3. Read "The Story of Grey Owl" by Colin Ross (p. 327), and write a comparison essay showing the similarities and differences between Kerrigan's and Ross's satiric essays. Focus on technique rather than content.
4. In some cultures, teachers are highly respected. However, the conservative movement to reduce public spending in the late 20th century had a major effect on teachers, as one of the most visible groups of public servants. Research teacher-bashing of the period. Explore the reasons or the results.
5. Write a counterargument to Kerrigan's ten easy steps. For a long paper, try to argue point by point all ten steps. In a short paper, focus on fewer counterpoints.
6. Some people reading this satirical article will find nothing wrong with each of Kerrigan's steps. What are the problems of writing sarcastically?

Toxic Culture Syndrome

Kalle Lasn

If you reduced all of history's best advice on living well in two fridge-magnet-worthy goals, they probably would be: 1) pursue excellence; or 2) pursue balance. 1

In other words, drill down—work with obsessive focus in one area, try to create something new and valuable and lasting; or, go wide—bird-watch or mediate, read good books, tend a garden, raise a kid or two, try to be neighbourly. You know, all the stuff that makes life worth the price if your job itself isn't all that fulfilling. 2

TV-watching doesn't exactly top either list. 3

When you sit down in front of the box—not occasionally, but on a regular basis, as a lifestyle choice (and North Americans watch four hours a day, on average, making TV-watching the lifestyle choice of choice)—you're basically choosing neither path. You're neither rounding yourself out in any appreciable way, nor sharpening some art or skill or craft. You're just dropping out. Chronic TV-watching is like wearing sweatpants in public. It's a public declaration: "I give up." 4

Write this off as a scold if you like, it won't hurt. We TV-turnoff proponents are forever being chided by hip critics as joyless, clueless prudes. But have you ever noticed how these same critics often sound more earnest in their support of television than anyone on the turnoff side does questioning it? 5

There are the predictable hymns to *The Simpsons* and *The Sopranos* (a show that you might not get without an expensive extension to your already expensive cable package), and the oh-but-the-cream-of-TV-is-high-art shtick. It might be true. But "the cream" is an ever-diminishing portion of the grand, bland banquet of commercial programming. And anyway, the cream isn't what most people watch. 6

There are so many great reasons to go on a TV-fast for a week that the case can be won without resorting to the merely good reasons. Jerry Mander (*Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*) pretty much covered it 30 years ago. Besides, it doesn't make sense to talk about TV in isolation these days. 7

The media environment is one big, complicated mass of connected componentry, of which TV is but one element. You can't really pull out one part and hold it to the light. You have to step back far enough to get a 8

picture of how the whole thing works. And when you do that, something interesting and a little bit scary happens. You start to discover things you might have been better off not knowing.

9 Recently, some credible researchers have taken that wide view, and published some powerful studies. Their work suggests that there's something wrong with our hypermediated way of life — that something psychologically corrosive is happening. The strong implication is that not just television and the Internet, but our whole commercial culture is toxic.

10 Social epidemiologist Myrna Weissman of Columbia University published two such studies in 1992 and 1996 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. She found a depression explosion in the United States. Not only are more Americans becoming depressed each year, they're becoming depressed at a younger age, and the severity and frequency of their depression are rising. Each of the last four generations has suffered more depression than its predecessor. Since the Second World War, the overall rate of depression has more than doubled.

11 A more recent study, published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* in 2000, showed more than a doubling of depression in women from 1970 to 1992. Martin Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania psychology professor and head of the American Psychological Association, flatly claims the United States is in the throes of an "epidemic" of clinical depression.

12 What's going on? No one really knows. Probably a complex set of related causes is involved. Could some little-understood virus be making us genetically vulnerable? Or, might it be something in the environment — microwaves, electro-magnetism or a chemical in our food or water?

13 The accelerating pace of life is forcing breakneck adjustments; perhaps that's stressing us out. Or, maybe it's corporate identity branding? Or growing isolation, the "bowling alone" syndrome? Depression is "significantly more common" among people who live alone, reports the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR) — and nightly sessions with Regis don't seem to fill the void.

14 It's been difficult convincing some people that culture itself is one of the prime culprits in our malaise — but the task has been much easier since William Vega's 1998 study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

15 A public-health researcher at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Vega followed recent immigrants from Mexico as they tried to integrate into American society. When they first arrived, they were much better adjusted than the Americans they settled among (they had half the incidence of psychological dysfunction). But as they Americanized, they got sicker and

sicker. After 13 years Stateside, their rates of depression, anxiety and drug problems had almost doubled (to 32 per cent from 18 per cent), to the point where they were now on par with the average American.

16 Mexican-Americans born in the United States got the full brunt of American toxic culture from the get-to, and their still-higher rates of psychological affliction show it: Just about half suffered a disorder, as defined by the standard tests.

17 Mexican-American men born in the United States were five times as likely as recent immigrants to experience a "major depressive episode."

18 Other studies have both replicated Vega's findings and extended them to other ethnic groups. Vega's conclusion: "Socialization into American culture and society [will] increase susceptibility to psychiatric disorders." That's a damning indictment — and hard to refute.

19 Except that it doesn't tell us which part of the culture is toxic: Is it the lack of community and family life? The junk food? The thousands of commercial messages the mass media pumps into our brains every day? The gradual blunting of emotions that comes from growing up in a violent and erotically charged media environment?

20 It could be any or all of these, but a 1992 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* laid some of the blame on the atomizing effect of television and mass communications, which the study's authors suggested "have turned us into a single competitive group while destroying our intimate social networks."

21 Watching TV is the very opposite of a communal exercise — we finish up isolating ourselves, watching nature shows instead of going hiking with a friend, laughing at TV jokes instead of joking around ourselves, drooling over video sex and porn Web sites instead of having sex ourselves.

22 The authors of a Stanford University study released last year found that the Internet also steals time normally spent with other human beings. "If I go home at 6:30 in the evening and spend the whole night sending e-mail and wake up the next morning, I still haven't talked to my wife or kids or friends," the study's principal investigator, Norman Nie, told *The New York Times*. "When you spend your time on the Internet, you don't hear a human voice and you never get a hug." An on-line "community" can't possibly be a substitute for a real community, because the essential things — notably sensual interaction with other people — that make a community a community are absent.

23 David Korten, author of *When Corporations Rule the World*, points the finger at the whole capitalist rat race. He argues that we are all caught to some degree in "a downward spiral of deepening alienation." Our incessant

quest for money widens the gulf between ourselves and our family/community. This separation creates an inner sense of social and spiritual emptiness.

24 Advertisers then get into the act by assuring us that their products can make us happy and whole again. So we go out and buy their stuff, which of course puts us right back at the beginning of the vicious cycle: Our incessant quest for money.

25 Have any studies isolated the toxicity of TV specifically? Actually, yes. In 1999, a team of Harvard researchers looked at chronic TV watching and found it correlated positively with low public engagement, lack of sociability and just general loutishness. It "even correlates positively with 'giving the finger to people,'" said David Campbell, a member of the research team. (The question remains, of course, whether chronic TV watching creates louts, or whether louts tend to watch a lot of TV.)

26 But we all know that quoting from studies is a mug's game. It's like marshalling statistics: You can selectively use them to tell just about any story you want. These studies tend to contradict the prevailing narrative that ever-more electronic stimulation is a good thing, and that mediated living is our inevitable future. Maybe that's why these studies haven't got much play outside scientific journals.

27 But for me and my culture-jamming friends, these statistics mean and explain something—they are fascinating, alarming, revolutionary.

28 Think about the average mental state of the average millennial serf steeped in electronic media: Always, always on the go, with never a quiet time to reflect, persistent low-level anxiety, rapid emotional swings from euphoria to boredom, daily bouts of frustration that threaten to tip into despair.

29 And all the while we have this unshakable conviction that happiness is right around the corner, as soon as the next raise comes or the Hawaiian vacation happens.

30 This is dire stuff. Put enough people who feel this way together, get them sharing the intimate details of their dis-ease, and what you have is a recipe for revolution.

31 Once people start making the connection between advertising/TV/culture and their own mental health, we'll see a politicization of the mental environment and the birth of a movement every bit as potent and far-reaching as the physical environmental movement.

32 As this "environmental movement of the mind" gathers momentum, it will alter the way information flows, the way meaning is produced.

Every bit of our mediated lives will be up for grabs. Parents will teach their kids new rhymes like: "A bit less TV a day keeps the blues at bay." 33

Activists will challenge a TV system that delivers 15 minutes per hour of station hype and ads, and, in the name of democracy and a free marketplace of ideas, they will demand that the six media corporations that now control more than half of all the news and entertainment flows around the planet be broken up into smaller parts. 34

And then, just about everybody will suddenly get into the act, demanding all the media start paring back their usual celebrity gossip and consumer hype and start providing some, well . . . balance. 35

These would be most excellent pursuits. 36

2001

NOTES

Kalle Lasn is the editor of *Adbusters* magazine, which is known for its spoof ads.

Hypermediated When you cannot find words like this one in the dictionary, take it apart and look for obvious root words. The prefix *hyper-* means over and beyond, as in *hypersensitive*. The verb *mediate* implies that something is between people and reality.

Mug's game A foolish or worthless activity.

Culture-jamming Culture jammers are waging a war against corporate culture by interrupting (jamming) messages such as advertising. For example, they can distribute spoof ads or redirect web links.

Dis-ease Notice that with a hyphen this word means not being at ease, rather than disease, although both meanings are appropriate.

COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION

1. Lasn begins his essay by talking about the purpose of life. Is this an effective opening?
2. Do you think life boils down to a choice between pursuing excellence or pursuing balance?
3. Lasn compares chronic TV-watching to wearing sweatpants in public. Is this a good comparison? Why or why not?

4. Lasn says that watching TV is making a choice to drop out of real life. Explain whether you agree or disagree.
5. What arguments does Lasn make about good-quality shows?
6. What is significant about the rates of depression in the United States? What happened to the Mexican Americans as they integrated into American society?
7. What does the author say about statistics? Explain his viewpoint.
8. Why is human interaction so important in people's lives?
9. What does the title mean? Is it effective? Why or why not?
10. Could we eliminate television? What advantages or disadvantages would that bring?
11. What is the thesis of this essay? Is Lasn's argument convincing? Why or why not?
12. On August 14, 2003, much of Ontario and the eastern United States experienced a massive blackout. That evening people came out of their homes and socialized with neighbours they hardly knew. How does that event support Lasn's argument?

LITERARY TECHNIQUES

Parenthesis Commonly identified by its round brackets, parenthesis has several uses in writing. It can be used to insert extra information in a sentence. For example, Lasn clarifies the psychological status of the Mexican immigrants by saying "they were much better adjusted than the Americans they settled among (they had half the incidence of psychological dysfunction)" (paragraph 15). Parenthesis is also used to give alternative names, such as acronyms; for example, "the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR)." Furthermore, writers use parenthesis to add an aside: "There are the predictable hymns to *The Simpsons* and *The Sopranos* (a show that you might not get without an expensive extension to your already expensive cable package)" (paragraph 6).

Emphasis A speaker can stress a word (in other words, say it louder, longer, and higher) in a sentence to emphasize it. Writers, however, rely on a variety of other techniques. One is the single-sentence paragraph (such as paragraph 3 in Lasn's article), which stands out because of its brevity, just as a short sentence is more emphatic when placed after longer sentences. Another method is the parenthetical dash to set off some words. For instance, Lasn states: "That's a damning indictment—and hard to refute" (paragraph 18). This would be a grammatical sentence without the dash, but the emphasis would be lost.

Phrases as adjectives Lasn uses a phrase as an adjective twice in this article: "fridge-magnet-worthy goals" (paragraph 1) and "oh-but-the-cream-of-TV-is-high-art shtick" (paragraph 6). Notice that for these types of structures, the adjectives are connected by hyphens. Writers do this to coin new phrases and to get the reader's attention. Sometimes, however, a phrasal adjective can get too unwieldy. For instance, Lasn's first example is more successful than the second.

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay refuting Lasn's argument.
2. Read "Where Do the Children Play?" by Deborah Banks (p. 228). Where do Lasn's and Banks's arguments overlap? Write a comparison paragraph on the two authors' viewpoints.
3. Take a look at the *Adbusters* website. Do you support this type of ad spoofing? Is it effective? Important? Why?
4. Look up "culture jamming" on the Internet and write a report on what the activity entails.
5. Choose two TV programs, one that would be considered "the cream" and one that would be considered junk television. Write a review comparing the two programs, highlighting what makes one "good" while the other is not.
6. Explain the title of Lasn's article and show how it is apt in relation to the content.