

Screen II:

The Invasion of the Attention Snatchers

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¹ I recently undertook the unenviable task of moving house and amidst all the packing, puffing, panting and paying-through-the-nose for various services and utilities one thing caught my attention. The living room essentially laid itself out with little or no human input (apart from puffing and panting of course), and it did so all in relation to a single small hole in the wall of approximately one centimetre in diameter: the TV jack. So this article stems from that observation, and from the fact that so many of the living rooms one enters have almost exactly the same general configuration as mine. Sofas, or lounge chairs, or recliners, or beanbags, or cushions (or even hard wooden benches for the more puritan amongst us), or any combination of all or any of these, all facing more or less in the direction of a relatively small rectangular screen.

² There was a time when chairs in a room tended to face each other (so that the people sitting in them could also face each other and have a conversation, I guess). In colder climates, like the one I came from, the seating used to be aligned towards the fire, the heart(h) of the house; now it invariably faces the TV. There's nothing natural about this orientation of course, though like many such things it does seem to happen almost naturally. Like many new technologies before and since, the arrival of the television into the home was generally met with a curious mixture of enthusiasm, ambivalence and hesitation. Lynn Spigel notes, for example, how American women's magazines of the 1940s and [1950s](#) largely responded in such a fashion when they began attempting to negotiate, on behalf of their readers, the integration of the shiny new devices, and the endless potential for pleasure and distraction that they offered, into the existing domestic space which had hitherto mostly represented a somewhat duller mixture of various chores and responsibilities (Ang 133). Where should the TV be placed, both in a physical and cultural sense, in order that the home might continue to function efficiently? But fifty years later the home is arguably less a site of work and more a site of recreation, and the laying out of one's living room has become an almost automatic process. It requires an effort of concentration not to have the TV dominating the relaxation space, it is remarkable to find a home without one -- in the 'developed' world anyway.

³ What is our society like, then, now that this dominating little screen has so thoroughly invaded our homes? One way of beginning to address this question might be through what Igor Kopytoff called the biography of the thing. The idea is that just as people have biographies, so too can things, objects, commodities be thought of as having biographies. And just as the recorded life of a human being may illuminate the dynamic cultural or social context in which it is, or was, lived, so too can the recorded 'life' of something like television illuminate the socio-cultural formations and transformations that occurred, or are occurring in the context within which that 'life' is 'lived' (Silverstone et al. 17). The biography of television would most probably record a life in progress which has so far grown from a monochromatic, single channel, unarchived infancy into a multicoloured, multichannelled, recorded (and often repeated)... and here the metaphor fails me: is television an 'adult' yet? Or is it still more like a petulant and self obsessed adolescent? Whatever it is, it certainly demands a lot of attention.

⁴ But does it get it? Or to be more precise, what is the quality of the attention it receives? As Ien Ang points out, when you actually spend your hard earned dollars buying a TV what you're also getting, for the same cheap price, is potential access to all the available broadcast television output. In return for this bargain you are supposed to forthwith expose yourself to as much of this output as you possibly can, including (and indeed most importantly) the commercials that punctuate and pay for it. You theoretically become part of an Audience, a commodity to be measured, bought, and sold by TV stations and Advertisers; you theoretically are supposed to sit in those chairs that almost inevitably face the TV; and pay attention Godammit! Yes, there is, strange as it may seem, a right way and a wrong way to watch TV, from the point of view of the industry, that is. But of course, nobody ever does that: people don't pay attention, they walk out and put on the kettle during the ads, they channel-surf, they record programmes to watch later, fast forwarding through the ads. Realistically, television viewing for the majority of us is a bizarre behaviour made up of probably fairly equal parts of watching and nonwatching (Ang 139).

⁵ And of course now there is an ever increasing threat to the domination of the small screen coming from a slightly smaller, but nevertheless strongly attention-snatching screen. This second screen doesn't have its spatial position in the home quite worked out yet: sometimes it's in the living area, sometimes it's hidden away in a bedroom, or study, or some other nook or cranny (my brother has his beside the laundry). But it's getting there. Of course moves are afoot to blend the two screens together: [Sony](#), for example, sell a thing called a [Web TV](#) Internet Terminal® which "puts the Web where it really belongs, on your big-screen TV" ("[Sony Brings](#)"). All you need is a television (check), a standard phone line (check), and a thumb (check, in fact I've got two). Yes indeed, using "One Thumb Browsing® technology" ("[Everything](#)") -- yes, they really call it that, and what's more they've registered it as a trademark -- you too can "read bulletin boards for expert information on an incredible range of special interests. Join groups that let you share ideas and opinions. Or send and receive e-mail messages faster than any overnight service" ("[Sony Brings](#)").

The question remains: will we ever be able to look away?

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