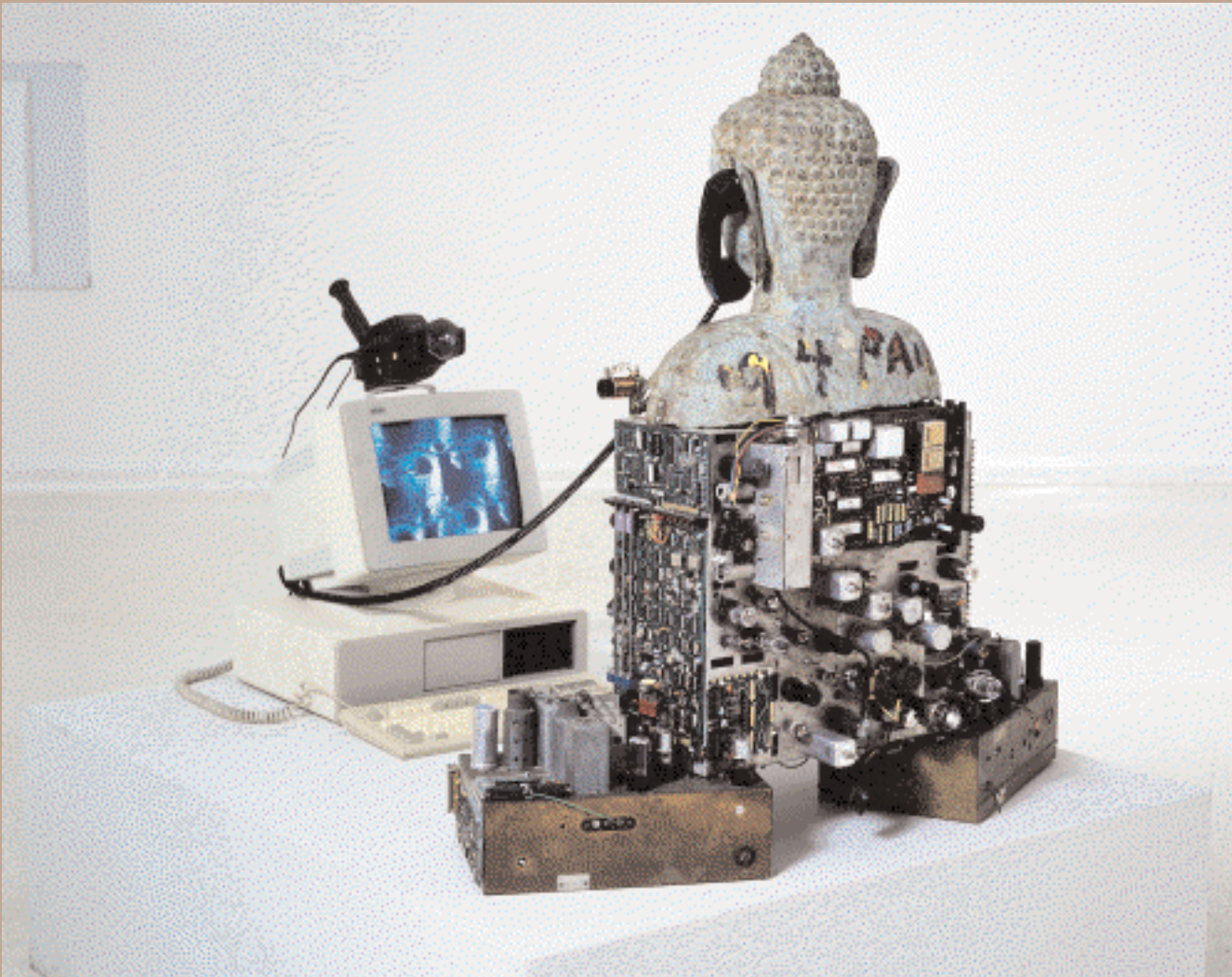


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Consciousness and the Media



NAM JUNE PAIK

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"HOW MANY OF YOU KNOW HOW TO WATCH TELEVISION?"
I ASKED MY CLASS ONE DAY. AFTER A FEW BEWILDERED ➤

AND SILENT MOMENTS, SLOWLY, ONE BY ONE, EVERYONE HALTINGLY RAISED THEIR HANDS. WE SOON ACKNOWLEDGED THAT WE WERE ALL “EXPERTS,” AS HAROLD GARFINKLE WOULD SAY, IN THE PRACTICE OF “WATCHING TELEVISION.”

For an experiment, students were asked to watch TV consciously. Insofar as this is sort of “Zen and the Art of TV-watching,” I said to them, “I want you to watch TV with acute awareness, mindfulness, and precision. This experiment is about observing television scientifically, with ‘Beginner’s Mind,’ rather than watching television passively with programmed mind. Ordinarily, if you are watching TV, you can’t also observe and experience the experience of watching TV. When we watch TV, we rarely pay attention to the details of the event. In fact, we rarely pay attention.” The purpose of our un-TV experiment is to provoke us into seeing television as opposed to merely looking, and to stop the world as the first step to seeing. Here we engage in stopping the world by stopping the television.

COUNT THE TECHNICAL EVENTS

In this particular experimental odyssey, we are going to be exploring how we subject ourselves on a daily basis to the overwhelming sirens’ song of TV entertainment (the great electronic cyclops) and, like Homer’s Odysseus, we will need to strap ourselves to the mast—in this case, the mast of counting technical events. For ten minutes, simply count the technical events that occur while you are watching any show. This is a “TET” or Technical Events Test, as Jerry Mander describes it in *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. What is a technical event? We’ve all seen TV cameras in banks and jewelry stores. A stationary video camera simply recording what is in front of it is what I will call “pure TV.” Anything other than pure TV is a technical event: The camera zooms up—that’s a technical event. You are watching someone’s profile talking, and suddenly you are switched to another person responding—that’s a technical event. A car is driving

down the road and you also hear music playing—that’s a technical event. Simply count the number of times there is a cut, zoom, superimposition, voice-over, appearance of words on the screen, fade in/out, etc.

1. Watch any TV show for 15 minutes without turning on the sound.
2. Watch any news program for 15 minutes without turning on the sound.
3. Watch television set for one half-hour with out turning it on.

Now proceed with these experiments:

The time requirements in these experiments are extremely important. I would urge you, the reader, to undertake the experiment personally, rather than merely going on to read the results.

In examining the results of these experiments, one of the first things that consistently comes up is students’ anger and resentment at being made to do such a thing—an anger and resentment very different from what comes up, say, in regard to the reading load or the writing requirements of a college course.

One expression of this anger that comes up repeatedly is, “I wasted 30 minutes of my time.” Is it possible that this is a very valuable waste of time? Is it possible that “wasting time” is a very valuable thing to do in studying society? Pursuing this experience puts us smack in the middle of the infamous Protestant Ethic in a very direct and personal way: “Remember that time is money.” After some discussion, it invariably turns out that all the students admit to having wasted a lot more than a half-hour in front of the TV set. So why this anger about watching TV for 30 minutes without turning it on?

When you turn the TV on, in effect you turn the

world off. The TV is only two feet high or so, yet we are fooled into thinking we are watching life-sized things. How is it that everything on it appears real and lifelike?

Technical events produce the illusion of being natural and realistic. They produce the feeling of being non-produced (a good cut is one you don't notice, as the editors say). In the same way, we are unaware that the practice of watching TV is a practice because we have never experienced it as a phenomenon in its own right. Doing the TET forces us to notice that watching TV is a practice, an active, ongoing achievement that we accomplish "for another first time through" each time. We see what the texture of the experience of watching TV consists of. We are shocked into seeing what it is that we've been doing all these years.

Counting the technical events brings about what Thomas Kuhn would call a "paradigm shift." When you focus on the technical events, you can't focus on the plot or storyline. You learn very quickly how difficult it is to divide your attention. Either you watch the program, or you count the technical events. You are unable to do both at the same time. In terms of the phenomenology of perception, this is a little like the famous demonstration of either seeing-the-vase or seeing-two-profiles in a drawing, but not seeing both simultaneously in any sustained manner.

In doing the TET, we notice the discrete segments of independent footage that are presented with a rapid-fire quality. As we watch, we, the "passive" viewers, apparently put together, synthesize, and integrate the scenes: We link, we knit, we chain, we retain the past, and anticipate the future. We methodically weave them all together into a coherent narrative. A high-speed filling-in-the-blanks and connecting-the-dots occurs. Our actively synthesizing mind—our labor—goes on while we sit back, relax, and absorb. This high-speed integration of often wildly disconnected phenomena (angles, scenes, persons, music) is experienced in the mode of blank and passive absorption. It would seem that our minds are in high gear without our knowing. Mander addresses this pointedly:

This difference between internally generated and imposed imagery is at the heart of whether it is accurate to say that television relaxes the mind.

Relaxation implies renewal. One runs hard, then rests. While resting, the muscles first experience calm, and then, as new oxygen enters them, renewal.

When you are watching, absorbing techno-guru, your mind may be in alpha, but it is certainly not "empty mind." Images are pouring into it. Your mind is not quiet or calm or empty. It may be nearer to dead, or zombie-ized. It is occupied. No renewal can come from this condition. For renewal, the mind would have to be at rest, or once rested, it would have to be seeking new kinds of stimulation, new exercise. Television offers neither rest nor stimulation.

Television inhibits your ability to think, but it does not lead to freedom of mind, relaxation, or renewal; it leads to a more-exhausted mind. You may have time-out from prior obsessive thought patterns, but that's as far as television goes. The mind is never empty; the mind is filled. What's worse, it is filled with someone else's obsessive thoughts and images.

TV AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

The Technical Events Test dramatically reveals the functions of the political institution of television in (a) training us to shorten our attention span, (b) making ordinary life appear dull, (c) injecting a hypnotic quality into our ordinary awareness, and (d) coercing us into its reality.

Television is the quintessential short-term medium. Like jugglers, television lives for the split second. Its relationship to viewers is measured in tiny fractions. Solemn hierarchies of men and women react to overnight program-ratings with something approaching nervous breakdowns, because one percentage point can mean \$30 million a year. The result of this manic concern is to design programming that will serve attention-getting rather than humanistic substance that will stay with the viewer. The ratings race serves the advertisers, not the audience.

It is easier to shorten attention spans and increase distraction than to lengthen attention spans, increase concentration, and still the mind. There is an old Zen analogy that the way to calm, clear, and quiet the mind is similar to the way to clear a muddy pool—not by action, by doing, by stirring it up, but by stillness, by letting it be, by letting it settle itself. The function of TV is to create, main-

tain, and constantly reinforce what—in the Zen tradition—is often called “monkey-mind.” The question to ask is: What is the good of a jumpy, volatile, scattered, and hyper monkey-mind?

Since the emergence of long-term space flight in orbit above the Earth, a new physiological phenomenon has arisen among our astronauts. They found that as a result of long-term weightlessness, some rather drastic physical changes began to occur in their bodies. They experienced a marked and dramatic reduction of muscle size; even their hearts became markedly smaller. The astronauts also experienced a loss of coordination abilities—such as the ability to focus on and follow moving objects with their eyes. All of this seems to be due to taking the human organism outside the experience of gravity. In order to preserve their earthbound physiology in conditions of weightlessness, astronauts need to do two to three hours of custom-designed exercises per day. Perhaps watching TV produces the equivalent mental condition of weightlessness for the human mind, together with the attendant shrinkages and deteriorations. The normal, invisible, all-pervasive pressure of mental gravity, of our ordinary, active, incessantly thinking mind, is suspended when we turn on the television.

COERCING US INTO REALITY

Our culture and education conspire to condition us, to create a reliance on media to reinforce our actions, feelings, and self-perceptions. When we seek media confirmation, we acknowledge and assume that our personal experiences no longer qualify as reality. We lose the drive to pursue direct experience as well as the drive to participate in co-creating reality. We no longer do this, we watch, and reality is someone else's creation. Stretched out across our world is the media membrane, over the threshold of which—and only over the threshold—lies legitimate, confirmed reality, and though we don't have to believe what the media tell us, we can't know what they don't tell us. —BMcG

TV WITHOUT SOUND

Just as psychologist Charles Tart has talked about our being caught up in a consensus trance, we can talk about a narrative trance, a narrative-consciousness. We have been programmed to become narrative subjects, subjected to the developmental narrative mode, intertwined with the storyline. In the TET, we're suspending our narrative consciousness and hence destabilizing the narrative subject. We identify not with a character, nor with the omniscient author, but with the camera. During usual viewing, however, our eyes do not see what is actually there because our narrative-trained mind overrides our eyes. We don't see with our eyes, we see with our programming, and we are programmed to see stories. TV programs are made so that we don't notice the “technical events,” the details—so that we don't pay attention. We are programmed to be unaware of the programming, the non-narrative structure and possibilities of that structure. To watch TV programs is to be lifeless and unresisting. This is the state that allows the commercials to take full effect and operate our minds for us.

As a usual daily routine, only the unusually tragic or triumphant is shown—not the ordinary routines and day-to-day reality of our lives. It is true that news shows have fewer technical events. There is a good reason for this: With fewer technical events, a news show appears realistic relative to other shows in the TV environment. Further, it appears super-realistic relative to the commercial shows in this environment. As earlier, we witnessed the joining of technical events in a coherent narrative. Here, we witness the reduction of worldly events into a narrative.

The problem is not that TV presents us with entertaining subject matter, but that TV presents all subject matter as entertaining. This transcends TV, and spills over into our post-TV life experiences. TV trains us to orient toward and tune in to the entertainment quality of any experience, event, person. We look for that which is entertaining about any phenomenon rather than qualities of depth, social significance, spiritual resonance, beauty, etc. In this sense, TV doesn't imitate life, but social life now aspires to imitate TV.

Further, we become greedy. Not greedy in the traditional sense in reference to material wealth; rather, we experience a greed to be entertained. It's not just a *need* for entertainment, but a downright *greed* for entertain-

ment, and it becomes a 24-hour obsession. In the absence of entertainment, we usually entertain ourselves with plans for future entertainment.

As one formula puts it, Media Power = Political Power Squared. The TV has shown us, according to Joshua Meyrowitz in *No Sense of Place*, that politicians can't be trusted but TV can. We can trust TV, and the institution of TV, to reveal how politicians and the institution of politics can't be trusted.

TV has become such a mechanical friend, such a substitute for social interaction, that one's solitude becomes acutely magnified, doubly experienced and doubly reinforced if one is deprived of its glowing, life-like presence (as if one wouldn't still be alone if it were on). If one is alone in one's room and turns on the TV, one actually doesn't feel alone anymore. It's as if companionship is experienced, as if this communication is two-way. We have achieved a new level of isolation, solipsism, and withdrawal. "It's just an object when it's turned off," hundreds of students have bemoaned. When it is turned off, it more clearly reveals itself as an object, as an appliance—rather than as a friend, a companion. It is shocking after all these years to discover this. Mander captures the phenomenology of the situation well:

Television is watched in darkened rooms . . . it is a requirement of television viewing that the set be the brightest image in the environment, or it cannot be seen well. To increase the effect, background sounds are dimmed out just as the light is. An effort is made to eliminate household noises. The point, of course, is to further the focus on the television set. Awareness of the outer environment gets in the way. . . . Dimming out your own body is another part of the process. People choose a position for viewing that allows the maximum comfort and least motion . . . thinking processes also dim. Overall, while we are watching television, our bodies are in a quieter condition over a longer period of time than in any other of life's nonsleeping experiences. This is true even for the eyes . . . the eyes move less while watching television than in any other experience of daily life.

Almost every household's living room is arranged around the television set. As a weight room is arranged for weight training, our living rooms are arranged for TV

training. The furniture is purposely arranged for the transcendent practice of "watching TV," rather than for the immanent, human practice of communication or interaction. The interior design of the average American living room with its lines of attention, hierarchy, and transcendent TV is very similar to the interior design of the average American church with its transcendent altar, lines of homage, and gestures of genuflection.

TV AND THE ILLUSION OF KNOWING

Marshall McLuhan says TV opens out onto an electronic global village. It would seem, rather, that it gives us only the illusion of being. It reinforces security by presenting danger, ignorance by presenting news, lethargy by presenting excitement, isolation by promising participation. The media confines reality to itself. And it limits knowledge by giving the illusion of knowledge. In the same way that the most effective way to deflect, diffuse, and terminate a social movement is to announce that it has been achieved (the feminist movement must contend with this on an almost daily basis), the most effective way to deflect inquiry is to present it as fulfilled. TV acts in this guise as a thinking presentation device that offers non-experience as experience and not-knowingness as knowing.

In the words of Mat Maxwell, "Television becomes the world for people. . . . The world becomes television." The overall and cumulative effect of the media is to heighten our insensitivity to reality. Rather than breaking the chains of ignorance, political domination, and illusion in our Platonic cave, something insidiously similar yet different is going on. Instead of actually turning away from the shadows to see the realities, instead of actually leaving the darkness of the cave and going up into the sunlight, we merely watch an image of ourselves doing this, we fantasize about doing it, and think it's the same.



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