9. Television is a dissociative medium OR tele turns you off

The trends towards the dissociation of public and private life embodied in the psycho-technical construct called secondary reality – the reality of the media – have been laid at the door of its primary technology.

'Television, queen of the consumer durables, is also the principal assassin of public life and community politics. It absorbs the deceptions and evasions of the real world, mixes them with its own inherent deceptions, and thereby creates a new reality of its own, a reality more acceptable by far because of its modulation than the fragmentary glimpses of the real thing that occasionally prompt outraged citizens to write to the newspapers. The crisis of television begins when you stop watching it. Until then it exudes secondary reality, the synthetic social glue of consumer society.' (Pawley, 1973, p. 160).

'For the Children of Change time has collapsed and the horizon disappeared. It was, more than anything else, TV that did it.' (Fabun, 1969).

'Alone in a centrally heated, air-conditioned capsule, drugged, fed with music and erotic imagery, the parts of his consciousness separated into components that reach everywhere and nowhere, the private citizen of the future will have become one with the end of effort and the triumph of sensation divorced from action.' (Pawley, p. 203, emphasis is ours).

'Because the medium cannot afford to deliver a final judgement . . . its political influence consists largely in its ability to distract rather than to analyse.' (Ibid, p. 159).

'The mind drinks less and less.' (Bradbury, p. 60).

'The television personality can be admitted to a cage of snarling radicals without waking the suburbanite.' (Pawley, p. 72).

'It is in this way, watching while not really watching, listening while not really listening, that the individual citizen uses television.' (Pawley, p. 73).

'I saw 10,000 talkers whose tongues were all broken . . . I heard 10,000 whispers and nobody listening'. (Bob Dylan, A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall, 1962.)

The following data tend to confirm the above: the nature of the medium itself works in the first instance to dissociate the holistic nature of the human brain, thereby creating the conditions under which an illusion of reality, a mythical world can be developed and appreciated. These data illustrate the ‘inherent deceptions’ of the medium and its prolonged and systematic after-

1. We consider that A Hard Rain is in fact one of the earliest television scenarios and that Dylan unconsciously put his finger on the emerging private future long before the data started to pour in (cf. p. 50 Futures We’re In).

F. Emery et al., A choice of futures
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effects. In a later chapter we will consider McLuhan's conclusions in the light of these data.

Television, as a media, consists of a constant visual signal of fifty half-frames per second. Our hypotheses regarding this essential nature of the medium itself are:

1. The constant visual stimulus fixates the viewer and causes habituation of response. The prefrontal and association areas of the cortex are effectively dominated by the signal, the screen.

2. The left cortical hemisphere – the centre of visual and analytical, calculating processes – is effectively reduced in its functioning to tracking changes on the TV screen.

3. Therefore, provided the viewer keeps looking, he is unlikely to reflect on what he is doing, what he is viewing. That is, he will be aware but not aware of his awareness. The TV producer, on the other hand, is very much concerned about what the viewer is doing, particularly with whether he is continuing to view. The producer might be said to be striving to be 'the conscious ego of the viewer', as Margaret Ribble described the mother as 'the ego of the infant'. Put another way, TV viewing is goal-seeking but purposeless. Its end is in its immediate consumption. 'The Children of Change want miracles. And they want them now.' Switching from one TV programme to another is not a choice between means but a conditioning to one consummatory behaviour rather than another, to old films or modern domestic dramas.

4. The immediate consumption of TV is inherently rewarding. TV producers have to constantly strive to sustain viewing and conform more closely to the viewer's self conception. But the intrinsic rewarding effects of viewing, the ratings, are the only end points for them, not sales or votes.

5. The power and control exerted by the television signal have far reaching and cyclic effects on the total system of the individual.

9.1. Vigilance and attention

Both vigilance and attention are necessary conditions for purposive behaviour, but neither is sufficient in itself (Head, 1920). The evidence is TV not only impairs the ability of the viewer to attend, it also, by taking over a complex of direct and indirect neural pathways, decreases vigilance – the