

Qube TV

Pushbutton 1984

deLusory

“The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously; any sound that Winston made, above a whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard. There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment.”

— George Orwell, 1984

For many years now, capitalists, Marxists and some libertarians—to name but a few—have held aloft technology as the “liberating force” that will provide us with the means by which to build a totally free society.

Apart from the capitalists, the most explicit theorists of this technological utopia are the Situationist International (and all their political offspring), who hail industrial technology as a “progressive element” of capitalism. Taking this “progressive element” into consideration, the Situationists view a new society where houses would travel on railroad tracks (so as to give the inhabitants a daily change of scenery), translucent trees that would glow in a rainbow of colours and a television network that would let everyone discuss global problems from one end of the earth to the other—instantaneously!

Taken for a given that capitalism and industrial technology are separable; never seriously questioning whether or not modern technology, born out of the needs of capital, can be worthwhile in anything but a capitalist society, the Situs blunder ahead with such new world illusions without ever giving any credible answers, for example, to the dehumanizing aspects of the centralized computer source that would be necessary for such a global TV network and to who is going to build these “marvels” (“machines” and “technology” is all they shout back).

But now we don’t have to wait for their answers to see what such a technological liberation would be like. The Columbus, Ohio-based Warner Cable Corporation (a subsidiary of Warner Communications, Inc.) has made the first move toward two-way television communication, utilizing cable TV.

Out of the 20,000 cable TV subscribers in Columbus, 13,000 have allowed Warner to hook up a computer system to their TV sets which allows them to participate in polls, game shows and talent contests.

The system, which the February 28 *Detroit Free Press* referred to as “a novel and relatively inexpensive method of getting computer technology into the living room under the guise of entertainment,” is called QUBE and is what Gustave M. Hauser (chairman of Warner Cable) calls, “a prelude to bigger things.”

Consisting of an 18 button input terminal connected to the television set, and a main computer—located at Warner Studios—that deciphers and codifies the actions of the 43,000 subscribers, this seemingly harmless experiment in “participatory TV” brings back all of the fears of government and corporate spying that were voiced when cable TV was first introduced.

From the outset, those opposed to the cable system warned that the boob-tube could easily be converted into a transmitter/receiver, much like that of the Thought Police Telescreens in Or-well’s 1984. Dismissed as poppycock by corporations involved in marketing cable TV, this Orwellian nightmare of a totally monitored society is no longer

being denied. In fact, it is being ushered in as a public convenience that allows the subscribers more free time to do as they wish. Along with being able to shop from the comfort of your own living room (CUBE has recently opened a new studio in a shopping center), some of the “bigger things already talked about are burglary and fire security systems and monitoring of heating and lighting systems” (Detroit Free Press, Feb. 28).

As Ron Castell, vice president of marketing at QUBE, so aptly put it: “What we’re looking at for the future are services that have nothing to do with the TV screen. Our mission is to get the service into homes. Once the guy is comfortable with the technology, he’ll be receptive to other applications.”

Although one might argue (only by a sheer distortion of language) that QUBE is progressive because it allows the viewer to be more than a passive Observer of electronic illusions, the idea of “participatory TV” is in itself delusory. It may seem like more fun to sit in front of the TV and flick at buttons rather than just vegetating before a thousand flashing dots of light, but the viewers can only make decisions on choices that-have-already been made for them. It’s as phony as voting.

TV is, in fact, inherently authoritarian. It necessitates such incredible technological complexity and centralization that regardless of whether or not it is used in the manner prescribed by the “Situationists, Marxists, libertarians, the Warner corporation or CBS, it would be impossible for each individual to have complete control over their tube. The entire system is left in the control of technocrats (in the case of the Situs’ view of a new society) or any of the various corporate and political gangs and rackets.

Without even getting into the adverse emotional and physical effects television has on all of us, the sheer complexity of its technology—and consequently the sophisticated technology needed to support a society that can produce a TV system—negates the ability of all of us to control our own lives: Television only has a place in a society dependent on the spectacle; where the participants are reduced to passive observers of their own demise.

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