

When I was a kid, we still had ink wells in our school desks—circular holes for holding the ink bottles into which we dipped the nibs of our pens during penmanship practice. I'm not talking about authentically antique times, but about the '40s, not really so long ago, but quantum leaps back in terms of media changes that have happened since. Back then the inception of cheap paperback books had made novels more popular than ever; every newsstand was a kaleidoscopic spectacle—there were hundreds of comic book titles alone. Print was a Big League medium then; McLuhan was just some fledgling egghead.

But anybody with a sniper's eye for observation could have seen it coming, even then: The latest thing in Big Little Books was an edition with a tiny picture at the righthand top of each page; ripple the pages with a quick flick of your thumb and you got a miniature movie. It was a fast cheap thrill, watching one of your favorite comic characters performing a frantic schottische, say, or running the hundred-yard dash in two seconds flat.

In the meantime, movies themselves were doing heyday business. Maybe they weren't better than ever as a Hollywood slogan declared (the worst of them—B westerns—even came in color filter flavors: Grape, lime and orange, which is why I remember a green Johnny Mack Brown), but they were omnipopular. I used to hit all three hometown theaters on a lazy Sunday: Great training for the ultimate picture-machine that lay just around the temporal corner in the early '50s.

And then, *voilà!* Television! TV!

Having non-stop movies in your own living room was the penultimate giddy high, more ethereal than the rush of pink divinity sweets. These exotic movie machines took up residence in

America's living rooms and set about mesmerizing the populace (suckling it, if you prefer Harlan Ellison's metaphor, the glass teat). The nation's roofs bristled with tin stubble. The next thing we knew, the TV dinner made its debut. Consider the fearful import of that day. Dinner became an addendum to viewing. The printed word had taken a sharp one on the chin and was practically on the ropes.

Fast forward now to the present, a time when the preternatural glow of the television screen has achieved the status of a domestic icon. The discriminating cultural voyeur has a set that gets umpteen channels in colors as opulent as the old three-strip Technicolor process, even gets the special movie channels where he or she can see some semblance of real life: People exclaiming, "Get on out of here, you sonofabitch!" instead of, "Get on out of here now!" and men and women gamely simulating the beast with two backs.

A ripe time for the elevation of television to the status of an, um, God forbid, religion. Which brings us to the Couch Potatoes. Couch Potatoes, according to their tract, *Dr. Spudd's Etiquette for the Couch Potato*, are disciples who practice "the esoteric art of prolonged TV viewing." Leave it to California, the Promised Land for every kind of maverick cult and ism, to produce the Couch Potatoes. Chalk it off to the fertile psychic soil of the Golden State.

Made in on a storm-tossed Northern California night. A wind- and rain-rent Toyota on its way to the secret farmhouse where the Couch Potatoes meet and view. Jack Mingo, our guide, in the backseat. Jack, the Couch Potato etiquette expert and the author of the Dr. Spudd pamphlet, is taking us to some Couch Potato rites.

"Where did the name Couch Potatoes come from?" I ask. "Because potatoes have a thousand eyes?"

"Yes, that's one reason," Jack says, "and also because we're tubers. It was a cosmic revelation of one of our elders."

Jack, who grew up watching a 19-inch Dumont, now watches seven or eight sets simultaneously. Simul-viewing is part of the Potato creed, he explains. The more viewing the better—that's the point. "It's a form of transcendental vegetation," Jack points out, "and transcendental vegetation is good for you physically." Elucidating some of the finer points of viewing, he says, "Some Potatoes like to watch up close for a pointillist effect, and some watch out of focus for an art effect."

We pull into the yard of a farmhouse and, in the downpour, hurriedly lug the three TVs we've brought with us to the door. Two of them are Jack's, the third we've brought at his request "so there will be more sets to watch." Inside the farmhouse, two couches full of Potatoes are watching TV, while—surprise!—a TV crew of five mills around in the same living room in the process of taping their watching. It's, if not pandemonium, at least pandeminium. Right now Julie Brannon, from Sacramento's Channel 13, is interviewing some of the Potatoes, who sit powwow style on the floor in front of a couch,