

Flusser, Vilem. "Two Approaches to the Phenomenon, Television",  
The New Television, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 1977. (Out of print.)

The most common form TV assumes at present is that of a box which stands among the furniture of a private dwelling. This box has a screen on which movie-like pictures appear, and a speaker from which radio-like sounds issue, if it is appropriately manipulated. The manipulation is simple, but the reasons for its effectiveness are complex. The box is, to speak with Moles, a structurally complex but functionally simple system. In order to see the pictures and hear the sounds, the dwellers of the room sit around the box in a semicircle. The pictures and sounds thus received have a meaning for those who receive them, and so has the box itself. The viewers recognize that these messages do not originate in the box, but their true origin is not clearly known. The viewers know vaguely that the box is somehow connected with a place where the messages are being manipulated and broadcast. They know vaguely that this is an expensive process, and that therefore those who finance it must have some sort of interest in it, an interest that must reflect itself in the messages the viewers are receiving. But this vague knowledge is suspended during the reception of the messages, and the viewer adopts the attitude that the pictures and sounds issuing from the box are messages from "his world." This is the meaning of the box for the viewers: it means communication of messages from the world in the direction of private dwellings.

The viewers will distinguish between two kinds of messages: those that present events of the world, and those that represent events of the world. The first type consists of pictures and sounds that issue more or less from the events themselves, and in that sense "mean" those events for the viewers, as with newsreels and political speeches. The second type consists of pictures and sounds that issue from phenomena that represents events of the world, and in this second degree sense "mean" these events for the viewers, as with TV plays and films. The first type of message is taken by the viewers to be "true," the second to be "fictitious." But this distinction between presentation and representation is not very clear, nor is it very important, for the following reasons: (a) The pictures and sounds themselves do not allow the distinction to be drawn; it is only made by a comment on the message which is itself a TV message. The picture of an athlete and that of an actor representing an athlete look alike and can be distinguished only through the comment of an announcer who may himself be an actor representing an announcer. (b) The pictures and sounds have an "artificial" and therefore "fictitious" character, whether they present or represent events of the world. To watch the landing on the moon is like watching science fiction. (c) The vague knowledge that all messages have been manipulated confers a fictional character to those pictures and sounds that profess to present events of the world. A newsreel is vaguely felt to be a film that

represents the events it is showing. (d) The pictures and sounds that obviously represent events are often more perfect than those which present them and therefore look "truer." An actor representing a politician often looks "truer" than the politician himself on television. The result is that for the TV viewer the distinction between reality and fiction becomes both difficult and unimportant. The criteria of distinction between messages tend to become ever less ontological (true or fictitious) and ever more esthetic (sensational or boring).

The pictures and sounds that issue from the box do not betray, either through their quality of their message, that they serve a purpose (with the exception of commercials) which is in the interest of those who finance their reception. The result is that the viewers are led to believe that there are two types of messages: "subjective" ones, which aim at provoking a specific type of behavior (as do commercials), and "objective" ones, which seem to aim at informing the viewers or informing them with esthetic experience (as do plays and newsreels). Although the belief in the "objectivity" of some of the messages is denied by the vague knowledge of the manipulation of all messages, it is still widely held, because it is constantly reinforced by the messages themselves. The fact that all messages provide information and esthetic experience only as a means of provoking behavior patterns that are in the interest of those who finance them, and that the difference between commercials and other messages is one of degree, not of kind, tends therefore to be forgotten. One consequence is that the viewers become more or less conscious tools of those who pay the manipulators of the sounds and pictures. Another consequence is that the viewers tend to forget the existence of those who pay the manipulators, and to some extent even the existence of the manipulators, and tend to accept the box itself as the source of the messages they are receiving. The box thus gains a magic quality, and the messages that issue from it become myth like.

The box has buttons which offer the viewers the choice of various channels, and can also interrupt the flux of the message. This creates an impression of control over the box and of a sort of mechanical freedom. In fact, the choice is highly illusory, because all channels provoke the same behavior pattern and because interrupting them means interrupting one of the few communications between man and the world. This illusion of control and freedom contributes to the manipulability of the viewers. The box emits messages but does not receive any. Although some of the messages emitted seem to be open to replies by the viewers through other channels (mail, telephone, and so forth), such sporadic feedback does not influence the flux of messages in any decisive way. Therefore the viewers are conditioned to what amounts to a passive reception. The result is a passive attitude to the events of the world, accompanied by an illusionary impression of participation, which is due to the constant flow of messages from the box. In fact, this is one of the purposes of the messages: to create an illusion of participation while guaranteeing passive reception.

There are a great number of boxes distributed throughout society, and all of them emit the same information. The result is that private dwellings become linked closely to the public sphere and lose their privacy. On the other hand, the public sphere becomes closely linked to private dwellings through millions of univocal channels and loses its dialogical, "political" character. (The public man is present in millions of private dwellings, talks to them, but cannot be talked to.) The consequence of the invasion of the private realm by the public, and of the elimination of universal dialogue from the public, is the abolition of the distinction between the private and the public. Since this distinction is the basis of politics, it means depoliticization.

Although this description is incomplete and sketchy, it permits the following conclusions: (1) The TV occupies a specific place in private dwellings and provokes a new family structure. (2) It means communication with the world. (3) It makes the distinction between fiction and reality uninteresting, and is thus a powerful instrument for alienation. (4) It provides esthetic criteria of a specific type. (5) It emits models of behavior which are in the interests of those who finance its operation openly and covertly, and the viewers are more or less subject to them. (6) It provides a false sense of freedom. (7) It has a magic character. (8) It does not allow effective feedback and conditions the receivers for passivity, while creating an illusion of participation. (9) It abolishes the border between private and public, thus tends to eliminate politics and establish totalitarianism.

TV shares many of these characteristics with other mass media, while some are specific to it. Almost none of them were intended by those who projected TV as a means of communication, which means that they are not "necessary," and that TV could become a different sort of means of communication in the future.

If we look closely at the box, we can see that its screen is not some kind of wall (as it is in movie theaters), but a kind of eye or window. It was not meant to be looked at and to provide a spectacle or show, but to be looked through and to provide a view and a vision. The box "means" communication with the world. This "window essence" of TV, has not, so far, been duly put into practice, because it has been cloaked by the image of the "movie theater made private."

A window is, of course, a hole in a wall, but so is a door, and it is obvious that the two types of hole do not serve the same purpose. The purpose of the wall is to create a private space separated from open public space, what the ancients called a "templum." Thus the wall (or more exactly, the four walls) provides a man with a shelter in which he may become himself again, after having committed himself to the world. The door is a hole in the wall which permits a rhythmic human motion: a diastolic phase in which man leaves himself to commit himself to the world, and a systolic one in which he comes to himself again without totally losing the world. The window, is however, a hole in the wall which provides man with a vision of the world which

may serve as a map when he leaves the door to commit himself to the world. Thus the purpose of the window is linked with the purpose of the door, and that link has a dialectical aspect. Were it not for the window, the door would lead into chaos, and leaving it would be stupid. Were it not for the door, the window would provide a "pure" vision with no practical purpose. The two tools, door and window, must be coordinated. The door is a tool which allows man to transform window visions into practice. The window is a tool which allows man to give his door commitments a meaning. To speak with Kant, the door is a tool of practical reason and the window of theoretical reason, and their coordination is what gives reason its meaning. This is the essence of door and window.

But this is not the whole story. Walls do not only have "door" and "window" holes, but also blank surfaces which may be painted over or covered with pictures. And against which libraries can be put up. The paintings and pictures represent window visions and projects for door commitments. So do the books in the library, only in a different sort of codification. The movie theater is a late development of wall painting. This is its essence. The TV was projected to be a new type of window. It was meant to provide men with maps of the world to be used in subsequent commitments. This is what the word "television" means: a better vision that is provided by conventional windows. To use TV as a kind of wall painting is to abuse it.

Let us ask how TV may become an improvement on conventional windows. The obvious answer is that it allows a wider vision. One can see more of the world through it; not only things that are too distant from conventional windows, but also things that are too small, or too ephemeral, or whose motion is too slow for conventional windows. This is an important improvement, and if it were put fully into practice it would profoundly change man's vision of the world, and in consequence, his practice. But this obvious answer does not touch the truly radical aspect of that improvement. TV is a window that may be handled in a way conventional windows cannot. This point demands a somewhat more careful discussion.

The basic techniques of manipulating TV were not developed within TV itself, but taken over from films. In films the same techniques have a different purpose. There they serve, not as categories of perception of events (as they should do in TV), but as categories of representation of events on a wall. In order to understand this difference we must first try to show why films are improvements on wall paintings.

Wall paintings are stabilized representations of one single fleeting view from the conventional window (although that window may open on the transcendent, as in Byzantine paintings, or the unconscious, as in surrealist paintings). This is what is meant by "image": a scene taken out of its temporal context, made timeless. But paintings are also spaceless, in the sense that they translate a three dimensional

vision onto a plane surface. An "image" is also a scene taken out of its spatial context. Images are representations of the world that substitute a space-time reality through timeless and spaceless symbols, through fixed two-dimensional symbols.

For thousands of years there existed another method of representing space-time reality through symbols: writing. Images show their meaning instantly, but letters only if one follows their linear sequence, which means that the reading of images involves a compact and circular time, and the reading of letters a diachronical sequence. But there is another important difference between the two methods. Images translate the time-space reality they mean on surfaces of walls: they intend always to represent it. Writing may do the same, and is then called "fictional" writing. Writing may also symbolize time-space reality as a kind of map, and it is then an impoverished transcription of window vision, "scientific" writing. Therefore books can be either pictures or windows.

Films are improvements on paintings in the sense that they organize images in sequences similar to sequences of letters, synthesizing both image-like and book-like time forms. Films are a synthesis of paintings and books of fiction, and therefore represent events "better" than do either. This image writing is a technique of representation. Thanks to it, fiction has become richer and more effective. The film is essentially a new art form.

The same technique, if applied to TV, should, however, have a different purpose. Here too, books should be absorbed into image, but not the painting-like books of fiction. The window-like books of conception should be absorbed into the window-like TV images of perception. The same techniques that in films serve to synthesize surface and line for the representation of the world should serve the same function in TV for the presentation of the world. They should not provide men, as they do in films, with new categories of esthetic experience, but with new categories of understanding. TV was projected to be, primarily, not a new art form, but a new form of seeing and understanding the world.

Two things must be stated immediately, to avoid a misunderstanding of this paper. One is that there is no intention to deny the close and obvious link between representation and presentation, between art and knowledge. One cannot exist, obviously, without the other; and every art has obviously an epistemological dimension, and every science an esthetic dimension. The other thing to be said immediately is that there is no intention to deny the close link between film and television. TV owes much to the movies, and there are newsreels shown in movie theaters as there are movies shown on TV. This is as it should be. Also, good films, to be works of art, must increase our knowledge of the world, and good TV vision, if it comes about in the future, must provide esthetic experiences to its viewers. The point this paper tries to drive home is this: TV must try to free itself from film

influence, if it is ever to become what it should be. At this stage to stress the fundamental differences between the two seems to be more to the point than to stress the obvious similarities that unite them. In short: TV must be seen as a window through which one may look, at, among other things, paintings, but not seen as paintings. This is important, because in its present stage TV tends to transform everything it looks at into a painting, and thus becomes a second-hand and bad quality movie theater which provides false esthetic experience and false knowledge.

Let us restate the problem. TV is potentially an improvement on traditional windows, not only because it allows us to see more and different types of things, but also, and chiefly, because it provides us with new categories to see them. These categories should serve a new kind of seeing and understanding the world. Let us now try and see how they may achieve this purpose.

We have, at present, two means (or, as one now says, "media"), to look at the events of the world. Traditional windows and printed letters. The vision through traditional windows is growing ever less important for its narrowness, which is a pity, because windows usually have doors close by, so that window vision is usually followed by door commitment. Not so with printed letters. These window-like media (the press, magazines, and books), which provide a far wider vision than do traditional windows, do not make it easy to find any doors through which readers might commit themselves to the world. Also, they provide a different sort of vision. Traditional window vision is felt to be immediate. The vision provided by printed letters is mediated by these letters. This is obvious; we must learn how to decipher them before we can use them, but need do nothing of that sort when looking through a traditional window. The result of this double vision of the event we have can be stated as follows: The immediate vision of the events provided by traditional windows can be called "perception." It has the structure of windows, which means the structure of a surface. To perceive events is to be able to imagine them, and what we see thus is an imaginable world. The vision of the events provided through the mediation of letters can be called "conception." It has the structure of writing, lines that follow each other. To conceive events is to be able to order them in sequences, and what we see thus is a logically ordered world. There is a growing abyss between perception and conception. The number of perceived events remains more or less constant (given the narrowness of traditional windows), but the number of conceived events grows constantly (given the linear and "discursive" character of writing). Therefore the world we live in becomes ever less imaginable. Since imagination is felt to be the form of immediate vision, the world we live in becomes ever more abstract. This is why events as they appear through printed letters do not seem to concern us as much as they do if they can be imaged, and why newspapers, for instance, do not lead easily to doors for commitment. They provide maps of the world that are too abstract.

This is where TV should step in. It has a structure which allows it to present events both to imagination and conceptual thinking because its messages flow like texts on that surface. This is not only means that it allows its readers to imagine events and at the same time conceive them, but also that it allows its readers to conceive images and imagine concepts. Written texts also conceive images (this is what they were made for, but no medium so far has been invented for the imagination of concepts. (Sketches of molecule structures are examples of failures in this direction.) In this sense TV may become a tool for a new type of reason, a radical improvement on windows.

TV is a tool to perceive concepts and thus be able to imagine. This sounds like a structuralist's dream or a Platonic vision. But there is nothing fantastic about it. The invention of TV is very much like the invention of writing, only on a different level. Writing is a technique of transcribing images to line, and it therefore permits the conception of imagination. TV is a technique of manipulating images in lines, and it therefore permits the imagination of concepts. Writing was a step back from imagination, on behalf of conceptual thinking. The result was historical civilization, including politics, science, and the arts as we know them. TV is a step back from conceptual thinking, the use of concepts on behalf of imagination. The results can not yet be imagined, in view of present lack of a correct use of TV for that purpose.

One thing seems however, to be clear already: the proper use of TV demands a change in the attitude of viewers. They must come to understand that the box in the living room was not meant to be a traditional window, but one that they could handle. The messages that issue from it are not necessarily ready made products to be consumed, but raw material to be manipulated. This is the fundamental difference between the cinema and TV; similar techniques serve a different purpose. The viewers must learn that they stand outside the program they are receiving, that they can rearrange it, introduce themselves into it, and control the flux of events both in velocity and direction. (Minkoff's experiences in Geneva, for instance, point in this direction.) Viewers must learn that they are in part responsible for their perception of the world, and that TV was made to provide them with a tool to assume this responsibility. Unless this change of attitude comes about, TV will never become as it should be. And, admittedly, it is difficult to imagine how such a change could be brought about in the present situation of passive consumption.

If such a change of attitude should occur, the video tape itself would be different from what it is now. It would have been made with a view to manipulation by the viewer. One of the esthetic functions of future television will be not so much to provide esthetic experience, as to provide the means to criticize it and interfere in its process. Art would be something different from what it is in our present situation. And so of course, would be politics and science. TV, as it is used now, consumption, but if used as it was intended, it might have an opposite

function. To some extent its use in the future depends on us, although our power of decision is very limited. To change this would require much more than just thinking about television. We should therefore try to act within the parameters of decision open to us.

Let us suppose for a moment that the present closed TV broadcast system could be rendered more dialogical than it is now and then opened to include all the participants that make up present open systems like the telephone, thus transforming television from a broadcast system into a true network. How would TV work in such a situation? Let us go back to the basic idea of this paper that TV was projected to be an improved window. I said, when discussing the window "essence," that it is a means of perceiving the world. But it is, of course, more than this: it is also a means to meet others without touching them. One may talk out of the window, and speak to a crowd (like Mussolini at Piazza Venezia), or one may lean out the window and talk to a neighbor (like village women before cars entered the village). The first example suggests that the radio is a development of a discursive aspect of the window: public information is imparted to private (passive) individuals. The second example suggests that TV was meant to be a development of both the dialogical and the discursive aspects of windows: private information is made public through the active contribution of all participants in the process. If I understand McLuhan correctly he believes that TV will transform society into a cosmic village. It will do so only if presented closed circuits are improved on and then opened. (it is important to recall in the present context that "village" means "polis," and "cosmic village" means "universal politicization.")

The important thing to keep in mind, if one considers talking out of the window to others, is the fact that there is no physical contact between the partners. It is a case of "telecommunication." One sees and hears the partner without touching him concretely. What one sees is the "Gestalt" of the partner in its context, and his gestures which aim at transmitting some message. What one hears are the words the partner formulates, and the intonation in which they are spoken. It is an "audiovisual telecommunication."

The difference between auditive and audio visual dialogue is difficult to grasp, because we know how an auditive dialogue works, but not how a visual one would work. We have letters and the telephone, which are advanced means for auditive dialogue, but we have no more advanced methods of visual dialogue than our traditional windows. The TV, if properly used, would jump this stage of development and provide an audiovisual dialogue method. But even if it is difficult to say how such a dialogue would work, we can be sure that it would achieve the same synthesis between line and surface, between imagination and concept, of which I spoke earlier. I discussed this synthesis as a new sort of "understanding the world," but in addition this synthesis must be seen as a new sort of "recognition of the other person."



It is a commonplace to speak of the loneliness of the mass man, of the impossibility of his "communication" (which means in fact "dialoguing") with others. This lack of dialogue may have a great number of reasons, some of them very profound, but one obvious and not very profound reason is that mass man has no means of dialoguing with others. What he can do, is either shout at them through traditional windows, talk to them over the phone, or write them letters. The first method is archaic, and does not work well in the present situation (full of "noise," in every sense of that term, including the one given it by information theory). The telephone is not a very good method, because it was intended to be a tool of conceptual, not existential dialogue; it does not transmit images ("Gestalten" and gestures of the speaker). But in desperation, the mass man or woman abuses the telephone in trying to force it to become a tool for existential dialogue, which is one reason the telephone network is no longer working efficiently. Writing letters is not a very good method because it is almost as conceptual as the telephone, and because it is a slow process lacking the rhythm of traditional dialogue through windows. [All these tools] tend to separate us from each other, and we have no good tool to unite us.

TV, if used dialogically in open circuits, might become just such a tool. It would allow us to "recognize" the other person," in the sense of perceiving and conceiving his message, and it would allow the other person to recognize us in the same way. A dialogue through such a medium would permit an intersubjective relationship which is both an intellectual and an existential dimension. Which means that the participants, linked to each other both intellectually and existentially, would form a true "polis" and would no longer be lonely. To put it more technically: such a tool would allow all of us to elaborate new epistemological, ethical, and esthetic information. Which means that our society would acquire the structure of a cosmic village. A future use of TV as an audiovisual window for discursive communication with the world and dialogical communication with the other person would provide us with a new type of reason and a new type of social structure. The problem is not a technical one. The problem lies with the resistance of both the owners and the users of TV to such a use of the medium. It is a political problem. It is not easy to see how this resistance might be broken.

TV was projected as an improved window, a medium for understanding the world and dialoguing with others. It is not used this way at present, because its present structure fosters the myth that TV is "cinema made private." This myth suits well the purposes of those who control the structure, and is accepted without resistance by its users, because it liberates them from responsibilities and allows them to lead a life of consumption--of messages and of the goods those messages propagate. The result of such a use of TV is a tendency toward a totalitarian society, in which man becomes a lonely tool manipulated by those who hold the powers of decision. Let us contribute to a better use of TV in the future.



Dec-31-1993