

MEDIA AND CHANGE

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The world is not a stage but a T.V. documentary . . .
— Gene Youngblood

We don't watch television, it watches and guides us.
— John van Zyl

THE concept of the world as a stage, of people as actors assuming and discarding different roles, and of the world of social reality being a play contrived by higher forces, is a useful analytical tool to investigate the structure and social relations of society. The media (film, T.V., drama etc.) externalize man's thoughts as he tries " . . . to make sense of his experiences by constructing 'fictions', whether they be dreams, myths, fairy-tales or dramas . . ." (van Zyl). That is, the media may be treated as society studying itself in various mirrors.

The application of linguistic constructs to theatre has resulted in the formulation of the *dramatic* model in which the metaphorical device of the world representing a stage is replaced by the metonymic approach which states that the world is a stage. Social reality as a form of performance, can be analyzed by seeing it as a *teatrum mundi* with the concomitant references to such terms as 'act', 'seem', 'character', 'performance' and 'role'.

Regarding Hitler as the *villain* of Europe, speaking about the last act of Stalingrad, and the performance of the troops in the theatre of war is derived from an interpreting structure which perceives events as part of a larger synergetic drama. The boundary between acting and being ones self (reality) blur as the two actions merge in performance which is electronically punctuated by cathode ray tubes and other technologies.

T.V. junkies, for example, mimic their small screer heroes. Fiction is confused with reality, a programmable reality of designated duration occurring on a 66 cms screen. The transmitted reality is expected, familiar and predictable. No problems are left unsolved. All have a happy ending. The viewer is comfortable in this environment. The rate of change in the real world can be slowed down by entrenching dramatic devices such as plot, genre and convention. The viewer escapes the complexities of reality and becomes part of the illusionary videoscreen action. Reality and illusion merge in performance — hence death threats to William Smith (Falconetti).

The consequence is that man, instead of liberating himself through the media, has rather enslaved himself in a commercially packaged electronic strait-jacket. He has restricted his consciousness to the familiar, to convention, to genre, to imitation and to the conceptualization of things and experiences in terms of the questionable bases of his languages, codes and sign-systems.

In contrast, the artist is always in a state of flux,

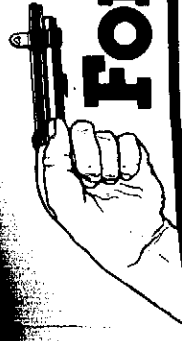
writing a detailed history of the future. His unique sensitivity to the nature of the present places him amongst the few who are able to distinguish between reality and illusion and to create change in a staging system — either social or conceptual. Electro-ideographic artists, for example, no longer represent the solid objective reality of objects but rather waves of energy-matter. "Our coarse sense of vision does not permit us to see cells, molecules, atoms, electrons . . . If it did, we would experience the apparent solidity of our environment as a vast expanse of space interrupted by swirling vortices of scintillating energy-matter" (Melvyn Siff). In an effort to represent this reality artists now create images without object matter which express shapes, projectaries, colours and vectors. The context of communication, however, must be studied in relation to the communications technologies and their symbol systems. Non-object imagery, for example, has no place in Soviet aesthetics. Marcuse states that Soviet Marxism supercedes metaphysics, the traditional refuge for still unrealized ideas of human freedom and fulfillment, with dialectical materialism and the emergence of a rational society. Unlike Western art, Soviet art cannot therefore attain a state of abstraction because Soviet aesthetics accepts the established social reality as the problematic for the artistic content, transcending it neither in style nor in substance.

Modern man has consequently acquired an ability to hear without listening and to look without seeing.

Conversely, western society elevates scientific and technological advance to the level of the meta-physical. Youngblood even implies that the artist is a *result* of technology. In other words the human communication system is affected by political ideologies which present reflections of dominant truths.

That the average individual is unable to relate to molecular reality and its visual representations by artists is also a consequence of poor visual literacy. The sources of this lack are dual. Melvyn Siff comments that (a) man's mental models of reality limit the size, complexity and accessibility of the real world, and (b) his verbal language is predicated upon the identification of solid object matter.

Although 75% of all information reaching the brain is from the eyes, the verbal emphasis of current educational methods leaves the individual poorly equipped to understand and interpret visual messages. This condition is further exacerbated by the left-right duality of the brain where the left hemisphere is concerned with logic, the right, intuition. Information

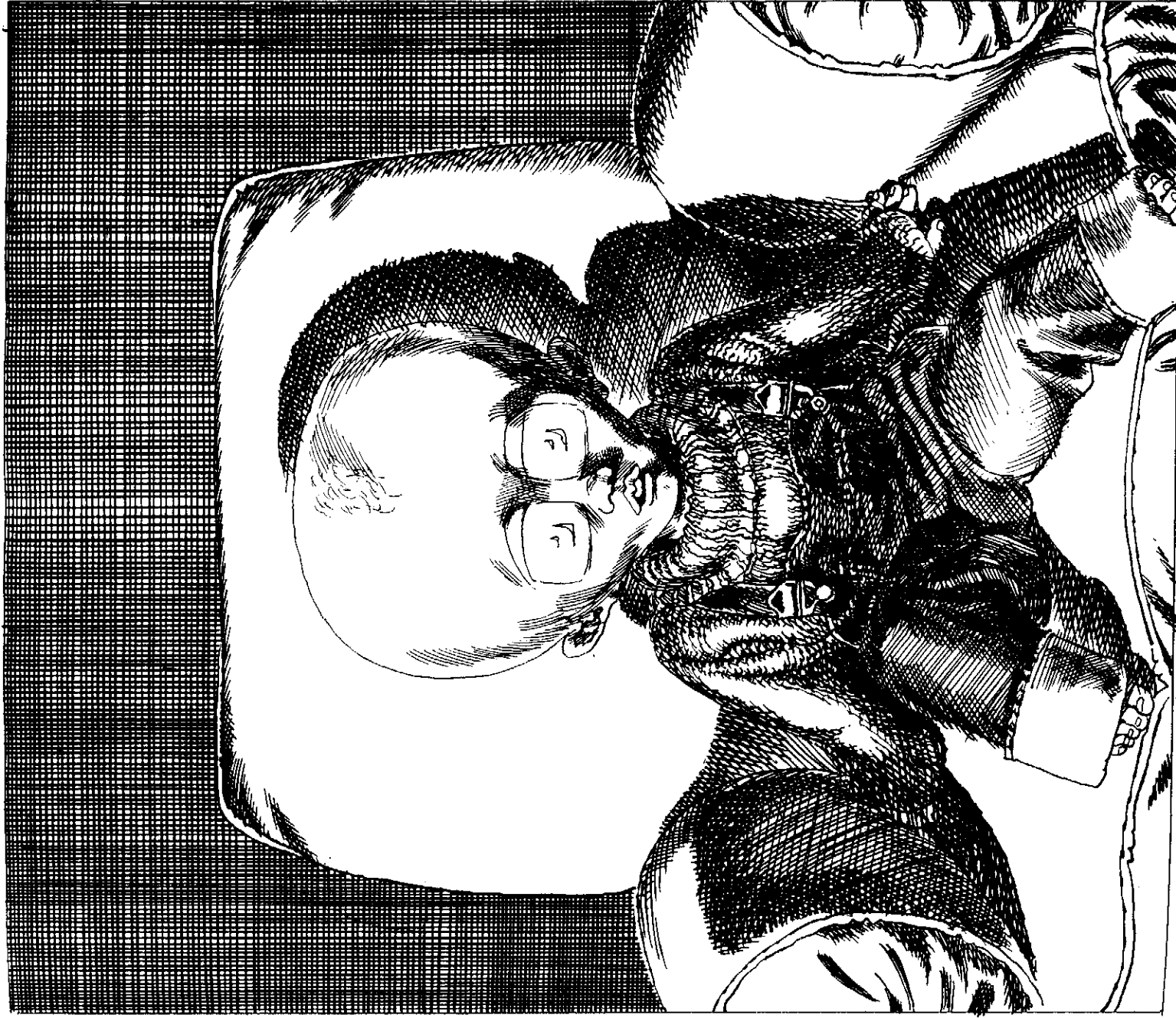


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from the eyes is not always understood by the logical functioning hemisphere. The emotional intuitive process has been subjugated in western society preventing a synergetic partnership between the two hemispheres. Despite this "we live in a visual culture . . . Our senses are subservient to seeing. Before tasting food and drink must appeal visually. Musicians must pander to the eye in dress and action . . . Few of us

enjoy touching something we have not first seen." (Adolf Veenstra). We live in an age when the cult of seeing is increasing, and by implication therefore, the illiterates of the future will not be those who can't read but those who can't see.

Seeing refers to understanding and the ability to reason, evaluate and interpret. Most filmgoers do not see films. They watch them. Thinking is left to the



Helmut Starcke

critic and the filmgoer excuses his laziness by saying "I'm here to be entertained". Modern man has consequently acquired an ability to hear without listening and to look without seeing.

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Every day the modern schoolchild reads thousands of words, sees a myriad of pictures and hears volumes of sound, all carefully constructed and concise. Radio advertisements punctuate waking moments, pop music tunes into alpha rhythms and brainwaves. Nutritional advice is offered by cartoon characters like Captain Crunch; sugar is associated with health and snacks with social acceptance. The child is a consumer, and his experience in the age of the new media very different to that which is experienced by his elders. His school environment does not match his experience of life in general. The classroom is a far cry from the blaring radios, psychedelic posters, pulsating strobe lights, large screen movies or flickering T.V. images. His lessons are presented by traditional, tried, age-old methods. The draughty, dark, sombre atmosphere of the classroom with its wall-size maps and pinned up projects is as remote to the media conscious student as piloting a space ship is to a New Guinea Islander whose language has no numbers. Teachers and children live in differing realities subject to different needs, expectations, perceptions and social mores. Or as Peter Goldmark observes, "Telecommunication has put every man in contact with every other man, yet the distance between man and man has not decreased". Hence Robin Lee can conclude, "media are change".

In traditional societies children learn primarily from their parents and the older generation. The future is an extension of the past. When a society is exposed to new forms of technology (as in modernizing societies) with which the old are not familiar, the young have to develop new behaviour patterns and their experience now differs from that of past generations. In post-industrial societies the future has no connection with the past. The generation gap has become the technology gap. The technology gap has caused a perceptual gap. Reality is now relative. The individual constructs a model of reality based on experiences he considers important. The same generations living at the same time, live in different but overlapping cultural epochs, all representing differing interpretations of overlapping realities. Reality and future assume a symbiotic relationship, and definition depends more on a given society's position on the societal continuum than on semantic construction. For as Daniel Bell asserts, for most of history, reality was nature — to find shelter and food. Then reality

became *technics* where a technical order substituted the natural order. The post industrial society is concerned with neither. *Reality is the social world*, is concerned less and less with the machinery of things; people live with and encounter one another.

But, warns Robin Lee, although technology has an inner dynamic for change, it has an external need for stability and resists change. Nick Patricious observes that the media as new forms of leisure have served to intensify man's relationship to the machine, and through their reproduced images and sounds, further separated man from his environment. Concludes Wilf Mallows, "Although man displays a genius at handling mathematical problems and sophisticated machinery . . . he is still ignorant of the effects of such technology on human associations, social processes and community groupings".

While T.V. revels in convention and stability, the child grows up and matures. He has to leave the T.V. and go to school. His control over his cathode ray tube is loosened. Real life is not governed by switches which eliminate unwanted experiences. He is threatened by the presence of people and events he can't control. The comfortable distance he maintained between himself and the world has been annihilated. The real world is unpredictable, complex and non-linear. Problems are not solved within 40 minute time slots. The child may become alienated, bewildered, disillusioned and depressed. In other words, man's consciousness, his ability to correctly identify the world around him (reality), has not yet caught up with the sophistication of the messages transmitted by his technology.

The unconscious and subconscious and conscious have blurred. Or as John van Zyl expresses it, "The act of performance is the act of creation is the act of criticism. The part stands for the whole, is part of the whole and ultimately is the whole."

Adapted from *J.A.F. van Zyl and K.G. Tomaselli* (eds.), *Media and Change*, McGraw Hill, 1977.

The man you love to hate — is yours



VIEWERS who rather fancy the odd villain here and there will be able to show their dark allegiances from Tuesday when *The Argus* will publish in Tonight another of the popular Rich Man, Poor Man iron-ons — this time of sinister Falconetti.