

## Remote Control: Mythic Reflections

Television is the most relentless purveyor of the messages that constitute and perpetuate our severely fragmented public consciousness. It slices our attention span into increments too infinitesimal to get up and measure.

B. Kruger (1987)

TV gives us infinite information about choice—it celebrates choice as a great blessing, which it is, and over the course of a single day it lays out a nearly infinite smorgasbord of options. As much as it loves choice, though, it doesn't actually believe in choosing. It urges us to choose everything—this and this and this as well.

B. McKibben (1992)

In the post-Modernist sensibility, the search for unity has apparently been abandoned altogether. Instead, we have textuality, a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces. The work calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself. Instead of a single center, there is pastiche and cultural recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else.

T. Gitlin (1989)

In a recent "Arlo and Janis" comic strip, a man bores his son with obligatory tales of "when I was your age," but instead of the traditional 1950s tale of walking miles to school in freezing weather, this Baby Boomer father's memories of how tough life used to be have become increasingly "remote": "My Dad would holler, 'Fix the TV!'" Arlo recalls, remote in hand, "and I'd jump up and fiddle with the vertical hold until it was clear and as soon as I'd sit down, the horizontal hold would go!" In the last frame he delivers the final, clichéd moral to his hopelessly bored, eyes-rolled-to-the-top-of-his-head boy: "You've got it easy."

My children wanted the Disney Channel. Its free promotion had convinced us that the whole family might enjoy it enough to justify the cost of installation and the

"premium channel" charge which the local cable monopoly would put on our already large monthly tab.

As I watched the installer set up our new Sanyo cable-ready remote control television set for proper reception, sorting through the mass of cables (from the TV, two VCRs, the cable connection), placing a strange, new piece of equipment—a switch box—on the top of the set, the implications of what he was doing slowly became clear. Without this box, it seemed, we could not bring in Disney; although my TV could bring in HBO or Cinemax without additional equipment, Memphis Cablevision did not have the capacity to deliver directly to my home the unscrambled Disney signal. But the obligatory black box had a major side-effect. It made my remote control device unuseable. When I broke my incredulous silence to complain to the installer, I was informed that if I wanted to continue to use my remote, I would need to rent a special remote from the cable company for an extra charge! Stunned at the audacity of this scheme, the suspension of one of my unalienable human rights and its reinstatement in exchange for a monthly fee, I immediately cancelled the installation and showed the installer the door. Complaints to customer service, both at Memphis Cablevision and at Disney Channel headquarters, went unheeded. My children were disappointed, but as a family we agreed that doing without remote control was too, too high price to pay for acquiring the Disney Channel. We didn't want to return to the old days.

**ONLY 17% OF HOUSEHOLDS OWNED A REMOTE CONTROL DEVICE IN 1979;** at the end of the 80s, 72% did. Over 60 million households now no longer have to get off the sofa to change the TV. As this "living room gadget of the decade" (Shales, 1989) has multiplied in Malthusian fashion in our living rooms, its image abounds too in our popular culture.

—Being There's Chauncey Gardner, expelled, as childlike as Kaspar Hauser, from his lifetime hermitage, his only knowledge of the outside world via TV, tries to zap away some muggers with his remote control.

—Garfield, that ultimate couch potato, sits on the sofa, trying, without success, to use John's RCD to turn the pages of a book.

—In a "Calvin and Hobbes," Hobbes comes to ask his master to "go play outside," but Calvin is too deeply mired in a living room chair to engage in physical activity. offers the anticipatory rationalizations of an agoraphobic-in-training, "No," he responds, "It's too much trouble. First I'd have to get up. Then I'd have to find my

hat and put it on. (Sigh) Then we'd run around and I'd get tired, and when we came in I'd have to take all that stuff off. No way." "So what are you going to do instead?" Hobbes asks. "I'm going to sit here and wait for a good TV show to come on," Calvin answers. To this energetic plan, Hobbes responds sarcastically "I'll tell your mom to turn you toward the light and water you periodically." Calvin is not phased; he readily accepts his vegetative state. "Instead of making smart remarks," he counters, "you could get me the remote control."

—On MTV's resolutely mindless quiz show "Remote Control," three party-animal college student solipsists sprawl in lounge chairs, remotes in hand (they double as answer buzzers signaling their response when pointed at the Mother TV on the game board) and respond to questions about—what else?—television. At break time, munchies fall from the sky like manna into the contestants' proffered cereal bowls. And in the end, the lead point-getter stretches out in a Craftmatic Adjustable Bed and plays for more prizes (which often include, of course, a remote control) by identifying all of ten music videos regularly played on MTV, the channel of choice, after all, to which many zappers in the contestants' age group turn for instant release from the dull and uninteresting.

—A newspaper columnist (Diebold, 1989) insists, tongue firmly planted in cheek, that, judging by the evidence of his own household, remote controls cause violence. He has, he reports, actually seen his own children come to blows while struggling for possession of the family remote.

—In Wes Craven's horror film *Shocker* (1989), a serial killer escapes his electrocution when a power surge miraculously transforms him into pure energy, Able to transport himself over the airwaves from one television set to another, he goes on another crime wave. In the end, however, his nemesis "blows him away" with an RCD, turning off the TV in which the killer is momentarily trapped before he has the chance to escape. Like the western gunfighter, he expresses his satisfaction with a classic gesture, blowing the smoke away from the barrel of his "weapon" and placing it back in his holster/pocket.

—In a film called *Stay Tuned* ((Peter Hyams, 1992), a television addict and RCD junkie ("Very soon," he predicts, "we'll just evolve into huge heads with a remote control finger") subscribes to a new satellite system and, along with his wife, is absorbed into it, trapped (like Buster Keaton who found himself caught inside a movie in *Sherlock, Jr.*) in its flow, zapped from one program to another, from a professional wrestling match to re-runs of *Three's Company*.

—On an episode of Steven Spielberg's short-lived *Amazing Stories* entitled "Remote Control Man," a poor slob addicted to TV as escape from a nagging wife and awful family buys a new state-of-the-art set whose remote allows him to transform his family into characters from TV (June Cleaver, the Hulk, Ed McMahon, Gary Coleman, Richard Simmons).

—In another "Arlo and Janis" strip, we see Arlo sound asleep in his easy chair. In the second frame he awakes with a start and cries out "Where's the TV remote control?" In frame three, his son, Eugene, brings it to him. In the final frame he returns to the same position as the first, again sound asleep, but this time with his RCD firmly in hand.

—Jay Leno tells about his recent purchase of a brand new TV, complete with remote, as a present for his mother and father. The parents of a star, Leno explains, should be brought into the modern age—whether they want to come or not. Visiting months later Leno discovered, however, that though the TV was in use, the remote was buried in a drawer. His mother, it seems, was afraid to use it, terrified that its misdirected beam might shatter, like a *Star Trek* phaser, a nearby vase, or, horror of horrors, his father.

—In an editorial cartoon ("Drawing Board"), Kevin Kallaugher (caricaturist for London's *The Economist*) shows a man in the standard remote user position, staring straight ahead, a vacuous look in his eyes, device in hand. The top of his head opens and out crawls his brain. From a position at his side, the brain tries to get its "owner's" attention: "Hey! You!," it screams. "It's me! Your brain. I'm tired of all this TV!" It has, it seems, been reading recent studies of television's effects<sup>1</sup>: "Reports say," it lectures the still oblivious couch potato, "that you get passive. You get tense. You get anxious. You get frustrated. And it's time to do something about it!" Heeding its advice, the viewer turns away momentarily from his remote controlling to "zap," in *Dirty Harry* style, his own brain, blowing it away at the touch of a button. With the rude interruption now behind him, he returns to his grazing, assuming again the position, though now brain-dead.

**NOW THE STUFF OF WHICH CARTOONS AND MONOLOGUES** are made, remote controls are nevertheless approaching "mythic" status. Under the tutelage of Roland Barthes'

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<sup>1</sup> As Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi have shown (1988), TV does provide relaxation, but prolonged viewing makes the average viewer feel considerably worse, often guilty, less relaxed (even stressed), and largely incapable of taking on complex tasks.

reversal of the poles (1957), we now can see a myth as a way of understanding no longer problematic, as a kind of thinking or doing which has become so inextricably part of our cultural consciousness, so much now common sense that it seems almost invisible: a form of being which has come to seem entirely natural.

Television itself is already mythic in Barthes' sense. As Neil Postman has noted (1985), "We are no longer fascinated or perplexed by its machinery. We do not tell stories of its wonders. We do not confine our television sets to special rooms." Already it takes the strange mind of an artist like Nam June Paik or filmmaker Nicholas Roeg, to bring us even a glimpse of television's uncanniness.<sup>2</sup>

Now, after only a few short years of widespread use, after only three decades of actual existence, the remote control appears more than ready to go the way of its companion instrument. The sort of fascination which numinous new media/new technology induce in the so-called "primitive" mind—recorded, while it still could exist, by Edmund Carpenter in his media ethnography, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* (1973)—can not exist for long, after all, in this culture of technosophisticates. Leno's mother is clearly an oddity of the time, distinguished, of course, by her age. Already, Many of us can no longer conceive of non-remote television viewing. The Paik-like cover of John Fiske's *Television Culture* (1987), a recursive image of an extreme close-up of a remote control device filling the frame of a television, set against the ground of 1) a newspaper guide to TV viewing and 2) the self-same RCD, seems an accurate rendering: inside and out of our TVs the remote, recursively ever-present, is "what's on."

The following reflections are offered with the intent of demythologizing the remote before its complete transformation into a mere household appliance, its dissembling into the guise of the ordinary, is complete, while still a hint of mystery clings to this siny box of buttons in our hand.

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1963, the Korean born Paik has demonstrated a "lifelong effort to deconstruct and demystify television" through unclassifiable works in which televisions—dislocated from their normal locals (placed in jungle settings, for example, or formed into new constellations in the sky) and distorted (Paik's "prepared" televisions alter normal picture reception in strange and unexpected ways—again become mysterious cultural objects. Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) tells the story of an alien being (played by David Bowie) who comes to this planet on a mission to secure water for his own, an arid wasteland, but becomes entrapped by American culture. One of his debilitating obsessions becomes the slavish watching of hundreds of television images at the same time, images which he finds numinous but enthralling. For a fuller discussion of Paik's work, see Hanhardt (1987); Youngblood (1978), and Jameson (1984). Jameson also notes the similarity of Paik's and Roeg's visions of TV.

**AS THE RESULT OF A "FUNDAMENTAL WEIRDNESS,"** contemporary mass, exoteric culture now often mimics the formerly esoteric styles of experimental art (Polan, 1986). Not surprisingly, then, remotes enable users to feel creative. Umberto Eco, for example, has suggested that remotes may be a way of increasing aesthetic satisfaction by subverting the closed texts of individual programs and single channels into the open interpretation grazing requires. By allowing us to "transform something that was meant to be very dogmatic—to make you laugh, to make you cry—into a free collage," remotes, Eco claims, "can make the television into a Picasso" (Stokes, 1990).<sup>3</sup>

In an essay exploring the proliferation of the hyper-genre of simulation on television, Michael Sorkin notes that the "flow" of television shares much in common with a Surrealist exercise known as "the Exquisite Corpse." Exquisite corpses are collaborative works, both drawings and poetry, in which individual contributors work together to create a work but without any knowledge of their predecessor's input. At the top of a piece of paper, for example, one artist may draw a figure or design, in whole or in part, and then fold the paper so that the next in line could not see the beginning. The next adds his drawing, again, folding the paper to obscure the first two contributions, and turning it over to a third . . . and so forth. (Poets can easily play a similar game.)

Like the "Exquisite Corpse," Sorkin writes, "TV is about juxtaposition. TV's formal environment thrives on the multiplier effect of accidental collaborations among a community of propagators and users." An evening's prime-time viewing

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<sup>3</sup> Eco, it must be noted, is careful to distinguish between "works that were meant to be open" and the "patchwork" openness produced by a remote. Any critic tempted to theorize about remote control users as artists would do well to keep in mind the following sobering observation from McKibben (1992):

Television, the culture's great instrument, speaks to eighty-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds with the same voice. I think of grandmother, spending her last years remote control in hand. She could watch what she felt like, of course, but almost all the choices had been created for those with desirable demographics. Television never grows old, never ceases that small talk that may be innocuous when you're thirty but should be monstrous by the end of your life. Right to the last day of my grandmother's life it continued to offer her the sight of Donahue discussing sex changes and Cosby making faces and Vanna spinning letters.

is structured by a dialectic of elision and rift among the various windows (commercial scheduling, programming, "news") through which images enter the broadcast and are combined as television. "Flow" is more of a circumstance than a product. The real output is the quantum, the smallest maneuverable broadcast bit. And, with the spread of cable, VCRs, computer games, and the power to zap, "broadcasters" are accelerating toward the relinquishment—or rather the transcendence—of interest and investment in sequence. Any arrangement of bits will ultimately produce the same effects. (Sorkin, 1987)

As we look on at "the minisculization of TV's combinable bits," we begin to grasp television's true sense of order. According to an old thought experiment, enough monkeys, randomly typing on enough machines would eventually turn out the works of Shakespeare (and waste a tremendous amount of paper in the process). But "television's logic," Sorkin suggests, "accelerates toward a boldly economic resolution of this difficulty. The system, by definition, cannot make an illegible artifact: every chimp is a Shakespeare. No combination is lost to meaning."

Sorkin's essay does not specifically address the question of the effect of remotes on this logic, but clearly the process he describes can only be exponentially accelerated by their growing prominence.<sup>4</sup> Several commentators have noted that channel switching enables viewers to make up their own mosaic of images, but "mosaic" hardly captures the strange, surreal nature of the activity. We should think, rather, of the hybrid, random creations of the grazer as Exquisite Corpses. Thanks to the remote, the revivication of the exquisite corpse becomes, for the inveterate remote user, a nightly pursuit of a new order "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table."<sup>5</sup> Each grazer is, in fact, a re-animator; each night before the TV a night of the living dead.

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<sup>4</sup> Over a decade ago, before the widespread use of remote control, Susan Sontag issued (1977) an urgent call for an "ecology" of images. Any practicing ecologist in the 1990s will certainly have to contend with remotes, which mindlessly disseminate images into the cultural environment as widely and carelessly as fast food chains broadcast styrofoam.

<sup>5</sup> A favorite, oft-quoted line from a Surrealist precursor, the Comte de Lautreamont, written in the 1830s.

Permit me, if you will, to display before you only one such corpse, brought to life via Memphis Cable Vision at 7:35 p.m., Central Standard Time, on Thursday, June 25, 1992. (I will attempt no autopsy.)<sup>6</sup>

A small boy at Saint Jude's Hospital is fed intravenously during chemotherapy; on *A Different World*, college women talk of "reappropriating the symbols of our oppressors." On a cable access channel local experts talk about home insurance; on *Drexel's Class*, two teachers meet at a drinking fountain; whale watchers track killer whales; students remodel a house; a spokesman for Sears makes a full disclosure about recent charges of fraud in automotive repair; Lloyd Bridges narrates an unidentifiable documentary in which a man plays Santa Claus; a posse tracks some outlaws; the name of a QVC winner is selected from a clear plastic barrel; Burger King claims they "are the one"; Michael Kuzak (Harry Hamlin) addresses the jury on L.A. Law; the fast delivery of Domino's Pizzas is touted; Robert Conrad pretends to have a French-Canadian accent; toy dancers powered by "today's Duracells" outlast the competition; a radar image of the Memphis area reveals impending thunderstorms; Sgt. Joe Friday interrogates a suspect on *Dragnet*; on *This Is Your Life*, Jeannette MacDonald is reunited with the minister who married her; prices are dramatically slashed in a *Going Out of Business Sale at Shoe Biz*; CNN Headline News reports on the popularity of "hash" running in New York City; CNN reports on a man who has been stalking Janet Jackson; the Color Match Car Care System is promoted in an infomercial; professional painters are said to always start with Sherwin-Williams; Hurricane Celia's progress is charted; Rep. Jim Slattery (D-Kansas) speaks on the floor of the United States House of Representatives; Ho Frat Ho performs (in a rap video) the Ho Frat Ho Swing; Senator Warren Rudman (R-New Hampshire) speaks on the floor of the United States Senate; Dick Van Dyke speaks of preserving television's heritage" through re-runs of *I Love Lucy* on Nickelodeon; in an interview, Kurt Russell talks about *Bull Durham*, which was based on his life; we learn the 800 number for Super 8 Motels; a woman demands the keys of

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<sup>6</sup> In a book which records the results of a experimental viewing of one day (over two thousand hours) of cable television compared with one day in nature, Mc Kibben (1992) offers his own fascinating version of an exquisite corpse.

her obviously drunk male companion, as we learn not only that "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk" but that "Cable Television Cares."

Suffice it to say, that such excursions into Wacky Land may be undertaken at any time of the day or night, each time producing different results. The German electronic composer Karlheinz Stockhausen has created an ever-evolving work he calls *Kurzwellen* ("Shortwave"), in which a group of musicians responds intuitively and resonantly with bursts of shortwave reception selected by a mastermind (Stockhausen, of course) of the radio dial; each performance, as aleatoric as the broadcast spectrum, is thus completely different from the last. Every grazer can pretend to be the mastermind of a similar, though televisual, creation. And yet so accustomed are we becoming to the myth of the remote the tacit acceptance of a "dialectic of elision and rift" required by such a spacy adventure comes more and more naturally.

Surveys continue to show, of course, that some people—more often women than men, more often old than young—do not graze and see no merit in it.<sup>7</sup> Revealingly, they indicate as well that even dedicated grazers often become irritated when someone else masterminds the grazing as if their masturbatory art has no audience but the artist, as if flippancy is best performed alone.

And yet the more we watch TV, the more our obsessive selection, our manic search via remotes and smart windows, discloses odd couplings and strange transmutation, the more our viewing is governed by a meta-irony. In all its range, the one thing we seldom, if ever, see on TV, as Barbara Ehrenreich has noted, is people watching television. In fact, it may well be that "We watch television because

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<sup>7</sup> "Writing in *Esquire* magazine (in a column called "The First Sex"), Bing (1990), winking at his fellow males, revealingly confesses his own motives in using his RCD:

I love my remote, but I take it out of my mouth sometimes. During the day, for instance, I keep it holstered. . . . But late at night, when the children are in their warm, tousled beds and my wife is upstairs dreaming of upholstery, . . . when I can finally be with myself—not myself as a father or husband or son or commuter or aggressive pedestrian or angry restaurant patron or disappointed sports fan or corporate functionary, but myself as total human being on the face of the planet, the person known to myself and no other—I pick up my remote and watch TV like a man.

television brings us a world in which television does not exist" (1987).<sup>8</sup> Remote, flippant, the couch potato is a creature of paradox.

**IN PHILIP K. DICK'S *DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?*** (1968), denizens of a future, post-nuclear-holocaust, totally artificial Earth (people lavish great affection on simulated, robotic pets, and renegade, killer androids roam the streets) are equipped with special Mood Organs by means of which they can program their own feelings as the stresses of the day demand. One popular setting, we learn, is "the desire to watch television no matter what's on." Our primitive remotes have no such settings as yet and cannot program our desires, but they certainly do come in "handy" when the mood hits us to watch television no matter what's on.

Snyder quotes a retired executive's approach to grazing, an approach that must be fairly common: "I have my idea of what I want to look at. If it doesn't meet my specifications, I flip through the stations. If I still can't find anything to watch after five or ten minutes, I turn it off" (Snyder, 1988). Many grazers, of course, are not so fast with the off button, but continue grazing, ever in search of something to watch, just "watching television." "Entertainment gives us what we want," a media critic has noted, while "Art gives us what we didn't know we want" (Youngblood, 1978). Grazing, however, necessitates a modification of this simple but eloquent definition: for grazing is entertainment as the search for what the viewer wants: entertainment as the search for entertainment.

Like Jeff Jeffries in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, we have it in us to become immobilized spectators, voyeurs, before a multiple window exhibition. Hitchcock's voyeur, bedridden with a broken leg, became a Peeping Tom as a result of forced boredom. We, however, choose the couch. Jeffries lived too early—the film was released in 1954—to make use of even a primitive remote (though a pan of the head enables him to change channels), but he clearly stands as an ancestral figure of the couch potato. Today, if we have the right equipment, in fact, we can even open, with the touch of a remote, a "smart window" in the picture at hand and examine two offerings at once.

In a "culture of instinctive semioticians" (Eco, 1986), not surprisingly, it has become more and more the case that one channel cannot satisfy. Grazers speak of

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<sup>8</sup> If we do discover people watching television on television, Ehrenreich observes, it is "only for a second, before the phone rings or a brand-new multiracial adopted child walks into the house." But "they are never really watching, hour after hour, the way real people do."

enjoying the challenge of following more than one plot at a time, of moving back and forth not just across channels but between different genres and distinct forms, trying to keep them all "straight" (Snyder, 1988). But we must be careful, if we are to avoid falling prey to myth, not to take these developments as natural or value free. Our gadgets disclose our motives; our use of them can exhibit a psychological style. Snyder quotes a woman's annoyance with her husband's inveterate grazing.

He lies on the couch and plays the piano on the cable box. Every second it's switchy-switchy. It drives me crazy. It has something to do with a short attention span or hyperactivity. He claims it's how he relaxes, but it's very aggressive. I guess he feels in control. Anything he doesn't like, whammo, it's gone. (Snyder, 1988; italics)

It is an illusion to believe that technological devices send merely technical messages. "Flippancy," this woman knows, may in fact be a form of domination, a dream of manipulation. Convinced that pleasure is best attained through mastery (Slater, 1974). American culture appears firmly committed to a strange hedonics, and the remote control device, appealing as it does—like all forms of finger-tip control—to a fantasy of infantile narcissistic omnipotence complements it, perfectly.<sup>9</sup>

**REMOTE CONTROL . . . IN HIS ATTEMPT TO THINK THROUGH** the nature of human movement and develop the principles of "Kinetography," dance theorist Rudolf Laban has written (1988) of a form of "elemental action" he labels, simply, "remote." When we are remote, Laban suggests, we are the opposite of "near." No longer present to things in need of our "warm impact or careful consideration," no longer required to express "strong attachment" or even "superficial touch," we experience instead a "detachment which may include focus on self or universal attention, together with restraint or abandon." Are we not "remote" when we use the remote? Does not remote control immerse us in this mode? In a culture of narcissism, waffling between self-obsession and "universal attention"—the modern psyche, Hannah Arendt shows in *The Human Condition* (1958), is engaged in a "twofold flight": "from the Earth into

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<sup>9</sup> "I can't stand the way you jump around," says my wife over the latest Anita Brookner as I move from giant trucks on ESPN to King Lear on PBS and back to Nick at Nite's continuing Mr. Ed festival. . . . As a man, I must graze in the broad and swampy fields of contemporary civilization. That's my karma. Call it kismet. The spectrum in the message. The medium is my program. So open that big electronic channel and come on down!

the universe and from the world into the self"<sup>10</sup>—the remote confirms us in this flippancy, allows us to act it out while still inert in our living rooms.

The painter "takes his body with him," Paul Valery once noted (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Does the grazer? "Tubers," 80s' slang in its wisdom has it, are "couch potatoes," i.e., they are vegetables: individuals without use of their body. To use a remote is an out-of-body experience.<sup>11</sup>

In "Where Am I?" philosopher Daniel Dennett (1981), a prominent authority on the nature of the human mind and the development of artificial intelligence, offers a "thought experiment" in which NASA removes a man's brain from his body—placing it, "disembodied in Houston," in a life-support system at the Manned Spacecraft Center—so that "he" can be sent on a rescue mission into a highly radioactive underground chamber. Dennett's cautionary tale leads to much futuristic speculation on the possibility for and implications of "remote sensing" and "telepresence" (Marvin Minsky's term), and a meditation on mind-body interaction, the nature of reality, and the location of the self. Such thought experiments, in fact, become increasingly common: the anthology (edited by Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter) in which "Who Am I?" appears collects several similar ones.

On the evening of October 17, 1989, my body, suffering from a bad cold, lay prone before the television on a sofa in the living room of my Memphis, Tennessee apartment. When I had turned the set on, I tuned it to the local ABC affiliate to watch Game Three of the World Series, but the remote control lay within reach on a nearby table. Then, during the pre-game show, ABC lost its feed from San Francisco. As I learned that the Bay Area had been hit by a strong earthquake, I remained with ABC for a time, but then reached for the remote. Disembodied in Memphis, a couch potato," I was nevertheless able, via a kind of telepresence, to explore the effects of the quake on the Bay Area not from a single perspective but through the eyes and ears of NBC, CBS, ABC, and CNN. Safe in Memphis, my remote senses moved through this city at the touch of a button, walked across severed bridges, witnessed collapsed

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<sup>10</sup> I have explored this flight, and the "spaciness" that results, at length in *Late for the Sky: The Mentality of the Space Age* (Lavery, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> "TV," to quote McKibben (1992) yet again, "restricts the use of our senses—that is one of the ways it robs us of information. It asks us to use our eyes and ears, and only our eyes and ears. If it is doing its job 'correctly,' you lose consciousness of your body, at least until a sort of achy torpor begins to assert itself, and maybe after some hours a dull headache, and of course the insatiable hunger that you never really notice but that somehow demands a constant stream of chips and soda. If you cut off your nose to spite your face, or for any other reason, it wouldn't impair your ability to watch television."

interstates, looked on from an aerial view at a raging fire in the Marina district. . . . In January of 1991, I found myself telepresent at the Persian Gulf War (or, I should say, at those scenes U.S. Government censors chose to allow me to see), grazing my way through the first prime-time war (Kirn, 1990). And in April 1992, I could remotely sense catastrophe unfolding—telepresent this time at the burning of Los Angeles, a distant voyeur at the horrible beating of a truck driver, a vicarious looter of stores, push button torch of a city two thousand miles away.

"Our condition," writes Stanley Cavell (1971), "has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look out at it, from behind the self." Nothing in the primal scene of grazing contradicts this notion. Indeed, everything about remote controlling encourages just such a stance.

If it is true, as Meyrowitz has argued (1985), that electronic media in general and television in particular subtly alter—through a transformation of our customary "situational geography" (Meyrowitz, 1985)—our sense of proper behavior in given social settings (bringing "backstage" behavior into the foreground, for example<sup>12</sup>), the proliferation of remote control can only accelerate the process. If today, we often witness behavior once considered inappropriate for "mixed company," if we no longer "know our place" or understand the appropriate agenda of a given situation, it is, Meyrowitz shows, because media like television tear down the barriers that once segregated situations. "It is extremely rare," Meyrowitz writes, "for there to be a sudden widespread change in walls, doors, the layout of a city, or in other architectural and geographical structures." Such change, however, is the norm in the world of mass media, engineered not by architects or city planners but "by the flick of a microphone switch, the turning on of a television set, or the answering of a telephone." Or the push of a button.

The specialness of time and place can be destroyed. "If we celebrate our child's wedding in an isolated situation where it is the sole 'experience' of the day," Meyrowitz writes, "then our joy may be unbounded." The intervention of electronic media, however, changes all that.

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<sup>12</sup> Borrowing from sociologist Erving Goffman, Meyrowitz (1985) distinguishes between "frontstage" and "backstage" behavior: the largely unwritten rules we follow (respectively) in public and behind the scenes. Teachers, for example, often behave quite differently—and talk differently about their students, for example—before a class (frontstage) than they do in the teachers' lounge (backstage).

when, on our way to the wedding, we hear over the car radio of a devastating earthquake, or the death of a popular entertainer, or the assassination of a political figure, we not only lose our ability to rejoice fully, but also our ability to mourn deeply. The electronic combination of many different styles of interaction from distinct regions leads to new "middle region" behaviors [which Meyrowitz describes, after McLuhan, as "cool"] that, while containing elements of formerly distinct roles, are themselves new behavior patterns with new expectations and emotions.

By allowing us to zap, zip, flip, and graze, remotes make even traditional televisual "place"—sticking with a particular network for an evening—seem passe.

**THE REMOTE CONTROL, IT SHOULD NOW BE CLEAR**, is through and through post-modernist, its technological distillate, both cause and effect and exemplar of a new sensibility. With the great modernist search for unity now seemingly abandoned, with the triumph of pastiche as the ultimate mode of the age secure, as Frederic Jameson has argued in a seminal essay (1984), we are left only with, in the words of Todd Gitlin (1989),

a cultivation of surfaces endlessly referring to, ricocheting from, reverberating onto other surfaces. The work calls attention to its arbitrariness, constructedness; it interrupts itself. Instead of a single center, there is pastiche and cultural recombination. Anything can be juxtaposed to anything else. In a spirit of aftermath and accommodation, post-Modernism demonstrates that originality is fraudulent by ripping it off and repeating it, endlessly.

Post-modernism, Gitlin demonstrates convincingly, "only masquerades as avant-garde when, in fact, it is simply shouting that it has nothing to say" (Gitlin 1989) to an audience so habituated to the "experience of aftermath, privatization, weightlessness" that it seems worth listening and watching and grazing until really, finally, irrevocably they themselves are put out to pasture.

Apocalyptic-minded culture critics are fond of suggesting that, as the century nears its end, we are "rearranging deck-chairs on the Titanic." However accurate, the metaphor is now a cliché. Let me offer an alternative. We are, to be more precise,

chained in a state-of-the-art version of Plato's cave of illusion, remotes in hand, grazing shadows. As we come to live this life of allegory, as the myth becomes complete, it seems less and less likely that a philosophically-minded couch potato—or even a semiotically inclined one, enraptured by TV's new, open textuality—will bother to get up to bring news from outside; less and less likely that the shadows will be cross-checked against reality. As I write, new remote powers are on the horizon for average consumer. Soon we will be able, using our RCDs, to select camera angles on certain programs, track into the frame in search of other things to see, interact with the diegesis from the comfort of the sofa. And in the near future, we will be offered even greater control. With the likely late 20th or early 21st century dissemination of Virtual Reality—described by William Gibson, the creator of cyberpunk science fiction, as potentially "lethal, like free-basing American TV" (Austin, 1992), the remoteness offered in the late 1980s and early 90s will come to seem amateurish.

"It is possible," writes Mark Crispin Miller (1988), "that no contrast, however, violent, could jolt TV's overseasoned audience, for whom discontinuity, disjointedness are themselves the norm; a spectacle that no stark images could shatter, because it comes already shattered. TV ceaselessly disrupts itself, not only through the sheer multiplicity of its offerings in the age of satellite and cable, but as a strategy to keep the viewer semi-hypnotized. Through its monotonous aesthetic of incessant change, TV may make actual change unrecognizable, offering, in every quiet living room, a cool parody of the Heraclitean fire." Though unable to step into the same flow twice, remotes nevertheless inure us to this parody until it becomes indistinguishable from reality itself.