

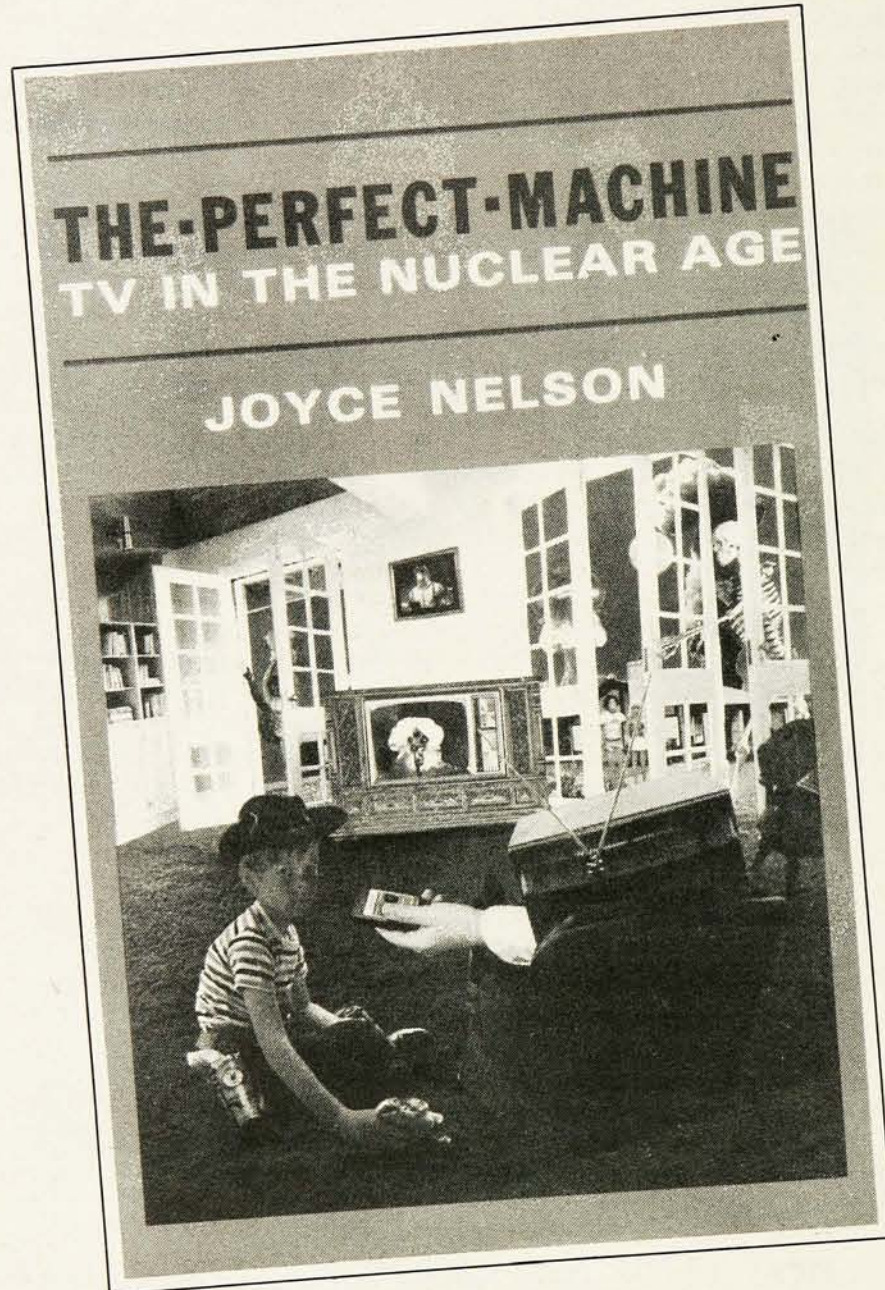
Joyce Nelson. *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987. 187 pp.

Joyce Nelson set out to conduct a political trial, and for this purpose has constructed the image of a perfect machine perfectly serving the interests of patriarchy, capitalism, and above all the U.S.A.'s nuclear weaponry industry. The historical evidence may give you insomnia and make you watch television differently. Part of what might keep you awake nights is the distress of trying to figure out what the evidence proves. The arsenal of arguments mounted against television is so total, so graphic, so determined to convict from all angles, so troublesome in analytic logic. *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age* is a troubling book. That's good.

Nelson is a genius at scouting out and piecing together previously obscure information about the political and economic machinations behind television's development and current production. *The Perfect Machine* traces scientific, industry and (U.S.) government debates in the early days of the nuclear and television industries. Their history is forged in their (apparently deliberate) simultaneous birth, and made further symbiotic by a number of factors: corporate links between the two industries; tying both to political and imperialist aims of the U.S. government; their arousal of intense scientific and political debate about physiological and social damage to citizens; and the suppression of this debate because of the ability of both industries to manoeuvre around potential protective legislation where it would interfere with corporate interests.

The history of the Motion Picture Export Association of America, and the portrait of political blackmail exerted by Jack Valenti worldwide on its behalf, will provide a familiar example of such government-industry complicity to those who have followed Canadian and Quebec governments' attempts to wrest some control of film distribution back from the MPEAA. There is a largesse of further information about television and its intersection with the U.S. military which is less familiar, and often frightening.

Nelson documents tangible links between TV and nuclear bombs by showing how television was used to glamourize the new nuclear weapons to early viewers, while simultaneously constructing a paradoxical image of the U.S.A. as potential victim of the weaponry of which it was still sole possessor. She also traces the debate around research concerning radiation damage from television screens, which was emitted (the damage, not the debate) from picture tubes and other components until the late '60s. As with the more vicious damage



threatened by domestic nuclear testing, research about health hazards from television radiation was ignored and/or suppressed throughout the '50s and '60s. The fictional construct of the U.S. as potential victim of anti-democratic aggression helped to legitimize nuclear testing and the suppression of critical information about its dangers; this fictional construct was a major accomplishment of television programming in the postwar period. With bombs signifying both American technological genius and the need to defend democracy from foreign aggression, criticism of radiation hazards was clearly dull and unpatriotic. What helped to suppress information about radiation from television was the political clout of the television/electronics industry, coupled with the apparently universal conviction that it was better for an American to die than be without television. "Better dead than red", they said when I was a kid.

When Nelson describes television's role in naturalizing the bomb, with all its photogenic images of unimaginable violence and destruction, and when she traces the postwar development of a television culture favourable to American military interests, the writing is informative, graphic, and generally convincing. TV proves itself as the magician amongst (technological) magicians "because it stages its own disappearing act while it reveals the workings of other technologies' magic". She attempts to 'expose' this magic through the sequential unmasking of a number of productive processes: news, religion, laugh tracks, audience research. Thus combined these come to resemble a mastermind at work: the operation of 'patriarchal culture'. This monolithic structure of power, ideology, culture, and political control finds its apotheosis in the unified "perfect machine" of television, and so

determines the shape and meaning of all television programs and effects.

The problem is that Nelson's analysis of television processes depends on the absolute conflation of patriarchy, capitalism, religion, technology, and progress, a conflation which she claims is enacted and ritualized through television. Nelson's assemblage of Jungian feminism, Marxism, and neo-McLuhanist neurological research provides her with the moral energy to attack television from all sides. *The Perfect Machine* applies this model to searing analyses of television technology, news, advertising, political coverage, product previewing, TV evangelism, narrative structures in sitcoms and crime series, audience research, corporate imperialism, nature programming, space exploration, and spectacle. No summary can do justice to the energy and thoroughness of the attack, but rather will tend to expose its vulnerability: its eclecticism, its logical equivocations and hyperbole, its claims about television's unmitigated effects on its audiences.

Nelson's perfect television perpetrates passive submission to authoritarianism, consumerism ("You don't ask for a product: The product asks for you!" explains one advertising expert, who candidly applies his techniques to political campaigns), and above all, "reactionary modernism", a religious faith in technology combined with conservative nostalgia for values of the past. Television privileges the visual and thus instills a passive, isolated mode of spectatorship; it has intensified this effect by replacing live programming, which "tended to continuously expose its spectacle as a human construction", with a controlled flow of technologically "sweetened" pre-recorded programming. Here as in all other of its aspects, TV is part of the death culture held in place by patriarchy; the favoured instrument of technological necrophilia, it formally privileges content dealing with death rather than life.

Nelson believes that television is a technology with direct impact on the neurological functioning of the brain, suppressing the left hemisphere and thus the capacity for critical logical thinking. This raises the first of a number of questions: should we worry so much about whether the programming is live or pre-recorded, when the signals from the screen are suppressing half of our brain in either case? Or about how TV affects the content of televised political campaigns, when it determines our responses technologically? Perhaps this seems a minor methodological quibble, if each claim is accurate in its own terms. But if content makes a difference, the implications are quite different from a prognosis that says that it doesn't. If this television is all television, the political implications for non-American viewers and producers are grave. Nelson solves potential contradictions by condemning everything, attributing all to its service to the bomb.

I have myself written about links between



television and bombs, and am sympathetic to this project. However it is difficult to remain credulous, for instance, when the author argues that the development of television arose as a deliberate ploy to seduce Americans and the world into acceptance of nuclear aggression. Surely the logic of capitalism also functions on a less apocalyptic level: by developing markets and profits, even where doing so valorizes anti-patriarchal impulses. No doubt the subject deserves some critical hyperbole. But underlying occasional lapses into dubiousness are a number of claims about society and television which need to be sorted out.

Following the work of Jungian psychoanalysts, Nelson describes society as needful of a "ritual container" now supplied by television: containing "in the sense of managing, subduing, encompassing", and "as the techno-institutional frame for programming". This "containing" process is aptly described, and helps explain programs ranging from news to sitcoms and crime series, related opposites which construct a clear representation of passive audience and privileged hero. Here "the deep structure of American prime time" is seen to be completely harmonious with the coherent or unified interests of patriarchy and the state. But what is patriarchy, then, exactly?

For Nelson, patriarchy and capitalism are one and the same: "Patriarchal capitalism remakes all nature into technological simulacra and fashions its technological systems to imitate the 'feminine'; its purpose is to sweep us all into an unconscious collectivity exploited by the power drives of the elite few." Following Jungian feminists, Nelson posits a "feminine principle" which is simultaneously suppressed and co-opted by patriarchy. This is not the place to enter into an argument about the eternal feminine; but this view of patriarchy has consequences for the discussion of television.

One of the effects of modern media, I believe, is to displace power from the ideological vestiges of a once stable patriarchy, and from the nation-state, and to shift it to the abstract exchange processes of capital: to the circulation of commodities, to consumption, to the displacement of cultural or geographical stability, to the cultivated and reabsorbed desire for realization and change. Patriarchy and capitalism aren't the same thing, they derive from different historical social structures, and perpetrate somewhat different structures of feeling or thought. They overlap and work together, but they can also conflict. A totally static social or mythic structure isn't useful to the circulation of commodities, which works by knowing how to trigger and channel real desire. This conflict gets played out every day on television, and on our bodies.

Nelson describes *this* process clearly; we see the success of advertisers in inscribing the memory of their product in our unconscious and triggering physical responses to it on the shelf.

For her all television is an analogue of this physiological process, a function of patriarchal containment of instinctive processes. But if patriarchal containment is exerted technologically through the inculcation of passive and isolated audience reception, or through neurological brain suppression, why talk about content at all? Is the audience pacified regardless of the content, because of the way we watch? Even families with their sets on constantly may not be watching, or may not be watching the way her analysis assumes. So researchers claim.

Maybe American TV allows for no such distinctions. Then is the conflation of technology, economic function, content, neurology, and politics, a characteristic of American television, or is it technologically inherent in television as a medium wherever it is, whatever it does? What about video? What about Vietnam?

Part of the difficulty is in writing about television at all. Almost anything you say about television and the state are *always* unified in their interests, notwithstanding her arguments, any more than church and state were when religion provided that "ritual containment" now supplied by television, or any more than patriarchy and technology are now, in all instances. One could recognize that television represents and articulates some very contradictory dynamics: nuclear arms (and television's role in defending them) are just as horrifying.

It's not easy to know how much these points

matter. "As Hans Magnus Enzenberger writes, 'You don't have to be Hegel to catch on to the fact that Reason is both reasonable and against Reason.'" (as Nelson writes in her critique of patriarchy). *The Perfect Machine* situates all of the ills of patriarchal capitalism, including the loss of the body and hatred of the feminine, the rise of an object-centred culture, the positing of an ideology of democracy in place of the real thing, in television, which is itself situated as a product of the (American) state. Television might (or might not?) function differently in different places, or at different times: here all television is fundamentally American, which makes cultural nationalism (with respect to television) contradictory and irrelevant. The result is a deterministic view of technology and politics similar to McLuhan's - though unlike McLuhan, Nelson provides a sharp critique of the "global pillage" of American expansionism, and substitutes eclectic negativity for his famous eclectic optimism.

There is an emotional and spiritual pleasure to be gained by conflating patriarchy, technology, and progress, which contributes to *The Perfect Machine's* critical punch. It's full of forceful perceptions. I'm still not convinced that these are all the same or always in cahoots. I'll leave aside the complete passivity and thus irrelevance of audiences. The problem is evident in the book's total conflation of television and the bomb. They may have shared birthdays, mutual corporate interests, and comparable roles in the mythologization of technology. But

exaggerating the interconnectedness of the two is hard-core functionalism, incapable of supplying more supple explanations. For Nelson, every aspect of television is totally determined by television's links to, and service for, the nuclear arms buildup of patriarchal capitalism. This can produce occasional incredulity or other projections.

If *The Perfect Machine* raises critical qualifications, its intentions justify the effect. "Patriarchal capitalism," Nelson argues, "having excluded and repressed the feminine and its wisdom, has substituted global technological systems in its place. . . Television is like the 'good mother': available 24 hours a day, catering to our 'needs', comforting, reassuring and entertaining us, even holding and returning our gaze just like in the mother-child dynamic." Some of these qualifications may arise from the instinct to defend the pleasures of such a good mother. Some refer to questions that cannot be easily resolved. There is no doubt, in either case, that *The Perfect Machine* offers valuable information and leaves powerful effects. Nelson has collected some crucially important historical material that everyone interested in television should know, and has analysed it from the perspective of very contemporary (if sometimes contradictory) critical theory. It is polemical, eloquent, and courageous. It also has a great cover. It should be read.

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