

**Mind Full Entertainment, or, the Media-Infotainment Complex, or,
Random Notes on Watching TV and Reading Literature in
the Age of the Attenuated Attention Span**

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

I. Does vegging out make you a vegetable?

Of course, you come home after a long day and all you want to do is put your feet up, snuggle down into the cozy sofa and ZONE OUT by watching mindless TV. But that is not because you have less of a mind. It is because your mind is so full of all the STUFF that makes modern life so busy, so stressful, so hectic, so chaotic, that you basically want to exist for a bit without thinking. You want your mind to stop – to stop thinking, stop worrying, stop processing. You want to reach the kind of unselfconscious state of mindlessness that monks who meditate claim is the highest state of Zen.

Okay, so I wrote those words and then I had to stop and really think about what Zen really means. I should ask my Buddhist friend but then I might be gifted with a super long reading list that I absolutely do not have time to read tonight. So...I do what all of us with a need for immediate gratification do nowadays, I commune with my BFF Google and randomly choose this website and, twenty seconds later, determine this is an adequate definition of Zen:

"Zen is more of an attitude than a belief.

Zen is the peace that comes from being one with an entity other than yourself.

Zen means being aware of your oneness with the world and everything in it.

Zen means living in the present and experiencing reality fully.

Zen means being free of the distractions and illusory conflicts of the material world.

Zen means being in the flow of the universe.

Zen means experiencing fully the present, and delighting in the basic miracle of life itself."

And now my exploration of this entire topic is challenged. If Zen means being free of distractions, then maybe it's best to neither read nor watch TV when your mind is full. But if it means the peace that comes from being one with an entity other than yourself, then maybe you should read and watch TV...simultaneously, like I do.

In the dystopic, futuristic TV series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel of the same name, women are relegated to being second-class citizens who are not allowed to read or exercise autonomy over their own bodies because a fundamentalist Christian crazy patriarchy has taken power whilst everyone was too distracted to pay attention. There is a scene which shows a montage of people zoning out as they commune with all their various devices playing numerous forms of beguiling media, their ears plugged up with earphones, their thoughts occupied by frivolity...The series' plotline seems relevant in today's world where misogyny is personified by presidents, current and former, worldwide (e.g. Zuma, Trump, Duterte, Bush 41) and sexual harassment is not only omnipresent but finally, hypervisible right now as more and more women come forward to say #MeToo. Personally, I think the show is kinda overhyped but maybe there is something to learn from the main protagonist blaming the birth of the harsh new order on the fact that no-one was paying attention...

There are myriad forces urging us towards mindlessness because our minds are so chock-a-block stuffed. But do we risk becoming complicit in our own oppression by willingly submitting to the media-infotainment complex?

I remember a lecture I once attended given by the erudite Noam Chomsky. He explained why he refused to be a "talking head" on the so-called news channels even though he was such a well-known public intellectual. He said that he couldn't reduce complex issues to the narrow time parameters required by TV producers to manufacture snappy sound bytes for easy digestion. The media-infotainment complex does not have time for complexity, texture, paradox, historical context or intellectual intricacy.

Don't forget this point. Please! Try and pay attention.

II. Is your soul for sale?

Scholars and "woke folks" rage against the prison-industrial complex which unjustly imprisons bodies. The media-infotainment complex incarcerates souls and minds.

I am writing this from within my prison walls – slave to random Youtube clips and music videos/infotainment masquerading as news (yeah, I'm looking at you CNN and MSNBC)/multiple TV series and the occasional movie. Mind you, I still have not finished *War and Peace* and that makes over a decade of trying!

So I will need some help to pose questions about the effects of incessant media consumption. Let me exercise my well-honed cut and paste skills. This is the somewhat abbreviated first page of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. He published the original version of this book fifty years ago in 1967 so a) appreciate his prescience and b) shudder at how much worse everything has become. Remember this was written long before the iPad became the most effective babysitter for three-year-olds:

"1 - The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.

2 - Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever. Apprehended in a partial way, reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudoworld apart, solely as an object of contemplation...The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of nonlife.

3 - The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges...

4 - The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.

5 - The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm - a world view transformed into an objective force.

6 - Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world - not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations - news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment - the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life...In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself."

You have to work your brain the same way you do your biceps. They both require vigorous strength and stamina-training. The brain is like any other muscle - if you don't feed it the right nutrients and make it do push-ups, it will become flaccid and weak. So if your brain is fit enough to read Debord, [click here](#).

What I understand by this long passage above is that the spectacle exists to absorb our minds into a representation of reality that justifies the existing order of society. As a Marxist thinker, Debord thinks of society as a hierarchical, class-defined system in which many are oppressed but the omnipresent spectacle naturalizes and familiarizes and justifies that oppression.

You can think on that and decide whether you agree or disagree with my interpretation or Monsieur Debord himself. But we have to also update him for our times. How have new technologies and social media further scrambled our brains? There is research that shows that just the presence of a smartphone drains our brain power by reducing our available cognitive capacity. Too much smartphone use and social media exposure has resulted in heightened anxiety, depression and increased levels of teen suicide.

Spending so much time making your life into a spectacle on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter or whatever your preferred platform and, in turn, absorbing the relentless spectacle of performativity and posturing and posting created by all your friends and followers puts you at risk of “information overload,” a term coined by Alvin Toffler who also invented the term “prosumer.” In the digital era, that term has been used by scholars to reflect on how users of social media both produce and consume the content that populates the platform.

In the post-industrial economy, what my chommie Karl Marx called “surplus value” and what laypeople call profit, is no longer created by manufacturing hairdryers and tractors but by trading in information, increasing spectacle consumption and harnessing big data from the habits of prosumers.

(Aside: Please don't buy into the hype of social media or app-based companies like Airbnb or Uber as representing the “sharing economy.” No profits are shared even if you are a prosumer. If you produce a bedroom for a tourist or give a ride to a German dude who needs a lift, you receive a fee for your services. The big bucks remain with the owners of the platform or as my buddy Karl Marx would put it, the “means of production.” Prosumerism and the so-called sharing economy are just furthering the proletarianization of those who like to think they are middle-class. The gig economy is a more accurate term.

Required background reading, “Neoliberalism: the idea that swallowed the world” and of course, the classique, Karl Marx's Capital, Volume 1)

I think the British TV series, Black Mirror, investigates some of the negative effects that result from technology-saturated modern life. As usual the Americans have stolen it as they so often do so hopefully they won't ruin it the way they did with so many others including House of Cards by trying to endlessly extend them well past their shelf life to extract every last ounce of profit possible. House of Cards was in its first incarnation a fantastic four-episode British series of biting social commentary. But look how the American version has been dragged out forever and ever and devolved into farce. I've only had a chance to watch one episode of Black Mirror so

far because I've had so much work reading and writing to do but it was frightening because it is quite probably prophetic of a future in which we're nothing more than our digital avatars!

III. Not TV versus literature, TV and literature: DFW throws down!

There's a general assumption that watching TV makes you dumber and reading makes you smarter. Is that true?

"I never normally watch soaps and sitcoms and police series, consuming them steadily and indiscriminately like a child eating its way through a bag of mixed sweets. For simple mindless distraction you can't beat early evening television. No scene lasts more than thirty seconds, and the stories jump from character to character so fast that you hardly notice how cardboard-thin they are."

In the philosophical novel, *Thinks*, by David Lodge, the middle-aged lady novelist, Helen, recently-widowed and lonely, takes refuge in TV for some "simple mindless distraction." The implication is of course that good literature writes into being full-bodied, three-dimensional characters whose complexity will require an attention span that can focus for more than half a minute.

A similar sentiment is expressed by David Foster Wallace who also relies on the active/passive binarism for differentiating the mindful engagement mandatory for reading good fiction versus the mindless consumption of television and movies: "...Serious fiction is a rough and bumpy affair for everyone involved. Commercial entertainment, on the other hand, smooths everything over...[Movies are] basically an anesthetic (and think for a second about the etymology of 'anesthetic'; break the word up and think about it)."

DFW was determined to make the reader think, to make her work hard, to ultimately empower her to join him as author in "fight[ing] a rearguard" against a culture "defined by mediated gratification and image." He said a lot of these insightful, inspiring things in an interview with Larry McCaffery about his essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction."

This essay is visionary but also a little bit dated. Wouldn't the most excellent TV series of all time, *The Wire*, qualify as an anti-anesthetic? Does it not require all the active engagement and committed attention that a proper analysis of a Shakespearean tragedy demands? DFW is writing in the 20th-century, in the context of TV versus literature, as if it was still possible that literature might still be able to occupy a separate island removed from the tsunami of media we are flooded with every moment now.

Today, if there was an actual match, TV is most certainly the victor, standing over literature with his fists raised in victory and his foot on her chest. It is almost

impossible to conceive of a literary universe that is separate from or unmediated by the moving image. Part of his goal in writing the essay was to draw attention to the flaws of such media-influenced fiction. Bigtime dissing Mark Leyner's "ironic cyberpunk" novel, *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, "the biggest thing for campus hipsters," DFW writes that, "Leyner's novel, in its amphetaminic eagerness to wow the reader, marks the far dark frontier of the fiction of image – literature's absorption of not just the icons, techniques, and phenomena of television, but of television's whole objective. *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist's* sole aim is, finally, to wow, to ensure that the reader is pleased and continues to read."

This, for Wallace, is a failing:

"Leyner's fictional response to television is less a novel than a piece of witty, erudite, extremely high-quality prose television. Velocity and vividness – the wow – replace the literary hum of actual development. People flicker in and out; events are garishly there and then gone and never referred to. There's a brashly irreverent rejection of 'outmoded' concepts like integrated plot or enduring character. Instead there's a series of dazzlingly creative parodic vignettes, designed to appeal to the forty-five seconds of near-Zen concentration we call the TV attention span...Its mocking challenge to the reader is the same as television's flood of realities and choices: ABSORB ME – PROVE YOU'RE CONSUMER ENOUGH."

To cure us of being mere consumers, or even prosumers, in "the present [which] is grotesquely materialistic," requires an art form that pricks and prods more than TV, that can help us discover how it is "that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price?"

Wallace believes that "fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being" whereas television "help[s] us deny we're lonely. With televised images, we can have the facsimile of a relationship without the work of a real relationship. It's an anesthesia of form. The interesting thing is why we're so desperate for this anesthetic against loneliness."

DFW wants us to be WOKE FOLKS! But not in that pretentious, self-righteous activist way (you know who you are!). He wants us to literally wake up, sit up, pay attention and THINK and FEEL.

If TV merely induces lethargy, and a lulling sense of detached application that deadens sensibility as it simultaneously titillates and provokes fleeting sensation, literature must aim to do the opposite. DFW describes it thus: "I had a teacher I liked who used to say good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable."

So can TV, a form of media, that is intrinsically tied to notions of the couch and greasy comfort food like potato chips, ever invoke that level of deep psychic empathy that entails some level of work, input, imagination and impetus?

IV. Concluding Questions I wish I could answer

- 1) The goal of this essay was not to analyze why people are so tired at night when they come home from work that they just want to escape into mindless television. But why does this neoliberal, non-stop, pressure cooker capitalism we live in demand we work so much and so many hours that all we want to do is to lose consciousness and escape into a fictionalized universe?
- 2) Does trying to zone out, dumb down, and log out during our recreation time bleed into our ability to zone in/log in/plug into other areas of our life? Is it a sign of depression or dissatisfaction? If we didn't switch on the TV, would we have to change our lives or change the world?
- 3) Are the millions of us who watch TV to achieve the state of Zen actually going about it the right way? Does TV ultimately achieve the desired effect of mindlessness?
- 4) Might it be that filling our minds with fibre rather than fluff is actually a more fulfilling route to Zen? Who benefits from our addiction to mindless fluff - e.g. the usual suspects like the Kardashian "reality" series or writing-challenged novel, Fifty Shades of Grey - over dense fibre - The Wire, Season of Migration to the North?
- 5) Does binge watching a whole series in one long, junk food-aided undertaking reflect a state of emotional emptiness? If so, does it fill the void or further exacerbate it?
- 6) Is concentration and the ability to focus and pay attention our most valuable resource? If so, is reading better than watching TV if reading helps us foster that skill and most TV relies on 30-45 second vignettes? But in the new rapidfire information economy, don't we require fractured, semi-distracted psyches to keep ping ponging from one entertaining spectacle to the next?
- 7) Will I ever finish War and Peace?

&&&*****&&&