

The New Literacy: From the Alphabet to Television

by John Culkin

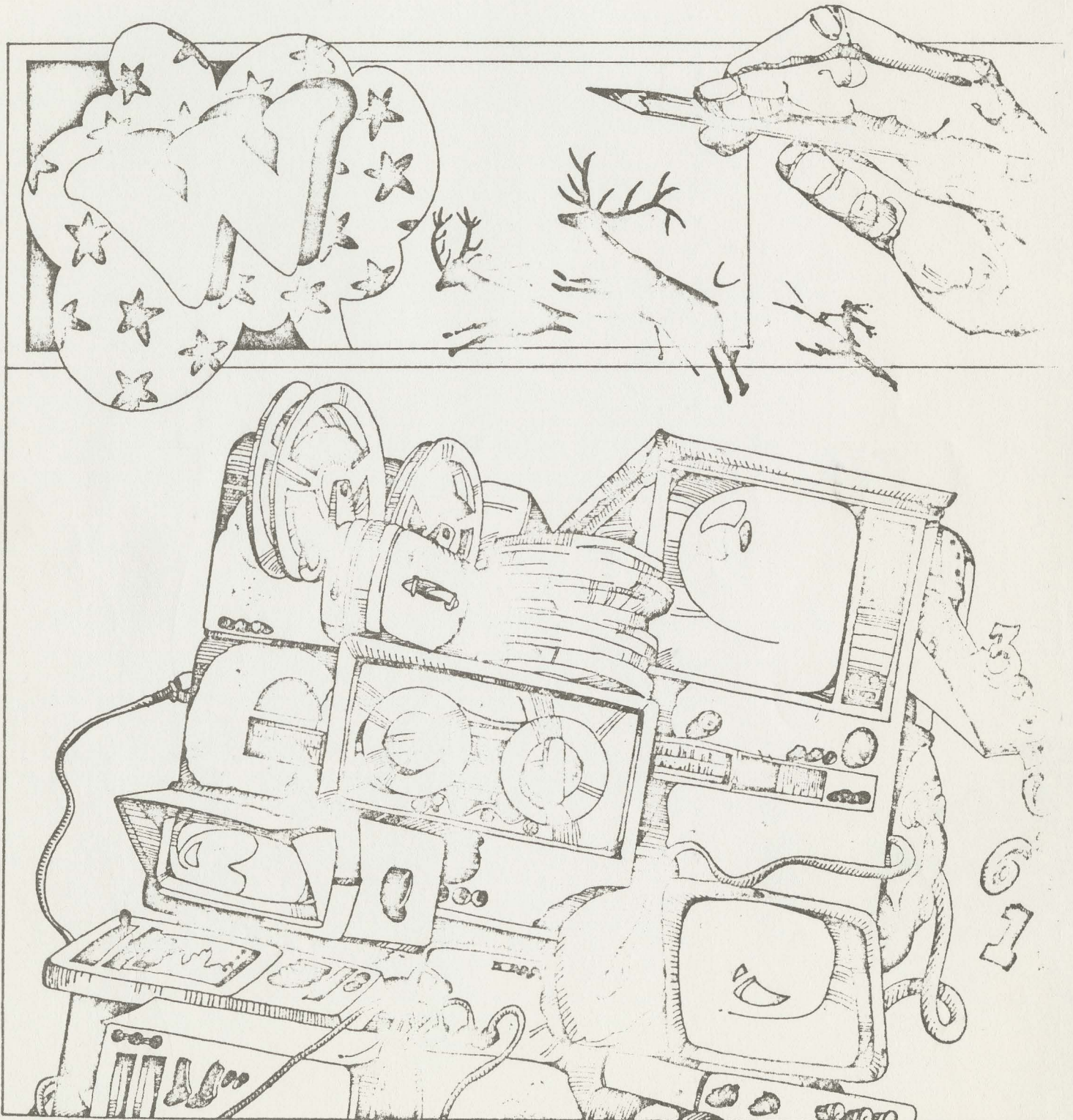


Illustration by Micheal McNelly

It was only the letter W. But when Helen Keller traced it into the hand of Annie Sullivan there occurred one of the most poignant moments in human history. That this child who could not see, could not hear, did not speak should suddenly burst out of herself and into sharing the world with others was a wondrous thing, a miracle generated by her own life force and by the loving skill of her teacher. All courses in human communication should begin with a screening of Arthur Penn's film, *The Miracle Worker*.

Everything is there in microcosm. What distinguishes us as humans is that we are symbol-making and symbol-recording animals. Helen Keller's sensory deprivation allows us to see the whole process stripped down to its essentials, to view it in slow motion as we would the unfolding of a flower in a time-lapse film. No matter how complex the symbol system may become it will always inevitably contain the moment when it touches the senses, brain and emotions of one individual who is invited to respond.

A symbol may be a word, a gesture, an image, a cadence, a film, a novel, a play, a sculpture, or any of the forms of human expression through which we communicate with each other. Without these symbols many contend that we would be incapable of thought, and all agree that symbols are the necessary condition of any form of interpersonal communication or social organization. As humans we live by, through, and sometimes, for symbols. The various languages and media through which we communicate are not merely envelopes carrying any message indifferently; they are active processes which structure the way our senses report to us and the way our thoughts are shaped. Therefore, to understand me I must also understand media.

From the paintings on the cave walls of Altamira to the flickering shadows on the walls of our living rooms — that is the sweep of art, symbol and communication which defines us today. If the distinctive thing about the human species is that we are symbol-making animals, then the distinctive thing about education should be its response to that reality. It is a topic which is highly theoretical, eminently practical, and especially urgent. Our ability to survive, on both the personal and planetary scale, depends on our ability to communicate.

The title of this article describes the full scope of the media terrain. To live intelligently today, to be fully civilized today, requires a knowledge and appreciation of the forms of human communication: speech, painting, dance, print, drama, numbers, music, sculpture, literature, architecture, photography, computers, film, television, holography and the various mixes thereof. For reasons of space, intrinsic importance, and urgency for reform, I will deal with just two of these areas: television, and the alphabet. The television section follows; the part on the alphabet will appear next month.

It is hard to be balanced and fair about television. If we accept E.B. White's postulate (written in 1938!) that "television is going to be the test of the modern world," most observers would judge that the world has failed the test. Yet, television has also provided a global vision of our world,

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documented the great events of our times, brought the arts to much wider audiences, entertained us with occasional brilliance. Most of us can find ten hours a week of quality programming on television. For any other medium that is extraordinary, but for television it seems paltry. There is just so much of it.

The statistics (maybe *sadistics* would be more apt) are staggering: