

Let's be clear. This is about children, freedom and the American way of life. It is about bonding, images, the Supreme Court and Dikembe Mutombo... Got it...? I was up late last night writing about childhood: how it was, how it is and what it might become. Books were piled high, filled with statistics, research, economic and educational forecasts, all pointing to a radically different world than the one we know.

In subtle but profound ways the brains of our children are different from ours. The way they access and process information has changed.

It's 6:15 Saturday morning. Earl Gray tea is steaming next to the Los Angeles Times. A picture of Clarence Thomas, our new Supreme Court justice, is on the front page. Along side, a headline... "Marketing the Athlete as Package." It seems that you don't have to be a superstar to be a superstar these days. Promoters, business agents, marketing agents, publishers, college coaches, recording and video producers, and publicists have eliminated the need for personal achievement. People make millions simply by creating an "image" around guys like Dikembe Mutombo, a 7-foot-2-inch native of Zaire in central African and rookie for the Denver Nuggets.

Dikembe may have skill. He might even prove to be another Michael Jordan. But his ability as an athlete doesn't really matter. This superstar is being packaged, scripted, given an image, one that will appeal to kids and therefore our pocketbooks. Forbes magazine places Michael Jordan's off court earnings at \$13.2 million, four times his basketball salary.

It is all an image, and image is really all that seems to matter.

Suddenly my fifteen-year-old plops down and breaks the spell. "Yaaaa" and "Cool" can be heard between the rustling pages of a sports catalog. He pauses. Tension builds in the air. He looks up. "Hey Pops..." (This is my cue to engage in meaningful conversation, usually at a price.) "Pro Set has Classic Hockey Jerseys for \$ 68.50." I glance. He points. I explain... "it doesn't snow in Los Angeles..." "you're not a wing for the New York Rangers..." "you've never even been on ice skates...!" It's all an image.

I fold the Times back to the front page and there is Clarence Thomas standing next to his wife. One hand is near his crotch the other out stretched, pointing. He is laughing at an unseen world, mouth wide open. There must have been a thousand photographs taken as he became the 106th justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Someone selected this one. It was awkward, undignified and intentional.

The power to select and control the flow of images is the power to shape experience and awareness. This is the driving force behind superstars like Dikembe Mutombo, President Bush and the American economy.

"Focus," I say to myself. "You are working on imagination." So I get up and go for my morning walk. Sunlight is breaking through the darkness. Birds start singing, one and then another. Outside I am calm, almost meditative. "Images, imagination and freedom," a familiar voice whispers. "They are connected and television is the key." The outer world disappears as a flood of impressions suddenly lock together, projections on an inner screen.

Never before have so few possessed the power and technology to influence the consciousness of so many. The sensory and emotional systems that receive these little bits of persuasion are millions of years old. Neurophysiologists have traced the path of pictures from the brain into the cells and found that our bodies react to mental images in much the same way as it reacts to the external world. An image held in the mind can literally affect every cell in the body. Now that is what I call power.

Images are symbols. They are power, whether we are aware of it or not, they cause us to respond. The scary part is all commercial images are created by someone else to impact and shape our behavior. The extraordinary ability to make, transmit and disseminate images has weakened our hold on reality and strengthened the illusionary power of the replica - which has become more evocative, more colorful, more "alive" than life itself.

It requires extraordinary mental alertness to recognize such persuasive and seductive images, that is, to see behind the illusion. This mental clarity has little chance of developing in our present state. If it does at all it will occur usually only after age seven. Young children do not have a chance. The pre-logical child, to use Piaget's terms, accepts everything as possible and therefore "real." You can tell the little darling that it is not real until you are blue in the face. Your words are abstractions. The actual experience remains absolutely real. This is why childhood is so magical and why these images are so powerful. Get the picture?

The most effective delivery system for these little illusions is television. It literally shoots images into the developing brains of our children. Each image, being a counterfeit of actual experience, triggers a physical and emotional response. Very early in life the child learns to accept these in place of actual interaction with the environment, including and most importantly, intimate relationships with other human beings. By seven years old our kids have been exposed to more than 7,000 hours of trance inducing imagery, 80% of which is sexual, violent, highly stimulating action-packed, adult programming.

America has become the first culture in history to accept a substitute, second-hand, mediated image in place of direct experience with the world. This commercial assault is now an economic necessity.

Take advertising out of the cycle and the whole thing comes to a screeching halt. Our economic survival is grounded in consumerism and imagery is the fuel that keeps the whole thing going.

So the plot thickens. Television, far from being "neutral," predetermines who shall use it (only those in power), how they will use it (to concentrate wealth and control), what effects it will have (produce non-discriminating consumers) and what educational and political systems we will have (ones based on spectacle rather than content). With the Kennedy-Nixon debate, politics shifted from content to image. Television has replaced family interaction and now, under the disguise of "educational," the same transformation is occurring in our nation's schools, the last and final outpost of discrimination in our society.

Commercial images fill the environment and flood the brain system. You cannot escape them. International studies demonstrate that what we call thinking does not exist while watching them. The experience of viewing television, regardless of program content, deeply conditions the mind to be inattentive and therefore is the perfect vehicle for propaganda. Make no mistake. Advertisers, politicians, television evangelists and "video educators" understand this and are creatively using the hypnotic nature of the medium. People with choice, people who discriminate, people who look beyond the illusion are not easy to control. They think before they buy, consider issues before they vote.

"So what shall we do," say those behind the image-making machine?

First, let's fill the environment we call childhood with brightly colored, flashing images. This constant supply of external pictures will deceive the brain and short-circuit the natural development of imagination. With all these wonderful images around, who will need imagination anyway? Without the capacity to create inner pictures children will soon become compulsively addicted to the only source of imagery available to them... ours and at a price. They will have no choice but to select from the constant, but limited, supply of image-products we provide... and they will not even be able to "imagine" that other possibilities exist!

For this to work we'll have to limit physical activity and increase the level of stimulation. We'll use shorter scenes, quick cuts, bright colors, music, explosions, sexual violence... you know, the regular tricks. Attention spans will shorten making everything else will seem dull... like words, listening and play. We'll give'em lots of toys that can be acted out but not acted upon. Throw out make-believe and introduce highly organized, competitive adult "games." The whole thing will reduce parent child interaction by at least 40%. Basic language skills will collapse. The trap snaps shut, and we'll have the little darlings for life.

A morning jogger pulls me from this altered state. Can this be, I wonder?

Can television's invisible tentacles suck the creative and critical potential from our children without even the slightest hint of what is actually happening? Like a science fiction thriller of the 1950's, can some alien force be implanting behavior-controlling images deep inside the brains of our children, altering the very structure and function forever? Yes, it is well established among brain researchers that there are certain "optimal" periods of mental development, including those for language and imagination. Once we pass these sensitive periods it's very difficult, some say impossible, to go back. Is this why foreign companies are spending billions to control the flow of images produced by our communication and entertainment industries?

How cunning. How bold... and it's all being masked by music, quick cuts, flashing colors and passionate cries of "educational." Like the body snatchers, it's taking place while innocent children stare and dream the dreams that "others" create.

Suddenly I find myself home again, sitting in front of the ol-word processor. I arrange the papers from the night before, ready to get down to business. I fire up the commuter and pour hot water over my second strainer of tea. Then for one final moment, I explode again.

Imagination.... yes, imagination is our only hope.

Give children the power to create their own imagery and you give them real freedom... freedom to create a new society, to look beyond the surface and delve deeply into the challenges facing our desperate world. Imagination is an open door to innovation and new possibilities. It empowers each and every child to take control over their own life and to literally change the world. The inner power to act upon the outer world is essential for self-esteem and the foundation for all creative and critical thinking.

The spell can be broken.

Our children can be awakened from the 32,000 hypnotic commercials being blasted into their delicate brains each year. But who will save them? How can they resist Pro-Sets' offer for Classic Hockey Jerseys or superstars like Dikembe Mutombo?

The tea is ready and so am I. So let's see... yes, the changing state of childhood, freedom and the American way of life...

To be continued.