

Beyond Cognition Children and Television Viewing *Eugene Schwartz*

Studies published in the July 2005 Archives of *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* conclude that television viewing tends to have an adverse effect on academic pursuits. In spite of this, many researchers are reluctant to voice condemnation of television viewing by children. "Parents should be encouraged to incorporate well-produced, age-appropriate educational TV into their children's lives. Such programming represents a valuable tool for stimulating children's cognitive development," write Ariel Chernin and Deborah Linebarger of the University of Pennsylvania.

These new studies, in common with most studies that have appeared in past decades, generally assess television's effect on children's cognitive faculties while ignoring the deeper, less-easily quantified effects of TV on children's lives of feeling and willing. Such cognitive studies tend to focus exclusively on the content or "programming" of TV as a positive or negative force. Approaching the question from the perspectives of children's feeling and willing faculties might give more insight into the intrinsic nature of the television experience.

A young child or adolescent sits before the television set, focused on the screen, which serves as a border or threshold separating the inner hardware of the TV and the outer space into which its imagery flows. Behind the screen, a condensed, high-speed beam of electrons flies through a cathode ray tube and hits the back of the TV screen. The cathode ray tube encloses a vacuum; and this tube has a history worth introducing.

In the late nineteenth century William Crookes (1832–1919), a distinguished chemist and physicist, embarked upon a personal investigation of "spiritism," especially those phenomena said to be caused by the intervention of departed souls. Skeptical at first, Crookes soon became convinced that the realm of the dead could be studied with the same scientific rigor as the realm of the living. If the living thrived in air, perhaps the dead could be found in an airless vacuum, and perhaps the same electrical currents that seemed to "animate" so many phenomena in Crookes' time could be used to make dead souls manifest and visible. This passionate quest led Crookes to develop the "Crookes Tube," a partially evacuated bulb through which "cathode rays" were generated. As the tube was further evacuated, unearthly swirls of light and color appeared, without any apparent ether or medium to convey them. Crookes may not have encountered the spirits for whom he searched, but he had established the basis for the cathode ray tube and laid the foundation for the modern television.

The TV screen is coated with phosphors, substances that glow when hit by an electron beam, the path of which is controlled by electromagnetic fields. On the other side of the screen, the child experiences these bursts of energy not as the thousands of small dots or pixels that they really are, but rather as recognizable images, e.g., a tree or a human being. These images are static, but the speed with which they are scanned onto the screen calls

upon the child's "persistence of vision" to present the illusion of moving images.

The processes described above occur regardless of the content that is transmitted. From the cathode ray tube, electrons—fragments of matter—stream, at high velocity, toward the child, while from the child form-giving forces that restore the fragments into the semblance of wholeness stream toward the television.

From one side, the child is bombarded, while from the other, he or she is drained. We could say that the child's own etheric forces cohere the pixels into a "form," while the child's astral forces animate the form into "movement." Forces of life and soul that should be serving the child are instead drawn out to serve the image on the television screen. The speeding electrons are like an attack of inchoate will forces, while the facul-

ties the screen draws from the child drain the child's life of feeling. It should be no surprise that EEGs reveal that a television viewer resembles someone in a state of deep sleep.

The "passive-aggressive" nature of television described above may help us to understand why it is an inherently unbalanced medium. We need only contrast this with the enlivened forces of feeling that awaken when a child's own will is engaged in artistic activity. Perhaps William Crookes' suspicion that the cathode ray tube was a medium in which deadening forces flourished is not so far-fetched after all. By its very nature, television undermines the healthy interplay of feeling and willing that arises as a child's faculty of imagination. Perhaps future studies of the effects of television will take into consideration, in one form or another, its impact on the threefold nature of a human being.