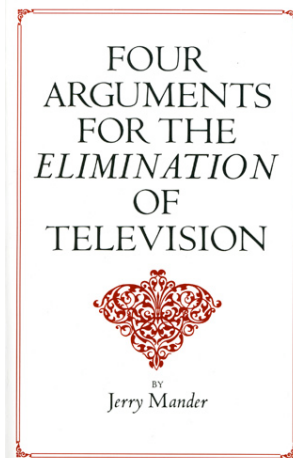


(TV)antipathy: A Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Television Hating

V for Vendetta, now in theaters, tells the story of a not-too-far-distant future totalitarian England and a revolutionary in a Guy Fawkes mask who fights to overthrow it. No one familiar with literary and cinematic dystopias will find it surprising that one of V's chief targets in a year-long-strategy to bring down the British government is an attack on the headquarters of the BBC. In V's nightmare world television, as in *Brave New World*, 1984, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and a score of other stories about future hells is an essential instrument in oppressing the masses, bullying and hypnotizing, harrying and manipulating, surveiled by and surveiling an audience of dupes. That one of the small screen's harshest detractors, NYU's (TV)antipathist Mark Crispin Miller, would conclude, in the final chapter of his *Boxed In: The Culture of Television*, that the horrendous world Orwell prophesied for the 20th Century's next-to-last-decade had been clandestinely realized, and its cruel tyrant conjured, in our living rooms: "Big Brother is You, Watching," Miller was convinced (309-31).



Television has always had its detractors, television executive Newton Minnow's characterization of it as a "vast wasteland" (1961), for example, or American comic Fred Allen's quip that television is called a medium because it is "rarely well done" (quoted by Bianculli, 59). Such sniping is not my concern here. I want to revisit a more philosophical form of "(TV)antipathy" to which I once subscribed myself.

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television. My one-time monolithic hatred of television began in the late 1970s

when I discovered former advertising exec Jerry Mander's 1978 rant against TV's inherent evil almost immediately after its publication. Television cannot be reformed, the book argues, any more than guns can, and unlike weapons technology, it is the technology itself that kills. Though divided (I am tempted to say "gerrymandered" but will not) into four parts, Mander's title is a bit misleading; still his overall thesis is clear enough. Television severely mediates experience, walling in human awareness, expropriating knowledge, and setting us "adrift in mental space." It colonizes the mind, dims it, turns us "into our images," immerses us forever in "artificial unusualness." In a later book, 1991's *In The Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations*, Mander would offer the following "Martian anthropologist" take on television man, which stands as a précis of his allegations:

We are scanning the Americans now. Night after night they sit still in dark rooms, not talking to each other, barely moving except to eat. Many of them sit in separate rooms, but even those sitting in groups rarely speak to one another. They are staring at a light! The light flickers on and off many times per second. . . . The humans' eyes are not moving, and since we know that there is an association between eye-movement and thought, we have measured their brain waves. Their brains are in 'alpha,' a noncognitive, passive-receptive mode. The humans are receivers. (77)

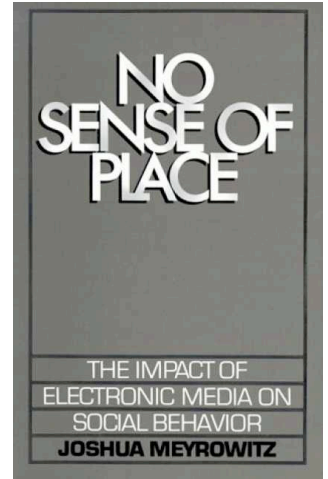
My 1970s abhorrence for and complete distrust of television, a stance that would lead me to go without a television set for almost ten years, a deportment for which Mander was my frequently-quoted and often distributed bible, had more than a little to do with drug use. Unless you had been there, it is difficult to describe what an alien, alienating, Orwellian "influencing machine" (as Mander liked to call it) television — or at least 70s' television — seemed under the sway of LSD. On acid, the movies seemed liberating and mind-blowing, but television? On my many 1970s' trips I solemnly vowed never to succumb to Big Brother's medium, never to fall under its insidious sway. I have strayed.

No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior. During the 1980s, my reading continued to feed my distaste and distrust of television. In Joshua Meyrowitz' *No Sense of Place* (1985), for example, I learned that electronic media in

general and television in particular subtly alter — through a transformation of our customary “situational geography” — our sense of proper behavior in given social settings, bringing Goffman’s “backstage” behavior into the foreground, for example. 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” (39-40). 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” (311). The intervention of electronic media, especially television, changes all that:

“More than any other electronic medium, television tends to involve us in issues we once thought were ‘not our business,’ to thrust us within a few inches of the faces of murderers and Presidents, and to make physical barriers and passageways relatively meaningless in terms of patterns of access to social information” (308).

By the time I read Meyrowitz, of course, I had already allowed the intruder back into my home — how could I deprive my young daughter of the essential enculturation it alone could provide? — but I put *No Sense of Place* right beside Mander on the bookshelf and in my mind.



Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow.

Indeed, I remained on the lookout for more fuel to feed my (TV)antipathy. Though largely still-born and ignored, Brian Fawcett’s *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow* (1986) practically jumped off the shelf into my greedy hands. In a book with a most unusual format — it consists of a series of essays and fictions, with titles like “Universal Chicken” and “The Fat Family

Goes to the World's Far," on a wide variety of phenomena from crowd control to baseball, train wrecks, and the novelist Malcolm Lowry and a running subtext concerning Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror, McLuhan's fellow countryman Fawcett fulminates against memory and imagination's extermination in the modern world. Cambodia was really a running commentary on the progress of what Heidegger calls "the oblivion of being," our modern alienation from the authentic sources of reality. Although prominently displayed in his subtitle, Fawcett has relatively little to say specifically about television, but his thesis was clear enough: we are in danger of losing "our right to remember our pasts and envision new futures," and we can watch this cultural genocide telecast live on the tube. "Cambodia," Fawcett insists, "is as near as your television set."

Boxed In: The Culture of Television. The same year (1988) I became a professor of media studies at the University of Memphis, my fellow English Ph.D. Mark Crispin Miller published *Boxed In: The Culture of Television*, which presented eloquent and subtle new denunciations of television. Offering, a few years after 1984 had come and gone, a Copernican revolution of the Orwellian dystopian primal scene, Miller would insist that "Big Brother is You Watching."

"In America, there is no need for an objective apparatus of surveillance (which is not to say that none exists), because, guided by TV, we watch ourselves as if already televised, checking ourselves both inwardly and outwardly for any sign of untidiness or gloom, moment by moment as guarded and self-conscious as Winston Smith under the scrutiny of the Thought Police. 'The smallest look could give you away. A nervous tic, an unconscious look of anxiety, a habit of muttering to yourself — anything that carried with it the suggestion of abnormality, of having something to hide.' Although this description refers to the objective peril of life in Oceania, it also captures the anxiety of life under the scrutiny of television" (328).

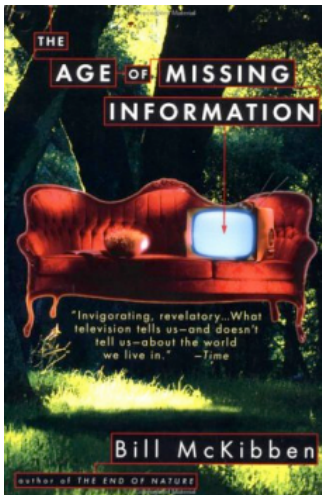
"It is possible," Miller writes, "that no contrast, however, violent, could jolt TV's overseasoned audience, for whom discontinuity, disjointedness are themselves the norm; a spectacle that no stark images could shatter, because it comes already shattered. TV ceaselessly disrupts itself, not only through 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” (13-14).

We may never be able to step into the flow of TV’s river twice, Miller would have us believe, but we will drown in its inauthenticity.

The Age of Missing Information. Bill McKibben's book (1992) was pretty much the last of my major anti-television influences. Two years before its publication I had fallen in love with a television show for the first time. As in all first loves, I would never forget *Twin Peaks*, and though its cancellation broke my heart, I was ready, willing, and critically enabled to love again and would, several times. Still, I found the arguments of McKibben compelling. Writing after the Golden Age of (TV)antipathy, the author of *The End of Nature* sought to change television hating's dominant controlling metaphor from drug addiction (Mittell) to environmentalism. The media ecology of *The Age of Missing Information*, you will recall, is the record of—or, more precisely a meditation on—an experiment, an extended comparison and



contrast essay on two days, on two realms of experience, two sources of information: 1) two thousand hours of videotaped television, all recorded on a single day (May 3, 1990) on the 93 channels of Fairfax, Virginia's cable television and 2) a summer day spent entirely in nature. A chapter of description and commentary, call and response, to an hour of television is followed by reflections on his time in the “real world.”

For the most part his insights about TV itself—that television alters our perception of the natural world; that it functions as an “emotional thermostat”; that it is “less an art form than the outlet for a utility”; that its content is almost immaterial (television, he notes, “can find subjects of interest to all only by erasing content”); that television reduces all that came before its existence to “prehistory” (the medium's four decades, McKibben writes, now “seem utterly normative to us, the only conceivable pattern for human life”); that television preempts our suspicion of it by ceaselessly belittling itself, adopting a “deride and conquer” strategy—these are not really new. Mander, Todd

Gitlin, Miller—all have written urgently and incisively on such themes, and McKibben duly credits their influence.

He casts his nets wide. (A good one third of *The Age of Missing Information* could be characterized as digression, asides, usually interesting in their own right, not so much about television as suggested by its Rorschach patterns.) He explains why it is more important to understand the *Brady Bunch* than *Twin Peaks*. He analyzes television's role in the "globalization of markets." He exposes the false appeal of animals on TV ("nature documentaries are as absurdly action-packed as the soap operas, where a life's worth of divorce, adultery, and sudden death are crammed into a week's worth of watching"). He contrasts God in nature vs. God on TV. He speculates on why it is that the memories of Baby Boomers are "spookily familiar." He shows why an ad for "Glassmates" reveals how paltry are "the kind of dragons we have left to slay" in an age of consumption. He wonders about TV's motives in "actively . . . savaging . . . an old order it once helped set in stone." He traces the evolution of teenage telephone secrecy from *Leave it to Beaver* to *One Day at a Time*. He investigates the "breakup of [the] *Donna Reed* order," explains TV's complete inability to bring war into our living rooms, considers the techno-effects of virtual reality and HDTV, ponders what would happen if God delivered the Ten Commandments on the Today show, recounts how Finland terminated a McDonald's ad because "it falsely leads people to believe that a Big Mac can replace friends and ease loneliness," and identifies television's role in making weather less real.



TV's inauthentic celebration of choice draws McKibben's special attention: "As much as [television] loves choice . . . it doesn't actually believe in choosing. It urges us to choose everything—this and this and this as well." He unearths television's secret link to contemporary disembodiment:

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 off your nose to spite your face, or for any other reason, it wouldn't impair your ability to watch television.

A baby boomer like myself, McKibben grew up with television and immerses himself willingly in it, not with metaphysical intent, but just to watch what he calls “TV TV.” Continuing his metaphor, he compares his experiment to “spending the holidays with your parents once you've grown up—in three days you comprehend more on a conscious level about your mother than you did in twenty years of living with her.” And what he discovers is that the parent he had once loved is in fact dysfunctional.

What is new here is the context in which such ideas are presented. When Susan Sontag issued her call for a new “ecology of images” almost three decades ago (in *On Photography*), she had in mind the application of the principles of a then emergent science to the proliferation of media messages in order to safeguard our consciousness against their possible polluting effects. *The Age of Missing Information* answers her call, partly through its own metaphors (consider, for example, McKibben's observation that “The most fanatic environmentalist doesn't recycle with half the relish of television producers”), but most of all in its project to study television as a phenomenon in and of the natural world. The book's original dust jacket shows a “peaceable kingdom” scene with lion and lamb lying down together—before a television set.

“Remote Control: Mythic Reflections.” The following year I would still find an indictment of television like the following passage from a Barthesian meditation on channel surfing entitled “Remote Control: Mythic Reflections” compelling and persuasive:

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.

I found that passage credible because I wrote it, and, almost a decade later, it still strikes me as phenomenologically, ecologically relevant. As a critic of television, however, I was no longer sleeping the sleep of the just. My relationship with the medium had officially become love-hate.

“We become what we hate,” the Irish poet and mystic Æ once wrote, and though he was thinking of The Troubles and the historical relations of England and the Emerald Isle and not of (TV)antipathy, the observation seems telling, at least on a personal level. Over the last two decades my own Golden Age of (TV)antipathy distaste for the medium has morphed into an obsession with it. The literary scholar who had once concurred with Jerry Mander's call for television's eradication now takes sides with television critic David Bianculli's observation in *Teletliteracy* that the anti-television stance I have catalogued here is exactly what we might expect from “someone who writes about TV a lot more than he watches it—or, at least, of someone who watches all the wrong things.” Careful to insist that he is not himself “soft on television,” Bianculli's book seeks to expose the origin and nature of television prejudice, a form of bigotry still acceptable in even the best intellectual circles. “Where else,” he asks, “but in the land of TV criticism are prejudice and ignorance considered assets?” “Almost alone among the major critical disciplines,” he complains, “television criticism fosters—and often encourages—an overt antagonism toward the medium being analyzed. A film critic displaying constant contempt for that medium would soon be replaced; a TV critic with the same attitude would likely be promoted.” Asking for a “change of venue” for television's trial, he then sets out to provide it. His seminal book, with its large historical canvas, is the new court he seeks. “Only idiots,” Bianculli concludes, “continue to think of [television] as an idiot box.” Film rose to prominence and attained serious consideration as an art form, Bianculli

suggests, because TV “absorbed most of the cultural flak.” The era of TV the flak catcher is, *Teleliteracy* argues convincingly, may and should be over.

Bibliography

- Austin, J. “Imagine: Computer-created Virtual Reality Lets Voyagers Enter, Explore Other Worlds.” *Memphis Commercial Appeal* 20 April 1992: C-1.
- Bianculli, David. *Teleliteracy: Taking Television Seriously. The Television Series*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2000.
- Fawcett, Brian. *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow*. New York: Collier, 1986.
- Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. rpt. Berkeley: U of California P, 1999.
- Lavery, David. “Remote Control: Mythic Reflections.” *The Remote Control Device in the New Age of Television*. Ed. James R. Walker and Rob Bellamy. New York: Praeger, 1993. 223-34.
- Mander, Jerry. *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. NY: Morrow, 1978.
- _____. *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations*. San Diego: Sierra Club, 1991.
- McKibben, Bill. *The Age of Missing Information*. New York: Random House, 1992.
- _____. *The End of Nature*. New York: Anchor Books, 1989.
- Meyrowitz, Jerome. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. NY: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Miller, Mark Crispin. *Boxed In: The Culture of Television*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988.
- Mittell, Jason. “The Cultural Power of an Anti-Television Metaphor: Questioning the ‘Plug-In Drug’ and a TV-Free America.” *Television & New Media* 1 (May 2000): 215-38.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973.