

watch television, the entire reason is not only that it is a low-grade activity, one that many think best fits the phrase “Am I lazy!” Part of the reason, too, has to do with what television is displacing. Many report that they feel as though they should have been doing something else. College educated viewers felt this way more often than other people because “they should have been doing something more productive.” Television rearranges life through decreasing the amount of time spent involved with other activities. It at times provides a center for the household, but such a center seems flimsy at best, especially in comparison with other potential centers or centers of the past. In another context, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi speak of these kinds of centers of life.

When people are asked what they enjoy most, and enough time is left for a genuine answer to emerge, we often find that the most enjoyable things involve doing something, and usually something rather complex and demanding. Rarely does watching television get mentioned, or any other passive or consummatory activity ... The first reflex for many people is to say that one most enjoys going on vacations, going to movies or restaurants—the typical “leisure” responses in our culture. But as people think more deeply about their real feelings they will mention enjoyable times with their families, and then there is often a point when their faces light up and they say something like: “Actually, the best times in my life have been ...” and start talking with great enthusiasm about designing and sewing quilts, rock climbing, playing music, working on a basement lathe, or about other activities that require concentrated skill, that do not separate the individual from the end result of his or her effort, and that provide the kind of exhilaration and high focused attention of flow. So ... we are still able to keep in sight those *vivid signposts* that show what it is that makes life worth living ... [On] reflecting on such occasions, people often say that not only was the experience enjoyable at the time, but that it helped them grow and become more than they had been. Compared to such optimal experiences, much television watching could be deemed a waste of time ... wasting it amounts to wasting life.

Casting television in terms of the symmetrical relationship of correlational coexistence developed

earlier, we can see that the medium is just not enough for humans to make the center of their lives. It does not call forth their humanity in any depth. Hence, Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi worry that by spending so much time viewing television “one may well lose opportunities to grow as a human being.”

Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi find that a mistaken cultural assumption underlies much of the appeal of television. For them the mistaken cultural assumption is narrowly one of thinking that physical and mental exertion are bad, and that they are unrelated to human growth and living a worthwhile life. In contrast, for us, the more comprehensive mistaken assumption is that technology generally can fulfill our aspirations for freedom and enrichment. Considered from the standpoint of the vision of technology, television is a paradigmatic example of and not an exception to the unimpeded development of technological culture. As for liberation, it is a commodity which does not make demands—in dress, transportation, or manners, or even having to be at home when a program is aired. Following the device’s split between means and ends, people exert themselves in labor and expect to relax completely in leisure. They want amusement, not challenge or disturbance. In terms of prosperity, with video cassette players and hundreds of channels, the most, the most varied, and the latest programs can be watched. Advertisements, too, and the settings of the programs themselves celebrate this prosperity of technology. In short, the incredible attraction of television is that it is the homeplace of the vision people are still spellbound by. It confirms them in that vision and tells them what’s what in the universe. Its glamour binds and soothes while simultaneously disappointing them with the flatness and shallowness of its nourishment, its ironic unfulfillment. Television as an exemplar of a final commodity represents the ultimate appeal of the promise of technology. It is, then, the success story of the technology. Television is the vision of technological culture.

So while technology is successful on its own terms when it make goods available, its success is merely a Pyrrhic victory. What makes good things rich and involving has been lost. We have been