

*“To all who are anonymous...”*

# **Disconnect to Reconnect**

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## NOTE TO THE READER

When translating this text from the original French, the question of gender became an issue. In English, 'he' and 'she' refer to the sexes whereas in French, the article *le* and *la* are attached to the noun and do not refer to any individual or group. Because I believe in and respect equality between men and women, I first wrote 's/he', 'her/his,' and 'her/himself' throughout the entire English version. This very quickly became unwieldy and confusing. I therefore chose to accept the convention of using 'he' when referring to both men and women whenever 'human beings' was, for one reason or the other, unusable.

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## INTRODUCTION

Most of us carry out the same daily ritual: we sit down in front of a television set, turn it on and watch it. Without questioning ourselves, we repeat this act day after day, month after month, year after year; throughout our entire lifetime.

Isolating me in my room, television gave me the illusion that I was unique; that for it I was really someone special. But, in fact, I was just like everyone else: I behaved like all the others, innocently performing this rite and not suspecting anything untoward. By watching television on a daily basis, I was not only perpetuating a modern custom, I was also becoming an adept of a new sort of religion. An unarticulated religion without inspiring tenets, with a blurry god hidden within billions of pictures and which, unseen by me, had become “the good word.”

I belonged to the great world-tribe for which television was the new totem. I watched this totem with its thousand faces and I listened to its thousand voices. Over the years, my attention was more and more monopolized by what had discretely become the sole point-of-reference for almost all of humanity. Except for a few very rare cases, not even the most remote places on the planet escaped its logic. Whether I wanted to or not, I, just like everybody else, was paying allegiance to a new belief-system: virtual, far from real and, thanks to which, this new god, coming out of nothing, could shape my life in his image. And not only my life but also the lives of just about every human being on earth.

Although humankind finds itself at its most technologically developed state and never before has humanity attained an over-all material level of comfort as advanced, I found myself asking the following questions: “What have we abandoned

of ourselves that allows us to accept a state of such inactivity? By what paths have we let reality escape? Why are we listening to a single machine to tell us what we should believe, think and do?”

I and everyone around me, consciously or not, were being affected by the issues that these questions raised. But, as far as I knew, there was no one that I could speak with; nobody to ease my confusion. To find answers, I resolved to get rid of my television for an unknown period of time.

Up until that point, I had found refuge in a sort of resignation; after all, I was just another TV watcher - just like all the others throughout the world - and these issues were bigger than me. But when I realized that no one else was responsible, that I controlled my own destiny, I understood that it was up to me to search for the answers. To find them, my life became my laboratory and I began an experiment for which I now felt ready. I wanted to know what I had given up to the television to the detriment of myself. My excitement at discovering new aspects of myself mitigated the fear I had of separating from my TV set. And a new question resonated in my mind: “What will become of my life if my free time is spent somewhere other than in front of a television?”

The answer came with action. When I got rid of my television, my life took an entirely new direction; a direction impossible to have imagined beforehand. My way of looking at the world changed. My choices became based on values other than those shown on television. My ideas became clearer. My body reacted differently. I became a different person: I became myself.

These changes influenced every part of my life, not the least of which was my profession. When I got rid of my television, I was the producer for a television channel. At that time, I believed with complete conviction that there was good and

bad television and that I worked for the good television. I had faith that the documentary channel I worked for helped to diffuse both awareness and knowledge. It was a good job. I had worked there since its launch seven years earlier and I sincerely thought that, thanks this popular tool, I was contributing to the betterment of my country. I supervised the production of more than one hundred documentaries a year, the majority of which were high quality, and I was persuaded that they made people more intelligent and more alert. The team of which I was a part was interesting and I was well paid. Above all, I had the good fortune to be able to align my skills with my personal beliefs and to work toward the betterment of society.

But the more I felt the beneficial effects from not watching television, the more difficult it was for me to accomplish my work with the same conviction. Even when producing quality documentaries, it felt inconsistent to contribute to a virtual faith which I had escaped. How could I contribute to the perpetuation of a system from which I had freed myself? As the years passed, the feeling of incongruity grew.

Then, one day, I left. Although I had seen television from both the outside as a watcher and the inside as a producer, I realized that never before had I seen it from a distance. By separating myself from television, by taking back my freedom, I saw it from far away. I saw it beyond its pictures.

# CHAPTER I

## A QUESTION OF TIME

*“The termite mound of the future terrifies me.  
And I hate its robot-like virtue.  
I was made to be a gardener.”*

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry<sup>1</sup>

Whoever we are, whether rich or poor, single or married, young or old, working or unemployed, woman or man, on the political left or the right, religious or Atheist, living in the countryside or in the city, television makes no distinction. It devours time; our time. In 2006, the people of the world watched an average of 4 hours of television per day<sup>2</sup>.

Most of us have schedules that oblige us to run from morning until evening and then, when our work is done, we make the choice to sit down in front of a television set. We complain about there not being enough hours in a day but we spend the substantive part of what is available to us in front of a screen. Watching television has become, in terms of dedicated time, the third human activity after sleeping and working.

Time, one of the most sought after assets of our era, is being eaten up by a machine. We voluntarily feed the television our free time. We spend our precious lives sitting in front of an electronic box.

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<sup>1</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. *Wartime Writings 1939-1944*, Harcourt, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Calculation based on the average viewing time in industrialized countries.

Maybe 4 hours of viewing per day does not correspond to how much you watch: you might be over or under the average. But whatever your viewing habits are, television is cunning and cannot be trusted. It tries to make us believe that we are only watching it a little. Too little: there is always another program that just cannot be missed<sup>3</sup>.

4 hours per day equals 28 hours per week...

28 hours per week equals more than 60 days per year<sup>4</sup>...

We work hard so that we can go on vacation – yet the number of vacation days pales in comparison to the time we spend in front of the television. And it doesn't stop there...

60 days per year equals 13 years of our lives<sup>5</sup>...

We spend on average 13 years of our lives watching television, 24 hours per day non-stop.

In the space of half a century, television has succeeded in convincing the great majority of the world's population that spending 13 years in front of it is a good idea. If our personal viewing time is less than the average, we might feel reassured but that does not resolve the problem: television is a *chronophage*.<sup>6</sup> It feeds on our time like cancer feeds on cells.

Imagine that at the end of your life you had spent 24 hours a day for 13 years in front of a television screen and that it was neither an obligation nor unavoidable but your choice. A choice nurtured by the illusion that no better ways existed to entertain or to inform yourself.

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<sup>3</sup> To calculate your exact viewing time, attach a piece of paper to your television set and write down the time that you spend in front of it each day. Do this for two or three weeks, then calculate your daily average.

<sup>4</sup> Once your daily average has been calculated, multiply it by 365 to find your yearly average.

<sup>5</sup> Calculation based on 79.15 years as the average life-span.

<sup>6</sup> *Chronophage*: time-eater. From the Greek *chronos* meaning 'time' and *phagos* meaning 'to eat.'

13 years represents a veritable fortune: a treasure that belongs to each one of us and that we give away by remaining seated in front of a screen. Try the following: take a moment once again to imagine yourself at the end of your life. Take back those 13 years that belong to you and imagine what you would rather have done with them. Something personal, enjoyable. Find a comfortable position, relax, take your time and have fun: let your mind go and give your imagination the freest possible rein.

Maybe what will come to you will be a personal urge, a wish, a childhood dream or a long-repressed desire. It could be to play a musical instrument, to write, to learn the names of plants, to do nothing, to take walks, to learn magic tricks, to practice all the positions of the Kama-Sutra, to sail, to spend more time with your children, to rest, to learn a foreign language, to travel, to understand the movements of the stars, to dance the Tango, to read, to record your memoirs for your grandchildren, to paint or to do one or more of countless other things. It doesn't matter: the essential thing is that it comes from, and is important to, you.

Now come back to the present time. You should have two images in your mind: one engendered by a life where you stayed seated in front of a television screen for 13 years and the other of you achieving something – fulfilling personal goals that came directly from you. Compare these two pictures and see if you can perceive two distinct emotional states: one coming from an attachment to television, the other originating from a connection to that which lives in you.

While it is impossible to re-live our lives once they are over, it is possible to decide today how we want to color the future. No one gets a second chance but using this little mental exercise can help you make a good choice now.

It is interesting to note that both of these pictures belong entirely to you. They came from you. In both cases, you produced them. You have seen what no television

will ever show you: your own vision. This projection exercise reminds us that human beings can produce their own pictures without the need of a machine. And, as George Bernard Shaw<sup>7</sup> reminds us, “...*Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will.*”<sup>8</sup>

Our imaginations give us the ability to travel in time and space, as we please, and for free: the opposite of television. More powerful than all the television stations put together, imagination is the number one producer worldwide of pictures. The pictures that it produces come from the depths of ourselves whereas those from television are created by others; by people we do not even know.

And while we are attentively watching the television, others are busy furnishing us with our pictures. There are two reasons why those people have a vested interest in keeping us in front of our screens:

The first, obviously, is commercial: watching television has a financial cost to the viewer. The most visible cost is also the least expensive: the television set, the subscription, possible license fees, etc. The partially visible costs are all the products that television suggests we buy. The invisible cost is the monetary value of our time. If one considers in terms of money the hundreds of thousands of hours spent in front of a television screen, one perceives that television, contrary to what it would have us believe, is very expensive. We pay for the right to watch it with our time.<sup>9</sup>

But this financial reason hides another, more subtle reason. While we are busy watching a television screen, we are not physically implicated either in our own lives or in the lives of our societies. As such, we leave a void which others, logically,

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<sup>7</sup> Irish writer, dramatist, theatre critic (1856-1950). Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, 1925.

<sup>8</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, 1<sup>st</sup> World Library, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> The estimated cost of watching television over a life time is 1 million dollars.

[http://www.savingadvice.com/blog/2007/07/17/101625\\_how-dumping-tv-allow](http://www.savingadvice.com/blog/2007/07/17/101625_how-dumping-tv-allow)

fill. Not only do they decide for us what we are going to see but, more importantly, how our lives should be lived.