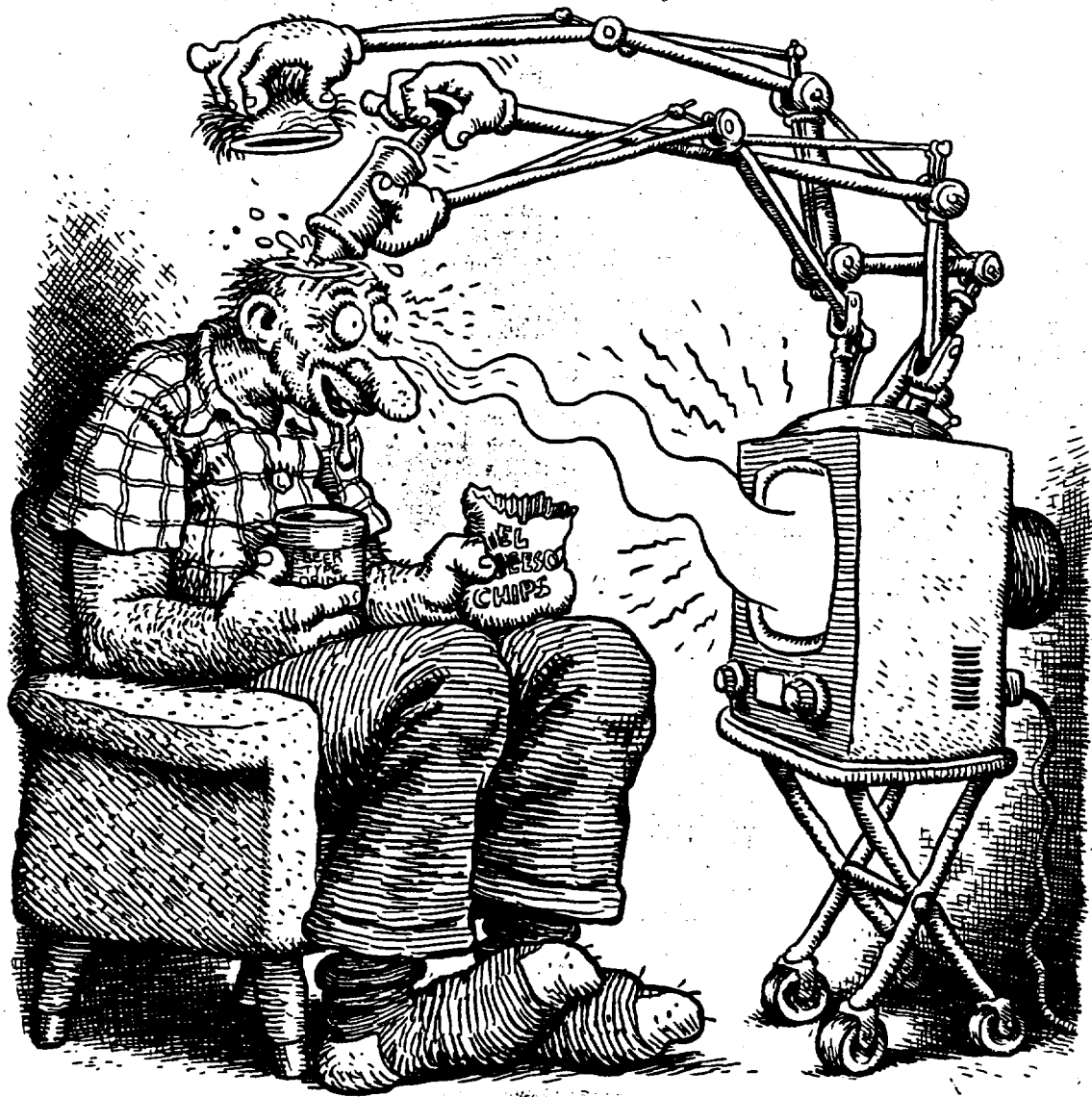


Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television

By Jerry Mander



R. CRUMB '77

These are some selected passages from the book Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, written by former advertising executive Jerry Mander, to be published by William Morrow and Company this March. What makes this book a complete departure from previous writings about television is that it argues that television is not reformable, that its problems are inherent to the technology itself. Mander is in close agreement with Gene Youngblood about the intimate relation between TV and the current eco-social crisis, and the awesome power of television to shape our evolution. However, their conclusions are radically different. TV or not TV? That is the question. Where do you sit? Let us know.

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The Illusion of Neutral Technology (From the Introduction to the Book)

Most Americans will argue that technology is neutral, that any technology is merely a benign instrument, a tool, and depending upon the hands into which it falls, it may be used one way or another. There is nothing that prevents a technology from being used well or badly; nothing intrinsic in the technology itself or the circumstances of its emergence which can predetermine its use, its control or its effects upon individual human lives or the social and political forms around us.

The argument goes that television is merely a window or a conduit through which any perception, any argument or reality may pass. It therefore has the potential to be enlightening to people who watch it and is potentially useful to democratic processes.

It will be the central point of this book that these assumptions about television, as about other technologies, are totally wrong.

If you once accept the principle of an army — a collection of military technologies and people to run them — all gathered together for the purpose of fighting, overpowering, killing and winning, then it is obvious that the supervisors of armies will be the sort of people who desire to fight, overpower, kill and win, and who are also good at these assignments: generals. The fact of generals, then, is predictable by the creation of armies. The kinds of generals are also predetermined. Humanistic, loving, pacifistic generals, though they may exist from time to time, are extremely rare in armies. It is useless to advocate that we have more of them.

If you accept the existence of automobiles, you also accept the existence of roads laid upon the landscape, oil to run the cars, and huge institutions to find the oil, pump it and distribute it. In addition you accept a speeded-up style of life and the movement of humans through the terrain at speeds that make it impossible

to pay attention to whatever is growing there. Humans who use cars sit in fixed positions for long hours following a narrow strip of gray pavement, with eyes fixed forward, engaged in the task of driving. As long as they are driving, they are living within what we might call “roadform.” Slowly they evolve into car-people. McLuhan told us that cars “extended” the human feet, but he put it the wrong way. They replaced them.

If you accept nuclear power plants, you also accept a techno-scientific-industrial-military elite. Without these people in charge, you could not have nuclear power. You and I getting together with a few friends could not make use of nuclear power. We could not build such a plant, nor could we make personal use of its output, nor handle or store the radioactive waste products which remain dangerous to life for thousands of years. The wastes, in turn, determine that *future* societies will have to maintain a technological capacity to deal with the problem, and the military capability to protect the wastes. So the existence of the technology determines many aspects of the society.

If you accept mass production, you accept that a small number of people will supervise the daily existence of a much larger number of people. You accept that human beings will spend long hours, every day, engaged in repetitive work, while suppressing any desires for experience or activity beyond this work. At work their behavior is subject to the machine. With mass production, you also accept that huge numbers of identical items will need to be efficiently distributed to huge numbers of people and that institutions such as advertising will arise to do this. One technological process cannot exist without the other, creating symbiotic relationships among technologies themselves.

If you accept the existence of advertising, you accept a system designed to persuade, and to dominate, minds by interfering in people’s thinking patterns. You also accept that the system will be used by the sorts of people who like to influence people and are good at it. No person who did not wish to dominate others would choose to use advertising, or choosing it, succeed in it. So the basic nature of advertising and all technologies created to serve it will be consistent with this purpose, will encourage this behavior in society, and will tend to push social evolution in this direction.

In all of these instances, the basic form of the institution and the technology determines its interaction with the world, the way it will be used, the kind of people who use it, and to what ends.

And so it is with television.

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The Four Arguments

The first argument is environmental and theoretical. It is not about television itself, except insofar as it is

typical of the way the whole of contemporary American life effectively confines, narrows and controls what human beings are capable of experiencing and knowing. With natural environments having been replaced and remade into a new artificial form (cities, suburbs), environment itself has become media, an intervention between humans and direct personal experience and knowledge of natural process. It is within this deprived environment that an instrument like television can come along and seem potentially interesting, useful, sane and worthwhile at the same time that it further accelerates the channelization process. Knowledge becomes subject to technological gathering and dissemination. What we celebrate as the expansion of human knowledge is really only its confinement within a singular cerebral mode, while varieties of other human experience and the personal knowledge that goes with them begin to atrophy.

The second argument is economic and political. That television would be used as an instrument of psychic colonization and human domination by a way of mind and lifestyle that suits only one form of political organization was inevitable and should have been predictable at the instant of its invention.

The third argument concerns the neuro-physiological responses of human beings to the television signal. Various radiations may cause physical illness. The TV signal itself produces a hypnotic-addictive effect. Television is a probable cause of hyper-activity. It surely suppresses conscious thinking and creative imagination. In many ways television is akin to sense deprivation, leaving the viewer lost within images which have been implanted, unable to discern the real from the not-real. The images themselves, following psycho-physiological channels, have the power to transform humans into copies of themselves. We become what we see. Taken together, these effects leave a viewer in an appropriate mental condition for autocratic intervention.

The fourth argument shows that television has only limited potential for improved programming, and no potential for democratic use. Aside from the venality of its controllers, the technology of television defines the boundaries of its content. Some information can be conveyed completely, some in only a very dis-

WE MAY HAVE ENTERED AN ERA WHEN INFORMATION IS FED DIRECTLY INTO THE MASS SUBCONSCIOUS.

torted way, but most information which would be useful to thorough human understanding of the complexities of existence cannot penetrate the medium at all. The effect is to confine the information field within the very narrow, hard-edged and objective form which the medium can convey,

creating, in turn, hard-edged, narrow minds. The mentality which emerges is one which nicely fits a simplified and, thus far, commercialized life. What is revealed in the end is that there is ideology in the

THE TV SIGNAL ITSELF PRODUCES A HYPNOTIC-ADDICTIVE EFFECT.

technology itself. To speak of television as "neutral" and therefore subject to change is as absurd as speaking of the reform of a technology such as guns.

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Television Is Sleep Teaching *(From Argument Three, Chapter 10)*

When you are watching television and believe you are looking at pictures, you are actually looking at the phosphorescent glow of three hundred thousand tiny dots. There is no picture there.

These dots seem to be lit constantly, but in fact they are not. All the dots go off thirty times per second, creating what is called the flicker effect of television, which is similar to strobe or ordinary fluorescent light.

For many years conventional wisdom held that since this flickering happens at a rate beyond the so-called flicker-fusion rate of the human eye, we do not consciously note it, and we presumably are not affected by it. However, recent discoveries about the biological effects of very minor stimuli by W. Ross Adey and others, and the growing incidence of television epilepsy among those particularly sensitive to flicker, have shown that whether we consciously note the flicker or not, our bodies react to it.

A second factor is that even when the dots go "on," not all of them are lit simultaneously. Which dots are on determines the picture. In a sense, the television screen is like a newspaper photograph or the images on a film, which are also comprised of dots, except that the television dots are lighted one at a time according to a scanning system that starts behind the screen. Proceeding along a line from the upper-right-hand portion of your screen across the top to the left, the scan lights some dots and skips others, depending upon the image to be conveyed. Then the scan goes down another line, starts at the right again and goes across to the left and so on.

What you perceive as a picture is actually an image that never exists in any given moment but rather is constructed over time. Your perception of it as an image depends upon your brain's ability to gather in all the lit dots, collect the image they make on your retina in sequence, and form a picture. The picture itself, however, never existed. Unlike ordinary life, in which whatever you see actually exists

outside you before you let it in through your eyes, a television image gains its existence *only* once you've put it together inside your head.

As you watch television you do not "see" any of this fancy construction work happening. It is taking place at a rate faster than the nerve pathways between your retina and the portion of your brain that "sees" can process them. You can only see things that happen within a range of speeds. This is because four million years of human evolution developed our eyes to process only that data which were concretely useful. Until this generation, there was no need to see anything that moved at electronic speed. Everything that we humans can actually do anything about moves slowly enough for us to see.

Even though you don't see every dot go on and off in sequence these events are happening. Your retina receives the light continuously and your brain cells record their reception. The only thing that doesn't happen continuously is the translation of the energy into images inside your head. That happens only at about ten times per second. Television is sending its sequential images at thirty times per second.

A few years ago there was a big fuss about advertisers exploiting the differential in these rates. A technique called subliminal advertising places images within the dot-sequence at a speed which is faster than sight. You get hit with the ad, but you can't process this fast enough, so you don't know the ad is registering. Your seeing processes are plodding along at nonelectronic speed while the advertisers have access to electronic speed. Your brain gets the message, but your conscious mind doesn't. According to those who have used the technique, it communicates well enough to affect sales.

For the entire four hours or more per day that the average person is watching television, the repetitive process of constructing images out of dots, following scans, and vibrating with the beats of the set and the exigencies of electronic rhythm goes on. It was this repetitive, nonstop requirement to reconstruct images that are consciously usable that caused McLuhan to call television "participatory," another unfortunate choice of words. It suggests exactly the opposite of what is going on.

I wish he had said "overpowering." The word "participatory" has been passed around at thousands of cocktail parties, misleading people to assume that if only they could have managed to get through McLuhan's books, they'd have discovered that their innate feeling (anecdotal evidence) that the experience

is passive and that it "deadens my mind" was somehow wrong. In fact, watching television is participatory only in the way the assembly line or a hypnotist's blinking flashlight is. Eventually, the conscious mind gives up noting the process and merges with the experience. The body vibrates with the beat and the mind gives itself over, opening up to whatever imagery is offered.

One sensitive correspondent, Jack Edelson, described his feeling that "the images seem to pass right through me, they go way inside, past my consciousness into a deeper level of my mind, as if they were dreams."

From what we know of how the images are formed, it is possible to understand this.

I have described the way the retina collects impressions emanating from dots. The picture is formed only after it is well inside your brain. The image doesn't exist in the world, and so cannot be observed as you would observe another person, or a car, or a fight. The images pass through your eyes in a dematerialized form, invisible. They are reconstituted only after they are already inside your head.



Perhaps this quality of non-existence, at least in concrete worldly form, disqualifies this image information from being subject to conscious processes: thinking, discernment, analysis. You may think about the sound but not the images.

Television viewing may then qualify as a kind of wakeful dreaming, except that it's a stranger's dream, from a faraway place, and it plays against the screen of your mind.

The stillness required of the eyes while watching the small television screen must be another

contributor to this problem of feeling by-passed by images proceeding merrily into our unconscious minds. There are hundreds of studies to show that eye movement and thinking are directly connected. The act of seeking information with the eyes requires and also *causes* the seeker/viewer to be alert, active, not passively accepting whatever comes. There are corollary studies which show that when the eyes are not moving, staring zombielike, thinking is diminished.

If television images have any similarity to dream imagery, then we have one explanation for a growing confusion between the concrete and the imaginary. Television is becoming real to many people while their lives take on the quality of a dream. It would also amplify recent studies, quoted by Marie Winn and many others, that children are showing a decline in recallable memory and in the ability to learn in such a way that articulation and the written word are usable forms of expression. We may have entered an era when information is fed directly into the mass subconscious.