a distinctively human act of decoding some kind of signal to create a meaning. (Cats do not read; nor do they watch TV.) And yet he wants to insist that the reader, as opposed to the watcher, is "intensely active mentally," involved in something that is somehow *serious*, since reading is—again, somehow—more complex than watching.

But to say this is to make what can only be called a leap of faith, faith in the sacramentalism of the printed as opposed to the electromagnetic Word. Are we, indeed, becoming significantly more doltish than our print-oriented ancestors? Are we increasingly submissive hostages

to the light show of the Tube—like the chained prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic,* condemned to watch only the shadows of the real world?

We do not know. More important, we cannot know. And we cannot because TV is part of our reality. Kernan assumes that we can judge the new medium from the perspective of a "pre-TV" sensibility. That is as impossible for us as it would have been for, say, Shakespeare to imagine a universe without printed books. The eye, as Wittgenstein says, can see everything except itself. Indeed, it is far from clear that literature is "dying" in the TV age any more than painting "died" with the evolution of photography or concert performance "died" when Edison recorded sound.

Perhaps more serious than the charge that TV is bad because it is not literature is the charge that TV is bad because it is not the real world, or that TV somehow occludes our participation in the real or natural world. That, at any rate, is the charge registered in Bill McKibben's remarkable book, *The Age of Missing Information* (1992).

McKibben is a naturalist with a brilliant prose style. In *The Age of Missing Information* he produced a book that, whatever else it may be, is a work of belles-lettres. It is a book about two "days." McKibben enlisted his friends to tape an entire TV "day" of all the shows on all 93 cable channels in Fairfax, Virginia, and he watched *every show that was on that day.* Then, on another day, he climbed a hill in the Adirondacks, took a swim, had some lunch, and slept under the stars. The book narrates these parallel days in alternating chapters. The chapters about the "TV day," timed precisely (e.g., "2:00 P.M.") describe the welter of shows, from sitcoms to televangelism to infomercials, that were on at the named time. The chapters about his day on the mountain are ruminative, Thoreauvian in tone, and given comfortable, cuddly titles like "Twilight" and "Deeper Twilight Still." McKibben's conclusion is that by becoming TV addicts we deny ourselves the real "information" of what it means to hike up a mountain, take a solitary swim, and simply be one with nature.

It is a gorgeously written, elegantly planned, and deeply unfair book. McKibben assumes that the only alternatives are total deliverance to or total liberation from the beast of commercialism. In fact his conclusion is implicit in the very terms of his experiment. And that is bad science.

No one watches TV the way McKibben did on his extended "day" in front of the set. I can inject a lab rat with large quantities of virtually anything—caffeine, beer, or vitamin X—three times a day for a week, and I will very likely find that by Sunday the rat is having some problems. Have I proved anything—except that the SPCA should tap my phone?

It should be obvious that I am still thrashing over the problem of the off button. If it really works—that is, *if we can use it*—then it seems the new medium is no more, or less, dangerous to civilization than any of its predecessors. (Who, after all, has not let the coffee boil over while engrossed in a book? Is this "enslavement to print"?)

In *The Five Myths of Television Power* (1993), Douglas Davis asserts that the ominous warnings about TV as mind control, substitute reality, and insidious counterliteracy drug are all, not to put too fine a point on it, nonsense. His subtitle is *Why the Medium Is Not the Message.* And his claim is that the cataclysmic alteration in consciousness assumed by both pro- and anti-TV-writers is, after all, not much of an alteration at all and surely not very cataclysmic. The TV watcher, he says, "knows precisely what is wrong, as well as what is right, with the drug that only appears to enslave him."

Nothing, perhaps, is as truly shocking or scandalous as common sense. Could it be that we always do know that we are watching TV, just as we always knew we were just reading books? And that we still manage to get on with our lives much as we always have? Davis is, if nothing else, a threat to most of the writers who have built their careers as "media analysts" since he assumes that people, however

they communicate, tend to remain sane. And this is a very alarming thing for him to say, because it is *not* alarmist.

So what, finally, are we to make of all this moral anxiety over a technological *fact*? I said earlier that technology is irreversible. For all the cautions and caveats about its deleterious effect on human society, one thing is as certain about TV as about the wheel: It will not go away. Our relationship to the Tube, as both Davis and Postman observe, is a matter of dealing with the way the world is for us. A Bill McKibben may want to insist that TV is not natural, but I find it hard to imagine "nature" as anything other than the total surround of experience as it is given to me in this time and place.

There is perhaps something better to compare TV to than nature. Running through all the anti-TV jeremiads is the metaphor of TV as drug: TV hooks viewers, saps their will, and makes them demand increasingly higher dosages. This is, rhetorically, an attractive image, since America in the 1980s and '90s substituted the idea of "addiction" for what used to be called moral choice. People write books and appear on TV explaining that they are "addicted" not just to drugs or alcohol but to gambling, shopping, TV itself, or even sex (an especially curious addiction, one must observe).

If TV is "addictive," let us then compare it to the other addictive substance which is not only legal in our society but subtly promoted by it, in ads, mythologies, and general behavioral standards: alcohol.

There *are* alcoholics. There are men and women whose lives are defined and circumscribed by an organic compound without which they find that they simply cannot function. For these people the substance is a living death, and the only escape is total abstinence.

But there is a far greater number of people for whom alcohol is a palliative and perhaps a not destructive enhancement of life. As my wife observes, there is a vast difference between someone who wakes up and thinks, "I want *alcohol!*" and someone who at 5 P.M. thinks, "A martini would be nice." (Did any of McKibben's neighbors, one wonders, wake up thinking, "God, I get to watch and tape *television* all day!")

And there are people for whom the drug—and alcohol *is* a drug—is, more than an enhancement, a perceptual tool. Some people can use the booze—knowing its dangers and side effects—to make their internal and social lives richer and more productive. The only necessary ingredients for them are self-consciousness and control.

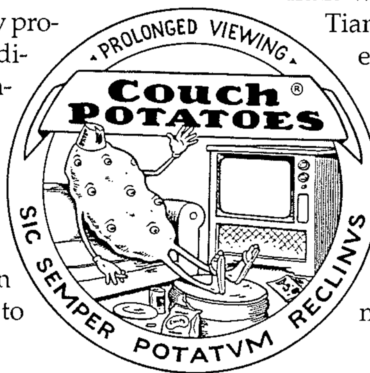
The same hierarchy, I suggest, obtains among TV watchers. It is surely possible to become a "Simpson"-style couch potato, imprisoned by the endless wash of images, immobilized, imbecilic, impotent. But most people are probably not quite so addicted: They know how to use the off button and they watch only those shows that give them some sort of pleasure. Our anti-TV pundits notwithstanding, they have lives of their own beyond the glow of the set.

There are even those for whom TV is a cultural experience no less nor more rich than poetry, music, or drama. The "complexity" of an art has to depend, after all, upon the complexity of the observer's intelligence. If you can watch *Hamlet* stupidly—and a number of very distinguished people have—then possibly you can watch "Gilligan's Island" intelligently, perhaps even notice that "Gilligan's Island" is actually a version of the pastoral romance of *As You Like It* or *The Tempest*.

In fact, when considering *individual* television viewers, one can be quite optimistic. Anybody with a little intelligence, self-awareness, or irony can manipulate TV rather than be manipulated by it. But if you consider the "sociology" of TV viewing, that optimism may be strained. There do seem to be groups of TV watchers caught in a typology as inflexible and harsh as the old class system was once thought to be. Certain types of viewers *are* particularly vulnerable to the Tube—children, illiterate or semiliterate people, poor people. TV provides their major source of in-

formation, and they have fewer alternative resources by which to measure its distortions. Certainly the three major networks, during their long domination of the airways, showed a crass cynicism in marketing programs that targeted these groups even while reinforcing their marginalized self-image. Detective series, for example, from "I Spy" and "Hawk" in the 1960s to "Matlock" and "Miami Vice" in the '80s, attracted African-American audiences by featuring a black detective who was invariably a sidekick of or lesser partner to the white detective. Today, MTV addresses an adolescent audience to whom it presents a picture of teenage life dominated by fashions and consumerism, fast in body and shallow in thought. The demagogic possibilities here are exactly Kozol's burning concern.

The avuncular Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has belatedly recognized the dangers of TV: It has prohibited cigarette commercials on television and, more recently, required stations to post "warning labels" on programs featuring excessive violence. It is a bit unrealistic, however, to expect the FCC to protect the more vulnerable groups of TV viewers from themselves. I would rather place my hopes on cable TV, which has grown explosively during the last 20 years. Today there are nonnetwork channels that are not merely aimed *at* but are actually produced *by* and *for* nonmass audiences—Spanish-language channels, channels with African-American news, channels for gays, and channels for senior citizens—which break the networks' old dominance and, as it were, democratize TV. When such "marginal" groups speak to themselves about their own concerns, paradoxically they cease to be marginal and enter into the public discourse. And let me disagree with Jonathan Kozol one last time: The coming developments of "interactive TV" can only enhance this democratization, as the technology grows beyond the clumsily "authoritarian" mechanisms of its early stages.



I conclude with a true story. In 1992, HBO ran a series of sleazy documentaries called "America Undercover." In one episode, "The Best Hotel on Skid Row," a young, heroin-addicted prostitute was interviewed sitting on the bed in her flophouse room with her boyfriend, an older wino. She wanted to get off junk and into a methadone clinic, but at the time there was no room available. In the middle of the interview she broke down crying. Her boyfriend looked at the camera and said, "Will you turn that thing off?" But the camera came back on, obscenely, a moment later, over their shoulders, while the broken little guy hugged his friend and tried to console her for the—what?—terribleness of existence.

Never mind that the cameraman and the director filmed these unhappy people against their will. That little fellow—like the young man who stood before the tanks in Tiananmen Square—is a model of ethics in the age of mass, TV culture. He knew where to find the off button, and how to use it, even against itself. More than any of the critics we have discussed, he understood that TV neither saps our humanity—nor allows us to give that humanity up.

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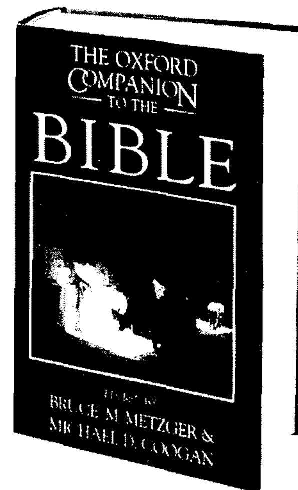

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