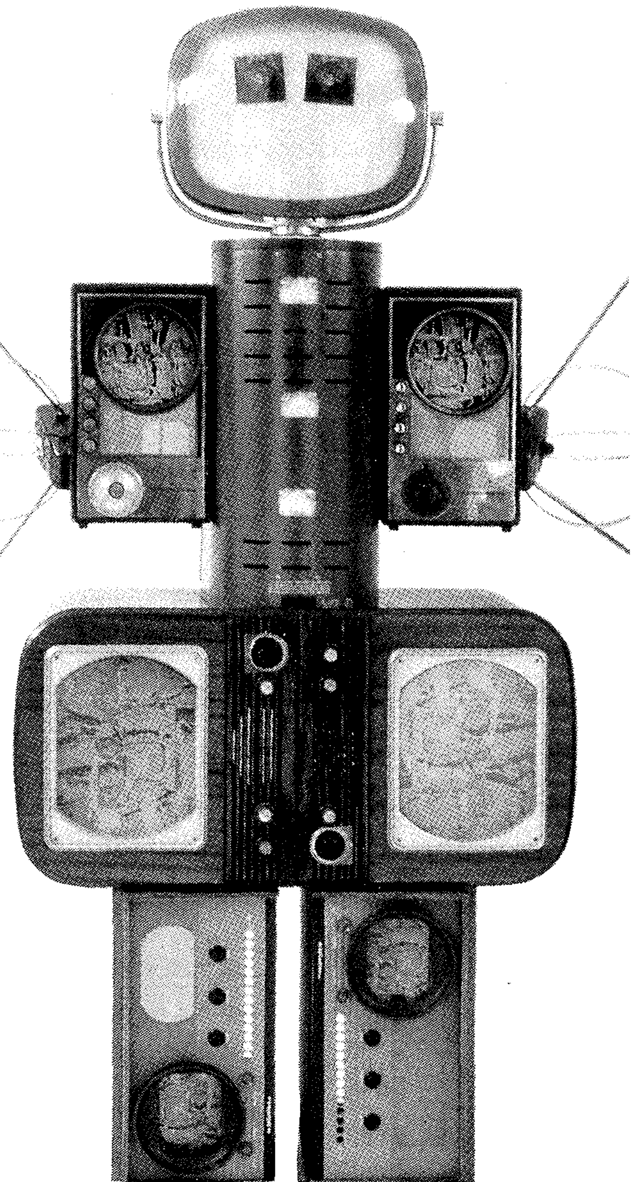
TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

"I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts," Orson Welles once observed. "But I can't stop eating peanuts." Like it or not, most other Americans are just as hooked. As our three contributors demonstrate, no other single force since World War II has done more to reshape American society than the Tube. Television is so pervasive, Douglas Gomery shows, that defining its influence is as difficult as drawing a circle around the air we breathe. Todd Gitlin proposes that television is America's school for morals and manners, one that has reeducated our national character into something it never was before. Frank McConnell, in cautious defense of TV, suggests that its critics more often than not exaggerate the hazards of the medium in order to advance their own social agendas. Television meanwhile grows more and more like the late Orson Welles—every day a bit bigger than it was the day before.



Nam June Paik's Family of Robot: Mother *(1986)*

AS THE DIAL TURNS

BY DOUGLAS GOMERY

It was a defining moment in American history, albeit one run over and over, like an episode of "Star Trek." Into the tidy living room of a young family's suburban home, usually just days before Christmas, came the electronic marvel. The old mahogany radio set, already seeming a bit antique, was shoved into a corner, and two hefty deliverymen struggled to position the bulky new console across from the couch, between the easy chairs. Everyone gathered around as the first test pattern came on. Then the fun began—perhaps with giggling children on "Howdy Doody" or the Top 40 beat of "Dick Clark's American Bandstand" or the stars on "Ed Sullivan's Toast of the Town" or the magnificent coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. Thus was a new age born.

Pictures flowing through the air. That miracle had been much sought after and anticipated since movies and radio transformed American popular culture during the first quarter of the 20th century. And like those two earlier marvels of mass communication, and with many times more power, television has so refashioned and reshaped our lives that it is hard to imagine what life was like before it.

During the Great Depression and World War II, families gathered in crowded city apartments or in the parlors of distant farms to listen to the radio. But TV was instantly and unalterably linked with midcentury America's rising suburban ideal. Indeed, certain TV offerings, such as "Ozzie and Harriet," became synonymous with the ideal. Along with closely cropped lawns, two cars in the driveway, and a single earner so well paid that no one else needed to work, TV became a symbol of the "good life" in modern America.

The TV boom was delayed first by the war and then for several years after 1948 by what might be called "technical difficulties." By 1948, the number of stations in the United States had reached 48, the cities served 23, and sales of TV sets had passed sales of radios. Coaxial cables also made possible fledgling networks, relaying live shows (there was no tape then) from the East to the Midwest. But as more and more stations went on the air it became clear that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) had not allowed enough geographic separation between stations to prevent serious interference. The agency froze TV-station allotments and redrew the maps. It was only on April 14, 1952—with the FCC's Sixth Report and Order—that TV as we know it first began to flow to all sections of the United States.

So rapid and complete was TV's friendly takeover of the American imagination that when Lucille Ball gave birth to her second son the "same" night in January 1953 that her Lucy Ricardo character on "I Love Lucy" gave birth to "Little Ricky," it caused a national sensation, including an article in *Life* and a cover story in *TV Guide*, itself newly born.

Ubiquity may be the medium's leading characteristic. In 1950 far less than 10 percent of Americans owned sets. Those were folks lucky enough to have the $500 that a black-and-white receiver cost at a time when $3,000 was considered a good yearly salary and $5,000 would buy a splendid Cape Cod in Levittown. But TV's allure was powerful. By 1955 about two-thirds of the nation's households had a set; by the end of the 1950s there was hardly a home in the nation without one. By 1961, when Newton Minow, the newly appointed chairman of the FCC, proclaimed television a "vast wasteland," there were more

Parents and children seated around a television set became, during the 1950s, an American icon for prosperity and wholesome family values.

homes in the United States with TV than with indoor plumbing. In less than a generation, the TV set had gone from being an expensive, somewhat experimental gadget to a home appliance considered more indispensable than the toaster or washing machine. With the possible exception of the videocassette recorder (VCR) in the 1980s, no other electronic gadget has been adapted so widely and with such alacrity.

Today, 99 percent of all households possess at least one TV, and most have two or more. There are nearly 200 million sets in use. More American homes have TVs than have telephones. (One study of the tiny minority of people who spurn TV found that the archetypal naysayer is a university professor of literature, wedded professionally to the printed word.) We take them to the beach, plug them into our automobiles, and even strap them on our wrists when we go jogging. Now a company called Virtual Vision promises to make TV even more omnipresent. Its $900 wraparound TV eyeglasses can be worn anywhere; they project an image that appears to float about 10 feet in front of the wearer.

In the space of only a few decades, watching TV seems to have become one of life's essential activities—along with eating, sleeping, and working. TV has become the Great American Companion. Two-thirds of Americans regularly watch television while eating dinner. The A. C. Nielsen Company, which monitors sets in a carefully selected nationwide sample of 4,000 households, regularly reports that the TV is on about seven and a half hours a day—virtually all of the time remaining if one subtracts eight hours for sleep and eight hours for work. Collectively, the nation tunes in to a staggering 250 billion hours per year. If one assumes that the average hourly wage is $10, that time is worth *$2.5 trillion.* If we could collect just $1 per hour we could wipe out the yearly federal budget deficit.

Figuring out who is actually watching the tube and when he or she is doing so is tricky. Nielsen's method shows when a set is on and what channel it is tuned to, but many studies have found that during much of the time the TV is on, no one is watching. Researchers have developed People Meters to try to determine who is watching, but these gadgets rely on viewers to "punch in" when they sit down in front of the set and "punch out" when they leave—hardly a foolproof method. As best as researchers can determine, the average person "watches" about four hours per day, varying

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by season (more in winter, less in summer), age (kids and senior citizens view the most), and race (African Americans and Hispanics watch more than whites).* When are the most Americans watching? Prime time (8 to 11 P.M., Eastern Standard Time) on Sunday nights in the depths of winter.

TV is one of the things that bring us together as a nation. Thanks to television, the Super Bowl has become our greatest national spectacle, watched in at least 40 million homes. (By contrast, Ross Perot's first "town meeting," which was wildly successful compared to other political broadcasts, was watched in only 11 million homes.) Such peak moments generate mind-boggling revenues. Advertisements during the 1993 Super Bowl, which NBC sold out a month before kickoff, cost in the neighborhood of $28,000 per second. Nevertheless, because virtually the entire nation assembles to watch this single game in January, advertisers such as Pepsi, Budweiser, and Gillette gladly ante up, and others have found it a perfect showcase for major new products. It was during Super Bowl XVIII in January 1984 that Apple introduced the world to the Macintosh personal computer. (The Los Angeles Raiders beat the Washington Redskins, 38 to 9.)

TV is a multibillion-dollar business. Sales of new sets alone come to about $7 billion per year. Advertising revenues amount to more than $30 billion, still collected in large part by the major broadcast networks—ABC, NBC, CBS, and, since 1986, Fox. Prime-time ads generate some $4 billion, and billions more come from morning, soap opera, news, and late-night offerings. Cable TV in 1992 received ad revenues in excess of $3 billion, and another $2 billion came from subscribers who paid for the privilege of watching its millions of advertisements.

Buying and selling television shows was a $25-billion business last year, principally done by the major Hollywood studios. TV shows, from the latest episodes of "Roseanne" to 1960s-vintage series such as "Bewitched," are also one of the nation's biggest exports. If once it was said that the sun never set on the British Empire, now it never sets on "I Love Lucy." The U.S. trade in sitcoms and soap operas shaves some $4 billion per year off America's chronic trade deficit, a contribution exceeded only by that of the aerospace industry.

The TV industry itself is split in two. As a result of antitrust policy decisions during the Nixon administration, the networks are barred from owning Hollywood studios, and the studios are barred from owning networks—with one famous exception. To promote the development of a fourth network, the FCC in 1986 allowed Fox to create a limited TV network while owning a major Hollywood studio, Twentieth Century-Fox. As a rule, the networks can only show (not own) TV's valuable series. These complex rules are now being phased out and should be gone by the end of the century. Then we are likely to see a spate of mergers joining Hollywood studios and the TV networks.

Despite all the hype and hoopla that attend its doings, TV is a mouse among industries, a relatively small collection of enterprises whose earnings, even if lumped together, are still smaller than those of either Exxon or General Motors alone. TV's cultural influence likewise tends to be exaggerated. The medium is so pervasive that whenever critics confront a vexing social problem, they blame TV. Crime on the rise? It must be TV's fault. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores dropping? Blame the boob tube. Now it is said that TV-induced passivity is literally killing us. A recent study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion* concluded that couch potatoes are twice as likely to develop high levels of serum cholesterol as those who rarely watch television.

Our anxiety about TV increases as the nation changes. More and more children in

*African Americans and Hispanics watch more TV than whites because they have lower incomes, on average. TV is, after all, just about the cheapest form of entertainment available. Only as one gets richer can one afford the luxury of fancy meals, nights at the theater, and other forms of diversion.

TV in America

There are more TV sets in the United States than there are bathtubs or showers. There are more American homes with television than with indoor plumbing.

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An average American living to age 65, at present levels of TV viewing, will have spent nine years of his life watching TV.

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When children aged four to six were surveyed, "Which do you like better, TV or your daddy?" 54 percent said "TV."

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Why is there no Channel 1 on your television set?

The FCC took the frequency away from TV broadcasters in May 1948 for use by the military.

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Twenty-seven million people watched the first televised presidential inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower on January 20, 1953. It was upstaged, though, the night before, when 44 million people tuned in for the birth of "Little Ricky" Ricardo on "I Love Lucy."

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A 1979 Roper Poll of 3,001 couples showed that the leading cause of marital disputes was disagreement about which TV shows to watch.

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If you were guilty of every crime shown on American TV in just one week, you'd go to jail for 1,600 years. Unless you had Perry Mason for your attorney.

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this divorce-ridden society watch TV unsupervised. "Behold every parent's worst nightmare: the six-year-old TV addict," says *Time* magazine—who takes Bart Simpson as a role model, one might add.

Violence on television is probably the public's main concern. A recent Times-Mirror survey found that 80 percent of adults think that television violence is harmful to society. More than 1,000 studies have been carried out to search for links between TV viewing and violent behavior. Under pressure from Congress, the networks recently agreed to provide warnings before their most violent offerings. One mother declared in the *Washington Post* recently: "I find myself curiously unmoved by television producers covering themselves with a First Amendment flag. As far as I'm concerned, they have abrogated their rights to freedom of speech by being so resolutely unconcerned about the impact of what they put on television. That includes the 100,000 acts of violence . . . that the average child will have watched by the end of elementary school."

In 1992 the American Psychological Association concluded that televised violence can sometimes stir aggressive behavior in certain kinds of disturbed viewers. Most researchers probably would concur. But this is a narrow case. Whether video violence has a significant impact on the general public is quite another matter, and the pile of studies published so far has not produced a consensus. It is clear that heavy viewers of televised violence are more likely to engage in aggressive behavior than are light viewers, all other things being equal. But it may be that people with a predisposition toward violence are more likely to watch action/adventure programing to begin with, not that watching makes them become violent.

To regard some of the more extreme claims about the impact of TV skeptically is not to dismiss the challenge posed by the medium. By the time an average American child enters the first grade, she or he has seen at least 5,000 hours of TV and by all accounts has fallen in love with the medium. New video diversions soon appear, such as Nintendo (which has sold an astonishing 25 million machines in the United States). According to a 1991 National Assessment of Educational Progress study, nearly three of every four fourth graders admit to watching more than three hours of TV every day. By the end of

high school, teens have seen some 19,000 hours of TV—and an equal number of televised homicides. We do not need hundreds of studies to know that the time children spend spaced out in front of the tube is time they are not devoting to homework or baseball or daydreaming or any number of other more worthwhile activities.

There are legitimate fears about the effects of TV on young children. But once children learn how to use TV—how to pick acceptable shows to watch, for example, or to substitute videotapes when nothing good is on—only excess seems to prove harmful. Putting a positive spin on this, critics such as Ellen Wartella, dean of the College of Communication at the University of Texas, argue that the accumulated "effects research" suggests that classes in "visual literacy" for the young are a better bet than more radical measures to control what is aired.

TV Around the World

The Japanese watch more TV than anyone (U.S. viewers are a close second). In Japan, the national TV craze is called ichioko-so-hakuchi-ka *or "the complete idiotization of 100 million people."*

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Iceland, not generally considered a repressive country, has a TV-free day every Thursday "to reduce disruption to family life."

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Sesame Street *is so popular in Pago Pago that the government once considered naming the island's main street after it.*

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Bonanza *is the most widely syndicated TV series. It has 250 million viewers in 85 countries.*

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A UNESCO Study found that TV-owners worldwide sleep an average of 13 minutes less per night than non-owners.

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TV was banned in South Africa until 1975. The government was afraid it might threaten the precarious apartheid system there. Even as late as 1988, TV sets cost double what they would elsewhere to keep them out of the homes of black citizens.

Technology, meanwhile, is rapidly changing the very nature of the television challenge. In the very near future, for example, it even promises a partial solution—a technological fix—to the problem of children's excessive TV watching. Soon consumers will be able to purchase digital TV sets that can be selectively "deprogrammed," allowing adults to block certain programs from their children's eyes and ears.

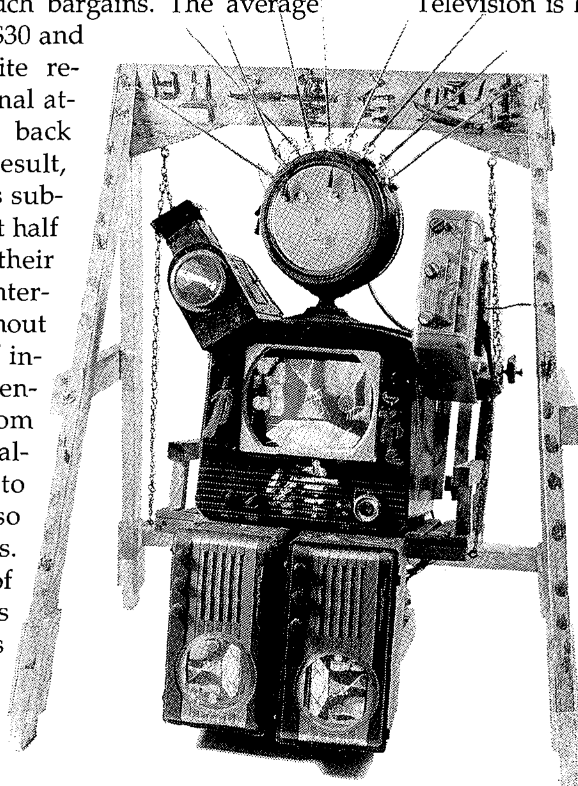
For 30 years after the FCC's landmark Sixth Report and Order, TV changed very little. During the last 10 years, however, it has been transformed. Roughly two of three households are now connected to cable television, and that proportion is steadily growing. Cable households have access, on average, to 30 networks rather than the traditional three. A generation ago, five of six viewers tuned into one of the Big Three networks; today only three of six do. The medium, in other words, is now more diverse. And we have changed not only what we watch but the way we watch it. Armed with remote controls, another relatively new piece of technology, viewers now "graze" or "surf" across cable's never-ending channels, from all-documentary formats (Discovery) to channels aimed at African Americans (Black Entertainment Network), from an alphabet soup of movie channels (AMC, TNT, TBS, and HBO) to all-weather and all-consumer news. We are promised all-crime, fashion, military, book, and (horror of horrors!) game-show channels in the near future. We can even shop by cable TV—and we do so to the tune of $2.2 billion annually. Soon, in all likelihood, we will do our banking and pay our bills through TV as well.

It was not only cable that overthrew the Big Three and transformed the TV experience. During the 1980s, the VCR took America by storm, occupying only one of every five house-

holds in 1985 but four of five today. Last year Americans rented an amazing 3.5 billion videos, which works out to an average of one a week for each household. Videotape rentals are now a $12-billion industry.

Impossible as it may seem, more technological change is coming. By the end of the century we will have digital high-definition television with movie-quality images, and in the next century, if not sooner, we will acquire the ability to summon (for a fee) an electronic newspaper on our screens and search through the biggest libraries in the world for information.

Already, these far-reaching changes have injected an undemocratic element into what was once in many ways a most democratic medium. Everybody could watch Neil Armstrong walk on the moon or Richard Nixon tender his resignation. That was because a TV set by the early 1970s cost only a third as much as the first '50s sets had. Cable TV offers no such bargains. The average monthly bill is $30 and climbing, despite recent congressional attempts to roll back prices. As a result, poor Americans subscribe to cable at half the rate of their wealthier counterparts, going without a whole slew of information and entertainment, from C-SPAN to local-access TV to ESPN. Many also go without VCRs. Add in the cost of videotape rentals and new gadgets (such as VCR Plus) and watching TV can suddenly become a $1,000-per-year habit.



It is typical of the American attitude toward TV that, much as we may criticize the medium, we are also troubled by the fact that some Americans do not have equal access to it. Television has become the greatest entertainment and information machine of all time. Love it or leave it, we all—rich and poor, the powerful and the underclass—use it to educate ourselves in various ways and to define a common culture. Nielsen's Top 10 tells us what is "in." "Murphy Brown" elicits the wrath of former Vice President Dan Quayle. "Monday Night Football" defines the quintessential male-bonding night at the bar. "Jeopardy" teases Ph.D. candidates away from their dissertations to see if they are really smart. "Sixty Minutes," the single show virtually everyone agrees is entertaining and enlightening, has become as a consequence the most popular program in TV's history—and surely the one we all hope never to be caught on.

Television is like the fabled uncle who came to dinner and never left: It is difficult finally to decide how we feel about it. In one recent survey people were asked how much money it would take to convince them to give up TV for a year. Almost half refused for anything less than $1 million! After a half-century-long love-hate relationship, we are just not sure if the story of TV in America will have a happy ending. But we do know that TV—probably in some advanced version we have yet to imagine, and surely not as all-consuming or as controlling as its current critics believe it to be—will be forever with us.

TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

FLAT AND HAPPY

BY TODD GITLIN

Today, there is no getting away from the electronic hearthland. Commentators may routinely misinterpret one of the more widely circulated statistics about television—that the average household has a set *on* more than seven hours per day—to mean that the average person *watches* that amount. (It is no mere pedantic detail to note that a set being *on* does not mean that it is being *watched*.) But even the correct figure of four hours a day is nothing to trifle with. Television watching is second only to work as the primary activity, or inactivity, that Americans undertake during their waking hours. One sign of how thoroughly television has been assimilated, even among the more literate, is that it has become a sign of inverse snobbery to proclaim affection for a pet series. Whole generations of popular-culture scholars now unashamedly rhapsodize about the stellar qualities of their favored habits.

The nation has assimilated television. Has it, then, been assimilated *to* television? More to the point, is television now a dominant force in shaping the character of Americans? Many analysts have argued the affirmative, even though they disagree on whether this is for the good. Television, it seems, has served as an instrument for the nationalization of American culture, furthering tolerance while eroding ethnocentrism and other forms of parochialism. For good reason did Edward R. Murrow choose to inaugurate the first coast-to-coast broadcast, on November 18, 1951, with a split screen showing the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge simultaneously.

It was no small blow against white supremacy, during the 1950s and 1960s, to bring into the living rooms of white America images of the brutal treatment of blacks, nor for that matter, during the 1980s, to convey to a white audience that professional-class blacks such as Bill Cosby were effectively identical to their white counterparts. In *No Sense of Place* (1985), Joshua Meyrowitz argues that television has brought to public view the "backstage" of American social life, educating the public to see through appearances and cultivating a knowledgeable skepticism even while contributing to the spread of egalitarian sentiments. On the other hand,

conservative critics such as Michael Medved and Richard Grenier suggest that television promotes adversarial attitudes, incites mindless rebellion, and cultivates a corrosive attitude toward social responsibility. The interesting thing is that both viewpoints presume that the impact of television is considerable, rather uniform, and, on balance, subversive of established authority.

The presumption in all these arguments is that television operates in a space left vacant by the demise of traditional authority. Some, such as George Gerbner, former dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, go so far as to call television a "religion." Others, more subtly, see television purveying identities, especially for the young, in a fluid, unsettled society where neither work, religion, nor family is stable or compelling enough to do the traditional job. Has an entire culture become, in the words of novelist William Gass, "nothing more than the darkening cross-hatch where the media intersect"? The smothering hypothesis, anticipated by novelist Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), has a dire appeal. It is easy to see why. Television not only looms large and loud in every private domain, its pervasiveness transcends that of all previous systems of communication.

Indeed, to call television a medium of communication misses much of the point. It is somewhat like calling a family a system of communication. Family therapists do so, but their descriptive power falls short of Tolstoy's. It might carry us somewhat further to say that television is a medium of cultural power. What happens on, or through, television—the images, topics, and styles that circulate through living rooms—does proceed from headquarters outward to take up a space in the national circuitry. But to speak of television as if it were nothing but a sequence of images is to miss a crucial feature of the machinery, namely *how much of it there is and how easily it enters the house.*

To think of American life today without television taxes the imagination. One extraordinary social fact about television is that it is both ubiquitous and, on the scale of social goods, disappointing. Television has the virtues of being cheap and accessible, and does not require much engagement—it is therefore most popular among children, the old, the poor, and the less educated. Society's most powerless receive television as a consolation prize. Even many of these, and most other people most of the time, think watching it an activity not so much valuable in itself as preferable, perhaps, to other choices near at hand. Yet, in several social experiments, many people have refused large sums of money for volunteering to do without television for one month. But even these diehards, like most people, rank television low among their pleasures. It is an enjoyment that turns out to be not so enjoyable after all. *What are you doing? Nothing, just watching television. How was the program? OK.* Watching television is something to do, but it is also and always *just* watching television.

The low status of TV watching obscures, however, a deep truth about the peculiar place of television in American life. Consider that in most households the television set itself has prestige. True enough, as the price of low-end televisions came down and households acquired more than one, the large-screen console television lost some of its majesty. Still, especially in the households of the working class, and probably in the majority of American homes, the set remains a centerpiece of the living room—to judge from the framed photos, trophies, and other esteemed objects surveying the room from the top of the set—something of a conspicuous secular shrine. It takes up, one might say, prime space. In

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this respect, the TV is an extension of the piano that was, in earlier decades, a virtually mandatory certificate of status in the parlor of actual or aspiring middle-class families. Members of the working class buy console sets and display them proudly in their living rooms, while members of the professional class buy high-tech large screens for their living rooms, keeping their smaller, simpler sets sequestered, for private use, in their bedrooms.

In all these households television is, I suggest, more than an amusement bank, a national bulletin board, a repertory of images, an engine for ideas, a classification index, a faithful pet, or a tranquilizer. It is all of these, in some measure. But television's largest impact is probably as a school for manners, mores, and styles—for repertories of speech and feeling, even for the externals and experiences of self-presentation that we call personality. This is not simply because television is powerful but also, and crucially, because other institutions are less so.

A "Saturday Night Live" skit from 1976 portrays Nixon and Kissinger as a pair of comical idiots. No public figure, many critics contend, emerges from TV exposure with his or her authority intact.

As work, family, and religion lose their capacity to adumbrate how a person is expected to behave, television takes up much of the slack. In the working world, for instance, the focus of employment has shifted during the 20th century from the craft itself ("I am a tailor") to the paycheck and the status ("I am an Assistant Grade II" or alternately "I am a working stiff"). Religious belief, while prevalent, is awkwardly coupled with the roles that most people act out in their daily lives, so that, even for most believers, "I am a Christian" is no longer a very clear badge of identity. Moreover, divorces, remarriages, stepparents, and live-in arrangements increasingly characterize family life, so that one (or one's subself) belongs to more than one family at a time. In this setting, where primary identities have slackened and people are members of many "clubs" at once, Americans look to popular culture for ways of identifying themselves. Consider, for example, the personal ads in local newspapers or magazines. Fifteen years ago you might have read, "Woody Allen seeks his Annie Hall"; today it will more likely be, "L. A. Law type looking for Vanna White."

It is reasonable to suspect that, at the least, television teaches people how they should talk, look, and behave—which means, in some measure, that it teaches them how they should think, how they should feel, and how, perchance, they should dream. Ideologically minded critics of the Right (those writing for the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, for example) or of the Left (Noam Chomsky, for example), obsessed with the power of ideas over benighted citizens, have distracted us from recognizing the deepest workings of television because their own rational bias impoverishes their social imagination. They cannot imagine that there might be any other reason for wrong-headed policies than the misinformation of influential publics.

In speaking of the cultural power of television, I am referring not simply to its impact on knowledge. For decades, researchers have published literally thousands of studies of the effects of watching television. As a result, many things can be said to be "known" about

"the effects of television." But all the hard-nosed studies qualify as hard-nosed—and therefore receive funding—only insofar as their scope is limited to specific, measurable effects on distinct behaviors and conditions such as buying, voting, aggression, and sexual arousal; or, more ambitiously, on ideas, attitudes, perceptions, and the salience of particular concerns in people's minds. Indeed, the very notion of "effects" suggests the sort of before-and-after controlled experiment that can be done, or simulated, only when the effect under scrutiny is demarcated precisely.

What interests me are more elusive and arguably more important matters: the tone and temper of American culture. Intuitively, one senses that the transformations of television in the past half century are deeply implicated in the way Americans feel. Of course, all cultures change, none more than America's. (If we think of technological innovations alone, and make a rough estimate of the cultural changes that followed, it is hard to imagine any decade to compare with 1895-1905, which brought the automobile, the airplane, the motion picture, and radio.) But the forms of cultural change in recent decades are remarkable. Distinctions that were formerly sacrosanct—urban/suburban, northern/southern, public/private, national/local, naughty/nice—have blurred. To borrow Joshua Meyrowitz's terms, themselves borrowed from the late sociologist Erving Goffman, the frontstage world of formal American life is more tolerant—there is a growing degree of routine sexual and racial acceptance. Gay figures pass across the evening news without scandal; Oprah Winfrey, Arsenio Hall, and Whoopi Goldberg have their talk-show billings; suburban white teens thrill to African-American rappers. Meanwhile, the backstage world of ordinary relationships is nastier. From domestic battering to automatic cursing and the rudeness of motorists—note the decline in directional signaling over the last few decades—a harshness has settled into the texture of everyday life. It seems to me that television has furthered these changes—without having, all by itself, devised or caused them.

I am struck, in particular, by the growth of "knowingness," a quality of self-conscious savvy that often passes for sophistication. Knowingness is not simply access to or a result of knowledge; knowingness is a state of mind in which any particular knowledge is less important than the feeling *that* one knows and the pleasure taken in the display of this feeling. Knowingness is the conviction that it is possible to be in the know; it is the demonstration that one hasn't been left behind, that one is hip, with it, cool. It is a mastery of techniques by which to reveal that one has left the side show and made it into the big tent. The opposite of knowingness is unabashed provincialism, naiveté, complacent straightforwardness. This provincialism and straightforwardness have been eroded within the American culture of recent decades—with the help of television.

Two generations ago, "simple people," morally straightforward types along with rural and other uneducated types, were amply represented on network television. There were the staunch, steady, plainspoken western figures of "Gunsmoke" and "Have Gun, Will Travel." There were the rural butts enacted endearingly by Red Skelton and the apparently artless working-class heroes of "The Honeymooners." There were the unself-conscious rubes who served as Groucho Marx's foils on "You Bet Your Life" as well as their offensive racist equivalents on "Amos 'n' Andy." On all these shows, sophisticates got to show off by distinguishing themselves from buffoons. The conflict between the two often drove the plot.

As late as the 1960s, despite the decline of the western, rural settings and folksy types were still on display in "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," and "The Andy Griffith Show." As I explain in my book *Inside Prime Time* (1983), these shows were canceled in the early 1970s, despite their commercial success, when the incoming president of CBS made the

decision to seek younger, more urban, more affluent viewers with "sophisticated" series such as "All in the Family," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and "M*A*S*H." Later in the 1970s, a few rural revivals succeeded: "The Waltons," "Little House on the Prairie," and "The Dukes of Hazzard." One running theme in many of these programs was that deviousness got its comeuppance at the hands of moral earnestness—though of course the comeuppance was never final, deviousness getting a new lease in the next installment.

But television's most affectionate renditions of plain folks in small-town America were delivered to the West Virginia hollows and Nebraska farms just as the hollows and farms were emptying out. The volunteers who troop onto the contest shows, quiz shows, and dating games today are vastly more media-savvy than the bumpkins who took their chances with Groucho on "You Bet Your Life" two generations ago. Today's hopeful contestants still submit to teasing, but unlike Groucho's foils, they can also tease back. They know how to banter without skipping a beat. They may still be shocked by Oprah's transsexual priest, Sally Jessy's teary molester, or Donahue's tortured immigrant, but boy, do they have a story for you, too. In the talk show studios as well, spectators in the live audience wear appraising looks. Ordinary fans may be thrilled by the presence, the sheer aura, of their stars, but they are also—as Yale sociologist Joshua Gamson shows in his forthcoming *Claims to Fame*—able to stand back and chat knowingly about the techniques with which publicists go about the business of manufacturing glamour and fame.

I do not want to suggest that television has merely replaced the plainspoken down-home characters and bucolic settings of the older shows. Literary critics, preoccupied with "text," have led cultural analysts to concentrate on representation—on the content of the programs. Many who criticize television criticize it because they take its representations as categorical and dislike the way various categories are represented. Thus conservatives have argued that when businessmen are treated as "crooks, conmen, and clowns" (to quote the title of a probusiness pamphlet of the 1980s), they inspire public contempt for business; likewise feminists have argued that when a woman character is victimized by violent crime, the representation teaches women that their role is to play the victim. Such critics tend to assume of television the principle, *Monkey see, monkey do*, and they also assume, rather as in Stalinist Russia, that characters must be exemplary in the manner prescribed by the critic. But if television exercised influence simply by spurring emulation, the popular rural comedies of the early 1970s should have led to rural resettlement.

The content of television is not simply one story after another. In fact, to think of television as nothing more than a sum of stories is like thinking of a lawn as nothing more than a sum of blades. The very significance of the units derives from their membership in the ensemble. As the British critic Raymond Williams pointed out, one remarkable thing about television is the sheer profusion of stories it delivers. No previous generation of human beings has been exposed to the multitude of narratives we have come to take for granted in our everyday lives. The impact of each one may be negligible, but it hardly follows that the impact of the totality is negligible. Moreover, the profusion of stories changes each component story. The stories exist in multiplicity: Their significance bleeds from one story into another.

Most people watch *television*, not discrete narrative units. The flow of television is both *rapid* and *interrupted*. A story begins with credits. A few minutes of story take place. The story is interrupted for commercials—probably more than one per commercial break. There may be previews of news bulletins, promotions, previews of other shows. The story resumes. There are more commercials, more announcements. The story resumes. And so on. At the hourly or half-hourly station break, there may be trailers for the following week's

episode, trailers for shows later that night, announcements of coming events. As the remote control-equipped viewer "zaps" or "grazes" through dozens of cable channels at the touch of a button—to the delight of postmodernist theorists celebrating the recombinant culture of juxtaposition as an exercise of freedom—cacophony is in the nature of the pastiche. In the wonderful world of television, anything is compatible with anything else. The one continuity is discontinuity. The flow resembles that of a mountain stream, complete with white water, more than a slow, steady passage. Indeed, rapidity and interruption are central to the sensory impression television leaves.

The private becomes the public: On daytime TV people confess their deepest secrets not to the priest but to the millions.

The question then arises: What kind of social education, what type of character formation, occurs when there are so many stories and each one is constantly interrupted, is soon over, and flows immediately into an unrelated story that, in turn, is swallowed up by the next? In an earlier America, even the uneducated could know well, and reflect upon, a small stock of stories—in particular, the Bible and Shakespeare. Lincoln, largely unschooled, read Shakespeare deeply enough in his youth to be able to rank one soliloquy over another in a letter written two years before he died. By contrast, every evening television tells a Scheherezade's 1,001 Nights-worth of stories, and the meaning of any particular show has a shelf life of, usually, minutes. A viewer engages less with the content of one program than masters an attitude of superiority to them all. Rather than learn one subject well, he or she acquires a sophisticated repartee and light banter good for discussing anything and everything that comes up—a style in which, as noted before, to seem quick and knowing is more important than what one knows.

Obviously rapidity and interruption are not brand-new features of Western civilization. Television is a caricature of what, before television, was already a way of life. The ideals and sins it depicts are those of America's formulaic modernity. The picture may be sepia but the frame glitters. Thanks to slick visuals (known in Hollywood as "high production values") and crisp movement, glibness rules. Like the Sears catalogue performing its service in the outhouse, the commercials and network IDs and promos and news flashes emanate from the cosmopolis. Willy-nilly, the slick wrapping carries the tumult and velocity of a commercial version of urban life, the cornucopia of desire, the lure of consumable things and "lifestyles." Commercials don't simply announce the wonders of goods and the lives they promise, they also bring energy and novelty—news of what passes for fun, freedom, and security these days.

Television and its spin-offs have thus furthered what psychologist Martha Wolfenstein called in the 1940s America's "fun culture." The motto is Hey, No Problem! A bright happiness is more the equilibrium state on television than in any other cultural form at any other time in history. In commercials problems are easily surmounted or minimized—as in a child's world where difficulties can be left behind. It is no coincidence that in almost all family sitcoms (with the exception of "The Cosby Show"), the parents, especially fathers, are typically shown as slightly stuffy, misguided, or well-meaning bunglers who are set straight, at the end of 30 minutes, by their sons and daughters. Children Know Best.

On TV both children and adults speak with an unprecedented glibness. Thanks to the wonders of editing, no one on television is ever at a loss for words or photogenic signs of emotion. Not even the bereaved parent asked "How do you feel?" about the death of a child is seen to hesitate. Hesitancy, silence, awkwardness are absent from TV's repertory of behaviors, except in sitcoms or made-for-TV movies where boy meets girl. Yet outside TV, awkwardness and hesitancy often characterize the beginning, and each further development, of interiority, of a person's internal life. On TV, however, speech is stripped down, designed to *move*. The one-liner, developed for ads, is the premium style. TV's common currency consists of slogans and mockery. Situation comedies and morning shows are in particular obsessed with the jokey comeback. The put-down is the universal linkage among television's cast of live and recorded characters. A free-floating hostility mirrors, and also inspires, the equivalent conversational style among the young who grow up in this habitat.

As critic Mark Crispin Miller has observed, the knowingly snide attitude is so widespread and automatic that it deserves to be called "the hipness unto death." The promotion of David Letterman to CBS's 11:30 P.M. talk-show slot signals the ascendancy of this style. Relentless if superficial self-disclosure is one of the conventions of television today. The audience is simultaneously alerted to the contrivance, transported behind the scenes, and pleased by both—and by the possibility of enjoying both. It is obvious how this plays in "Saturday Night Live," but more surprising to see how it plays in "straight" commercials and programs designed for people one would not commonly think of as sophisticates. In one commercial of the 1980s, a man in a white coat looks you in the eye and says, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." The audience is expected to recognize him as a soap-opera actor. (He goes on to say that other people also think they can "play doctor" and as a result

may take the wrong medicine. He has come to sell the right one.) There followed the "Joe Isuzu" series, in which a huckster makes outrageous claims about Isuzu automobiles: They get 100 miles per gallon, they cost $99.98, and so on, while subtitles provide the truth. Consider further the business news and gossip of "Entertainment Tonight," along with its knockoffs on CNN, MTV, and the local news, and the canny entertainment sections of today's newspapers, making the audience privy to Hollywood marketing calculations, casting tactics, career moves, and box-office figures. We are invited to understand Hollywood not only as a machine for dreams but as a game through which we, the spectators, are dreamed of—a game whose success or failure we are also invited to inspect.

Through this relentless inspection, character is dissected, torn apart. Indeed, character—based upon self-mastery, moral resolve, learning or understanding, and quiet or heroic action—is reduced to personality, impression management, the attractions of body and mannerism. Here again, television is not inventing but perfecting already long-standing trends in our social life. In *Within the Context of No Context* (1981), George Trow traces the changing nature of American magazine covers to show how character has been supplanted by personality. The typical faces on the cover of *Time* and *Life* through the 1930s and '40s—faces of people such as Roosevelt and Churchill and Hitler, who were famous, for better or worse, for what they achieved or brought about in public life—eventually gave way to personalities (Madonna would be a contemporary example) who are famous mainly for being famous.

The equivalent process operates in our thinking (and feeling) about politics. Coverage and conversation are dominated, first, by a focus on personality, and second, by the inside analysis of the stratagems of campaigns and governance. Politicians concluded that the arts of governance are less fateful than acts of spin control—and as television observes the spin, reporting thus feeds cynicism. The audience is flattered that it is superior to the corruption, dishonesty, and hypocrisy of public servants. The viewer has been brought into the know. He or she is treated as an inside-dopester, savvy to spin doctors, speech writers, electorate-pleasing "positioning," and all manner of practical calculations. In one sense, what is going on is democratic unmasking: Let the politicians be put on notice that they are hired hands! In another sense, at least under present circumstances, the cynicism that has become so widespread in politics is more likely to generate withdrawal than political engagement. The increased voter turnout in the 1992 general election, in which Ross Perot served as a third-party side-show attraction, may only be an interruption in the otherwise long-term decline in the size of the electorate.

The glibness, relentless pace, sloganeering, and shrinking attention spans of private life filter into television, via the selective antennae of the television-industrial complexes of Hollywood and New York, only to be reinforced there, like a rocket that accelerates by swinging close to Earth, using its gravitational pull to swing free of that same gravitational pull. The free-floating nastiness of sitcom existence may well be cultivating an equivalent show of popular sentiment, so that the endless put-downs of popular comedy penetrate the rest of everyday life. Take your own brief survey of bumper stickers (Florida's "We don't care how you do it up North"), of slang (e.g., *drop-dead* as an adjective meaning "stunning," as in "She has a drop-dead body" or "Our paints are available in 36 drop-dead colors"), and of T-shirts ("I'M NOT DEAF, I'M JUST IGNORING YOU"; "OUT OF MY WAY, BITCH"), which then recycle, especially via the Fox network's youth-oriented shows, into the popular domain.

In summary: *Television has nationalized American culture and made it more knowing.* This conclusion may seem to fly in the face of pre-

dictions that television's homogenizing days are waning. On the surfaces of culture, distinctions do multiply. Basic cable service now enters 62 percent of American homes, bringing an average of 30 channels. What the postnetwork cable channels offering popular music, home shopping, evangelical Christianity, African-American music, and Spanish-language soap operas have in common is that they thrive on undiminished enthusiasm for breathless, slick entertainment. Advances in interactive technology will probably not divert from these main tendencies; they will render more efficient the services that people already use—banking, video games, commercial movies, quiz shows. Pride in the national cornucopia will become a cornerstore of the orthodox American identity. White bread has already ceased to be the symbol of national unity. It has been supplanted by the new standard supermarket shelf of 72 different loaves, each bland in its own way. TV programs that would truly widen the spectrum—as far as character types and kinds of approved behaviors presented—are nearly as unlikely in the post-cable cornucopia as they were on the Big Three networks. For a series about, say, a gay couple disturbed about restrictions on military service or a devout Catholic family worried about the increasing materialism of daily life, a viewer, remote control in hand, will zap through his or her 30 channels in vain.

Make no mistake. The uniformities in present-day American style are not simply the creatures of television or of corporate culture more generally. They build, in turn, on cultural uniformities already observed in the early 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville, who pointed out, long before Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Roseanne, or MTV, that America's cultural products

> substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought. . . . Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. . . .There will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity.

In such passages where Tocqueville describes the arts in America, and where he predicts that surface and motion will replace the exploration of the soul, he appears almost to be anticipating the development of a democratic "art" like television. Tocqueville often speculated about what could hold together a country of such disparate regions and so many varieties of people. Not even he could have dreamed, however, of this slick and all-knowing personality—this glib persona fostered by television, which undermines all authority and is adaptable to every class and ethnicity—that would become, as it were, *the* American citizen, the glue that in its peculiar way unites the country.

One hardly needs to read Tocqueville to surmise that, regardless of the channel or brand name, the odds are that the rule of the slick, the glib, and the cute will prevail. The once-over-lightly glibness of American culture prevails not only on television but in the movies and magazines, among sports announcers and talk-show hosts, in the jargons of politics and psychotherapy alike. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that America's culture of comfort and convenience, of the quick fix and fast relief, of mass-manufactured labels of individuality, has acquired in television a useful technology to reduce the range of colors in the spectrum of life to a bleached center glittering with sequins in many drop-dead colors.

TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

SEEING THROUGH THE TUBE

BY FRANK D. McCONNELL

I begin with a true story. In 1974 I was having coffee in the English department lounge at Northwestern University when two of my colleagues—a younger, untenured man and an older, tenured woman—entered in mid-conversation.

"Oh, no," the woman was saying, "I just won't have a television in my apartment. I know there are *some* good things on it, especially on public broadcasting. But so much of it is just garbage!"

My younger friend laughed. "Joke's on you, then," he said. "It's got an off button."

For years I've thought that a brilliant riposte: If you don't like it, you don't have to do it. It certainly has all the bracing moral simplicity of our former first lady's insouciant slogan, "Just Say No." But now, having immersed myself in as many anti-TV jeremiads as anyone can digest, I wonder. The vast majority of media studies over the last 30 years, both anti-TV and, in a few heroic or quixotic cases, pro-TV, are unanimous on one point and one point only: that TV is not just a new medium but a revolutionary and cataclysmic alteration in the way humans perceive and process their world, destined to change forever the nature of consciousness and society itself. The consensus, in other words, is that, though "it's got an off button," the button doesn't really work. We are all creatures—or prisoners—of the Tube.

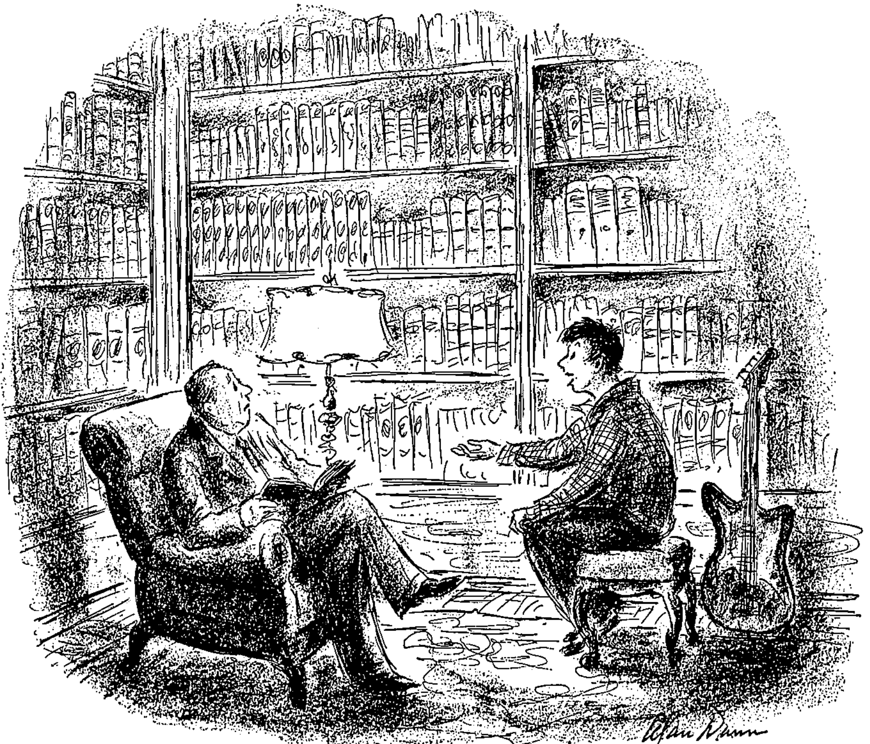
Now this is a fairly apocalyptic tonnage of significance to load on what is, after all, an entertainment or advertising or information medium barely 40 years old. Developed in the 1930s but largely dormant during World War II, TV blossomed only in the early years of the Bomb and the Cold War. As Robert C. Toll reports in *The Entertainment Machine* (1982), while in 1950 there were only about three million sets in the country, by 1953 the number had grown exponentially to 21 million. Today it is the rare American household that possesses only one set, and the atypical American who watches less than four hours of TV a day.

This much is statistical fact—a crucial *psy-*

chic fact of late 20th-century life. But the facts do not prepare one for the Druidic solemnity with which writers, many brilliant, have attacked TV as a kind of cultural succubus, seducing the Republic and draining it of its vitality.

In the 1976 film *Network*, Paddy Chayevsky, himself one of the great early TV writers, created a nightmare vision in which TV "news," driven by the ratings race, becomes a tawdry, debased, debasing, and ultimately murderous form of entertainment, pandering to the most prurient appetites of its audience. Recent, popular "reconstructed reality" shows such as "Hard Copy" and "A Current Affair," in which actors re-create tabloid "true stories," can seem a chilling fulfillment of Chayevsky's fantasy—as does the recent admission by NBC that, in a report on the safety failures of GMC trucks, the producers had "enhanced" the explosion of a truck by planting what were in effect bombs under the chassis. Novelists such as Don DeLillo (*White Noise*, 1985) and Thomas Pynchon (*Vineland*, 1990) use TV as a central metaphor for what they see as the Novocainized, universal moral stupor of present-day America. And media critics, from the populist to the high-culture mandarin, have argued that TV, *by its very nature*, reduces culture to the lowest common denominator, provides a false, substitute reality from which the viewer cannot escape, and is in fact little less than mind control.

But not only do intellectuals hate TV; TV seems to hate itself. A number of highly popular series since the 1960s—"The Dick Van Dyke Show," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and "Murphy Brown," to name a few—have orbited around the idea of writing for, producing, or selling a TV show. In each case, the assumption has been that the industry itself is well short of the respectable or the grown-up. In the vast range of the family sitcom—surely one of TV's staple crops—I cannot call to mind a single instance in which the image of a family watching TV together is presented as in any way a good thing. One example will serve. (And I note in passing that few of TV's most vituperative critics ever deign to discuss the specific details of a given show.) In "The



"You see, Dad, Professor McLuhan says the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village. Get it?"

Simpsons"—the widely praised cartoon sitcom about a preternaturally dense family which is itself a parody of the archetypal TV-sitcom household—each episode begins with the father leaving work, the mother coming home from the supermarket, and the kids returning from school, all of them arriving simultaneously and throwing themselves on the sofa, their glazed-over eyes fixed on the TV set.

Plato, notoriously, attacked the art of writing as an unworthy vehicle for wisdom—in, of course, some of the greatest writing the world has known. And Swift and Voltaire, among others, satirized the dangerous side effects of the proliferation of printed books—in, naturally, printed books of their own. We can even fantasize that, at the dawn of language itself, some anxious shaman delivered an eloquent speech to the effect that this newfangled thing, speech, would lead to no good.

Nevertheless, the salient fact about the birth of TV is the complexity of its historical moment. I have said that the industry began to burgeon in the late 1940s and early '50s, the age in which it first became thinkable that humanity, in possession now of the atomic bomb, could commit global suicide. The planet itself, again for the first time, began to align itself in two mutually hostile tribes—the "Free World" and the "Communist Conspiracy," to use the phrases that now almost elicit nostalgia. But that was not all. The moment of TV's birth was also the moment at which information itself began to be perceived as the only truly valuable commodity for the future. World War II, more than any previous conflict, had been a battle of and for information. The breaking of the Japanese code "Purple" and the German code "Enigma," and the instantly legendary Manhattan Project, whose secrecy was soon after revealed to have been penetrated by the Soviets—all of these information struggles were as crucial as any "real-world" military engagement in securing victory for the Allies. As much as TV, in other words, it was the war itself that guaranteed that ours would be a period obsessed with info-tech as its prime tool for survival.

In 1948—the year, by the way, that Milton Berle became the first TV superstar—Claude Shannon published his seminal book, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Shannon, a cryptographer during the war, was then working for Bell Laboratories, trying to devise a more efficient, static-free system of telephonic exchange. His monograph does not make for chair-gripping excitement, yet it may be one of the defining works of this century. For what Shannon, the sublime technologue, did was reassign the priorities: The *content* of the message sent, he argued, is less important than the *means* by which it is sent. Shannon could not have known in 1948 that his theories were mapping a phenomenon—TV—that would come to be seen as the third pivotal revolution, after writing and printing, in the history of communication. It would require Marshall McLuhan, in *Understanding Media* (1964), to translate Shannon's argument into what is certainly the slogan of the info-tech age: "The medium is the message." It was McLuhan who single-handedly raised the "question of media" to a level of philosophical and moral urgency it has not yet lost. And it is McLuhan who is perceived as the Great Adversary by virtually every later, anti-TV writer.

McLuhan, a professor of English at the University of Toronto, discovered the new world of media not through information theory but through his discipleship to a very remarkable man, Harold A. Innis. A historian

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and a humanist, Innis was concerned with the ways writing and printing technologies, "monopolies of information," influenced the growth of empires. In his 1951 book, *The Bias of Communication*, he argued that the print revolution, by making "texts" available to a hitherto ignored class of readers and by encouraging a new sense of *privacy* in the act of reading, contributed to the formation of modern, individualist, and democratic man. His argument has, by now, become all but dogma.

What McLuhan did was extend Innis's idea to include the technology of speed-of-light, audiovisual information: radio, and above all, TV. His two definitive books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964), contain his major argument, and they turned the man himself into something of a media celebrity—rare and heady for an academic! The conclusion of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* reveals McLuhan's prophetic fervor:

> The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such coexistence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person. Our most ordinary and conventional attitudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques. Familiar institutions and associations seem at times menacing and malignant.

There is something vaguely Nietzschean in the urgency of "new electric galaxy"—in its paradoxically apocalyptic optimism. McLuhan was unquestioningly sanguine about the effects of the revolutionary TV on human consciousness and culture. If oral society had been a media extension of hearing, he argued, and manuscript and print culture an extension of sight, then the new "electric galaxy" was, or would become, an extension of the central nervous system itself. TV would usher in a postliterate, immediate linkage of all peoples with all peoples, a hot line from self to self that would deliver us all from the bondage of literacy and establish us as a "global village"—humankind's long dream of one world, at last accomplished by the infinite crisscrossing of electromagnetic waves around the world.

It is easy for anti-TV critics to read McLuhan's great expectations as yet another excrescence of the solipsistic 1960s, like tie-dye T-shirts and macrobiotic cuisine. The TV set, around whose glow we gather in our darkened living rooms, becomes an avatar of the primal campfire around which the tribe would collect to share its grievances, its gossip, and its gospel. Does the phrase "Woodstock Nation" call up an embarrassing ghost here?

And yet, in ways McLuhan could not have predicted, we have become, thanks to TV, a global—or at least a continental—village. To take two obvious instances, it was indisputably TV coverage of the war in Vietnam that generated a massive public revulsion against that particular adventure, and it was obviously Ronald Reagan's superbly telegenic presence, more so than his policies, that made him the first two-term president in 30 years. More recently, in the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton and H. Ross Perot simultaneously contrived the "TV town meeting," an electronic question-and-answer session that gives the illusion, at least, of coast-to-coast intimacy with the candidate. This phenomenon, certain to be a feature of all future campaigns, is itself modeled on a genre that didn't even exist when McLuhan wrote: the "talk show," in which Phil Donohue, Oprah Winfrey, or Geraldo Rivera, guests, and audience all share a conversational space at once glaringly public and deeply private, one part group therapy to two parts tribal council. To give a final example, it is now a very real challenge in heavily covered court cases (the Rodney King beating trial, the William Kennedy Smith rape trial, the Amy Fisher assault trial) to find jurors fit to serve. If they have seen the TV coverage of the alleged crimes, how impartial can they be? But given the ubiquitousness of TV in our lives, if they haven't seen any coverage, how *awake* can they be? The global village, in other words, turns out to be a reality. The question is whether the

secret name of the village is Salem.

McLuhan's enthusiasm was for TV as a technology, a new way of perceiving, a new connectedness. What he did not take into account is that TV is also a *business.* Until very recently, three major networks held and enforced a crushing monopoly on what could be shown and what could be said, reducing the viewer to the passive status of a chooser-among-sames. Could the electromagnetic Eden of the TV tube be a return not to the primal garden but to the state of enslavement?

Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (1977) makes this case. Mander is a former advertising executive who used his first book to recant his sins. Sometimes *Four Arguments* reads almost like an auto-da-fé. The common theme of his four arguments is an almost exact inversion of the Innis-McLuhan approach to media. Yes, TV is a new and startling way of perceiving reality, but it is a false, engineered "reality" thrust upon its passive victims in such a way as to isolate them from the reality of their own lives. Yes, TV is a unifying force, but it is a unifying force only insofar as it turns us all into eager consumers of the products it exists, above all, to convince us we need. TV, for Mander, is more than anything else a sales medium, its other functions (news, entertainment, etc.) serving only as a kind of narcotic foreplay for the Big Sell:

> Whenever we buy a product [advertised through TV] we are paying for the recovery of our own feelings. We have thereby turned into creatures who are the commodities we buy. We are the product we pay for and all life is reduced to serving this cycle.

This is a powerful indictment. Part of the enduring charm of Mander's book, in fact, is his brave sense of himself as a lone voice crying out in the wilderness against the final closure of the TV-addicted mind. Few, if any, later anti-TV tracts catch quite his pitch of anger or risk his uncompromising solution to the problem of TV, which is, to quote Voltaire on Christianity, "Crush the infamous thing!" Mander is a man on fire with a vision of a great wrong, and we cannot expect such men to speak always with complete realism. The conclusion of his book is ringing and poignant:

> How to achieve the elimination of television? I certainly cannot answer that question. It is obvious, however, that the first step is for all of us to purge from our minds the idea that just because television exists, we cannot get rid of it.

Between McLuhan's enthusiasm and Mander's apocalypticism, later discussions of TV occupy a moderate, perhaps more habitable space. The Mander final solution to the TV problem is "Luddite," as Neil Postman calls it in his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* And Postman sensibly observes that this recourse is impossible. To date at least, the single indisputable fact about technology—any technology—is that it is not reversible. You cannot uninvent TV any more than you can uninvent the alphabet, the printing press, the wheel, the smelting of iron, or nuclear fission. As a species, just as individuals, our fate is to learn to live with what we have imagined.

Postman accepts, as Mander does not, the inevitability of the TV revolution, but he analyzes the negative effects of that revolution. Postman is not a disaffiliated adman but a distinguished professor of communication and rhetoric. And the debasement of mature public discourse caused by the "televising" of reality is the gravamen of his argument. Whereas Mander accuses TV of being primarily a narcotic, Postman's perhaps more damning position is that it is lethally trivializing.

What Postman claims here is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. Our television set keeps us in constant communion with the world, but it does so with a face whose smiling countenance is unalterable. The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject mat-

ter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.

Television then not only abstracts and etiolates experience, it compartmentalizes it—within the single compartment of entertainment. In a universe of discourse in which everything from tragedy to farce is presented simply as spectacle, both tragedy and farce and everything between become impossibly confused. Postman uses the example of the evening news. No one seems to notice, he remarks, the irony that the evening news on every channel in America is introduced with urgent-sounding signature theme music. The implication is that the events of the day, whether a plane crash in California or an international crisis, are all contents of a "show." A serious-looking anchorman or anchorwoman narrates, with video, the more ominous or violent events of the last 12 hours. After a break to advertise completely irrelevant products, a usually jocund weatherperson discusses what the weather might be like tomorrow. (In California, especially, this is virtually null information.) After another ad break someone appears to talk about sports; then, with perhaps a few local news items, the serious person with whom we began "wraps it all up," more often than not urging that one stay tuned for the sitcom or movie of the week that is to follow. The real and the fictional, the serious and the trivial, become hopelessly blurred, until only the uninterrupted, zombifying carrier wave itself is the "real" meaning of the transmission. The medium is not the message but, in McLuhan's best pun, the massage.

The political implications are ominous. Postman compares TV culture to the smilingly mindless dystopia of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). In Huxley's novel the people are kept in happy servitude by the drug "Soma," which reduces all stress and makes the world look just perfectly all right. "Better a gramme than a damme," as they are fond of saying. TV, Postman argues, *is* Huxley's Soma: an infallibly relaxing drug that reconciles the individual to his or her own tyrannization.

Social critic Jonathan Kozol hailed Postman's book as a "prophetic vision." In his own book published the same year, *Illiterate America*, Kozol makes his case with at least equal earnestness. Kozol's own "prophetic" credentials as a passionate advocate of public education are impeccable. And while *Illiterate America* has relatively little to say about TV, what it does say is damning. On the much-touted use of TV as an educational tool, he writes:

> The television learner is entirely passive. The television mode is intellectual disjunction. The consequence of televised instruction is a deeper balkanization of the human consciousness than anything that academic fragmentation has engendered up to now. The mechanistic dangers are no longer metaphoric but specific when we learn from a machine. The separation of a skill from a reflective understanding of its ethical or anti-human implications is enhanced (and it is often virtually assured) by televised indoctrination.

Kozol, even more than Postman, understood that the ultimate extension of TV technology would be not the simple passive-receptive viewer entranced by whatever happened to be "on" at the time, but the burgeoning—now triumphant—technology of *interactive* TV: the video game, the computer-enhanced curriculum, and the soon-to-be-perfected "virtual reality." Kozol suggests that this particular brave new world is even more Huxleyan than its immediate ancestor:

> The learner manipulates the terminal that sits beside her television console; yet it is she who is manipulated by the button she selects. Her only option is to choose at which specific moment she will plug into the sequence of accredited information which has been approved by those who know what is best for her, and for themselves, and who have planned the literacy curriculum with sensitive anticipation of its probable results.

For Kozol, TV is a disease of republican-

ism. At the opposite pole from a cordial "global village," we face the specter of a semi- or largely illiterate population, TV junkies all, voting, reacting, feeling, and desiring precisely as the "virtual" or, better, *ersatz* reality of the Tube tells them to. Marxist cultural critics such as Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1962), Jacques Ellul (*The Technological System*, 1978), and Jean Baudrillard (*For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 1981) have argued along similar lines. They charge that the salient feature of "mass culture" in advanced capitalist society is that it infinitely forestalls revolution by making the concept of *revolution* just another form of show business. How to form an underground movement when the "underground" is immediately taken up and celebrated on "The Tonight Show"?

Not surprisingly, the major anti-TV arguments begin, after a while, to sound the same. All are aimed, after all, at the same target. But we can say, at the risk of caricature, that Mander's main objection is that the medium, as primarily an advertising tool, narrows the scope of experience to artificially implanted needs and wants; and that, as a corollary, the experience of TV watching is, neurophysiologically, a trancelike or comalike state that short-circuits rational thought. Postman's concern is directed more to the body politic than to the awareness of the individual watcher. To him, TV's worst effect is that it cheapens the quality of public discourse by reducing it to the sensationalism of the sound-bite, giving us the illusion of sophistication without the reality of experience. And Kozol is alarmed at the implications of all this for a public-education system that is manifestly in crisis. An illiterate underclass, dependent solely upon the Tube for its information, is perfect prey for totalitarianism. You need not be so crude as to burn dangerous books if you can simply render them unreadable.

What all these arguments have in common, even Mander's call for a jihad, is that they are written, as it were, by "metaphysicians" of television. These authors are not objecting (only) to this or that show, or to a particular kind of programming, or to a specific network. When they write about TV, the sum of the parts has almost nothing to do with the parts. They attack TV *as a medium*, almost as though it were a destructive metaphysical force. Or, put another way, in the land of television the important point is not that the individual citizens are bad or good but that the country itself is so corrupting and polluted that it scarcely matters who or what the individuals are.

In the various exchanges about television *as medium*, two arguments furnish the subtext for almost every discussion. The first argument is that TV is the next phase of communication, supplanting print. The second is that television creates an artificial reality—the world as advertisement, or entertainment, or passively viewed spectacle—which distances us from our real or "natural" surroundings. To attack TV in either of these two ways is to fault the medium not for how it works but for what it is.

Alvin B. Kernan is a distinguished literary critic and historian at Princeton University. In *The Death of Literature* (1990), he articulates the academic humanist charge against TV that has been uttered, though less authoritatively, ever since TV came to be: that it is evil *just because it is not literature*. Kernan is too thorough a thinker to be a rhetorician. Book reading and watching TV, he concedes, both involve a distinctively human act of decoding some kind of signal to create a meaning. (Cats do not read; nor do they watch TV.) And yet he wants to insist that the reader, as opposed to the watcher, is "intensely active mentally," involved in something that is somehow *serious*, since reading is—again, somehow—more complex than watching.

But to say this is to make what can only be called a leap of faith, faith in the sacramentalism of the printed as opposed to the electromagnetic Word. Are we, indeed, becoming significantly more doltish than our print-oriented ancestors? Are we increasingly submissive hostages

to the light show of the Tube—like the chained prisoners in Plato's allegory of the cave in *The Republic,* condemned to watch only the shadows of the real world?

We do not know. More important, we cannot know. And we cannot because TV is part of our reality. Kernan assumes that we can judge the new medium from the perspective of a "pre-TV" sensibility. That is as impossible for us as it would have been for, say, Shakespeare to imagine a universe without printed books. The eye, as Wittgenstein says, can see everything except itself. Indeed, it is far from clear that literature is "dying" in the TV age any more than painting "died" with the evolution of photography or concert performance "died" when Edison recorded sound.

Perhaps more serious than the charge that TV is bad because it is not literature is the charge that TV is bad because it is not the real world, or that TV somehow occludes our participation in the real or natural world. That, at any rate, is the charge registered in Bill McKibben's remarkable book, *The Age of Missing Information* (1992).

McKibben is a naturalist with a brilliant prose style. In *The Age of Missing Information* he produced a book that, whatever else it may be, is a work of belles-lettres. It is a book about two "days." McKibben enlisted his friends to tape an entire TV "day" of all the shows on all 93 cable channels in Fairfax, Virginia, and he watched *every show that was on that day.* Then, on another day, he climbed a hill in the Adirondacks, took a swim, had some lunch, and slept under the stars. The book narrates these parallel days in alternating chapters. The chapters about the "TV day," timed precisely (e.g., "2:00 P.M.") describe the welter of shows, from sitcoms to televangelism to infomercials, that were on at the named time. The chapters about his day on the mountain are ruminative, Thoreauvian in tone, and given comfortable, cuddly titles like "Twilight" and "Deeper Twilight Still." McKibben's conclusion is that by becoming TV addicts we deny ourselves the real "information" of what it means to hike up a mountain, take a solitary swim, and simply be one with nature.

It is a gorgeously written, elegantly planned, and deeply unfair book. McKibben assumes that the only alternatives are total deliverance to or total liberation from the beast of commercialism. In fact his conclusion is implicit in the very terms of his experiment. And that is bad science.

No one watches TV the way McKibben did on his extended "day" in front of the set. I can inject a lab rat with large quantities of virtually anything—caffeine, beer, or vitamin X—three times a day for a week, and I will very likely find that by Sunday the rat is having some problems. Have I proved anything—except that the SPCA should tap my phone?

It should be obvious that I am still thrashing over the problem of the off button. If it really works—that is, *if we can use it*—then it seems the new medium is no more, or less, dangerous to civilization than any of its predecessors. (Who, after all, has not let the coffee boil over while engrossed in a book? Is this "enslavement to print"?)

In *The Five Myths of Television Power* (1993), Douglas Davis asserts that the ominous warnings about TV as mind control, substitute reality, and insidious counterliteracy drug are all, not to put too fine a point on it, nonsense. His subtitle is *Why the Medium Is Not the Message.* And his claim is that the cataclysmic alteration in consciousness assumed by both pro- and anti-TV-writers is, after all, not much of an alteration at all and surely not very cataclysmic. The TV watcher, he says, "knows precisely what is wrong, as well as what is right, with the drug that only appears to enslave him."

Nothing, perhaps, is as truly shocking or scandalous as common sense. Could it be that we always do know that we are watching TV, just as we always knew we were just reading books? And that we still manage to get on with our lives much as we always have? Davis is, if nothing else, a threat to most of the writers who have built their careers as "media analysts" since he assumes that people, however

they communicate, tend to remain sane. And this is a very alarming thing for him to say, because it is *not* alarmist.

So what, finally, are we to make of all this moral anxiety over a technological *fact*? I said earlier that technology is irreversible. For all the cautions and caveats about its deleterious effect on human society, one thing is as certain about TV as about the wheel: It will not go away. Our relationship to the Tube, as both Davis and Postman observe, is a matter of dealing with the way the world is for us. A Bill McKibben may want to insist that TV is not natural, but I find it hard to imagine "nature" as anything other than the total surround of experience as it is given to me in this time and place.

There is perhaps something better to compare TV to than nature. Running through all the anti-TV jeremiads is the metaphor of TV as drug: TV hooks viewers, saps their will, and makes them demand increasingly higher dosages. This is, rhetorically, an attractive image, since America in the 1980s and '90s substituted the idea of "addiction" for what used to be called moral choice. People write books and appear on TV explaining that they are "addicted" not just to drugs or alcohol but to gambling, shopping, TV itself, or even sex (an especially curious addiction, one must observe).

If TV is "addictive," let us then compare it to the other addictive substance which is not only legal in our society but subtly promoted by it, in ads, mythologies, and general behavioral standards: alcohol.

There *are* alcoholics. There are men and women whose lives are defined and circumscribed by an organic compound without which they find that they simply cannot function. For these people the substance is a living death, and the only escape is total abstinence.

But there is a far greater number of people for whom alcohol is a palliative and perhaps a not destructive enhancement of life. As my wife observes, there is a vast difference between someone who wakes up and thinks, "I want *alcohol!*" and someone who at 5 P.M. thinks, "A martini would be nice." (Did any of McKibben's neighbors, one wonders, wake up thinking, "God, I get to watch and tape *television* all day!")

And there are people for whom the drug—and alcohol *is* a drug—is, more than an enhancement, a perceptual tool. Some people can use the booze—knowing its dangers and side effects—to make their internal and social lives richer and more productive. The only necessary ingredients for them are self-consciousness and control.

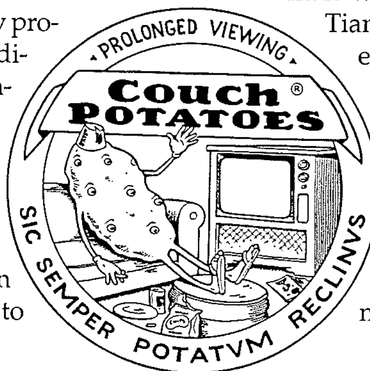
The same hierarchy, I suggest, obtains among TV watchers. It is surely possible to become a "Simpson"-style couch potato, imprisoned by the endless wash of images, immobilized, imbecilic, impotent. But most people are probably not quite so addicted: They know how to use the off button and they watch only those shows that give them some sort of pleasure. Our anti-TV pundits notwithstanding, they have lives of their own beyond the glow of the set.

There are even those for whom TV is a cultural experience no less nor more rich than poetry, music, or drama. The "complexity" of an art has to depend, after all, upon the complexity of the observer's intelligence. If you can watch *Hamlet* stupidly—and a number of very distinguished people have—then possibly you can watch "Gilligan's Island" intelligently, perhaps even notice that "Gilligan's Island" is actually a version of the pastoral romance of *As You Like It* or *The Tempest*.

In fact, when considering *individual* television viewers, one can be quite optimistic. Anybody with a little intelligence, self-awareness, or irony can manipulate TV rather than be manipulated by it. But if you consider the "sociology" of TV viewing, that optimism may be strained. There do seem to be groups of TV watchers caught in a typology as inflexible and harsh as the old class system was once thought to be. Certain types of viewers *are* particularly vulnerable to the Tube—children, illiterate or semiliterate people, poor people. TV provides their major source of in-

formation, and they have fewer alternative resources by which to measure its distortions. Certainly the three major networks, during their long domination of the airways, showed a crass cynicism in marketing programs that targeted these groups even while reinforcing their marginalized self-image. Detective series, for example, from "I Spy" and "Hawk" in the 1960s to "Matlock" and "Miami Vice" in the '80s, attracted African-American audiences by featuring a black detective who was invariably a sidekick of or lesser partner to the white detective. Today, MTV addresses an adolescent audience to whom it presents a picture of teenage life dominated by fashions and consumerism, fast in body and shallow in thought. The demagogic possibilities here are exactly Kozol's burning concern.

The avuncular Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has belatedly recognized the dangers of TV: It has prohibited cigarette commercials on television and, more recently, required stations to post "warning labels" on programs featuring excessive violence. It is a bit unrealistic, however, to expect the FCC to protect the more vulnerable groups of TV viewers from themselves. I would rather place my hopes on cable TV, which has grown explosively during the last 20 years. Today there are nonnetwork channels that are not merely aimed *at* but are actually produced *by* and *for* nonmass audiences—Spanish-language channels, channels with African-American news, channels for gays, and channels for senior citizens—which break the networks' old dominance and, as it were, democratize TV. When such "marginal" groups speak to themselves about their own concerns, paradoxically they cease to be marginal and enter into the public discourse. And let me disagree with Jonathan Kozol one last time: The coming developments of "interactive TV" can only enhance this democratization, as the technology grows beyond the clumsily "authoritarian" mechanisms of its early stages.



I conclude with a true story. In 1992, HBO ran a series of sleazy documentaries called "America Undercover." In one episode, "The Best Hotel on Skid Row," a young, heroin-addicted prostitute was interviewed sitting on the bed in her flophouse room with her boyfriend, an older wino. She wanted to get off junk and into a methadone clinic, but at the time there was no room available. In the middle of the interview she broke down crying. Her boyfriend looked at the camera and said, "Will you turn that thing off?" But the camera came back on, obscenely, a moment later, over their shoulders, while the broken little guy hugged his friend and tried to console her for the—what?—terribleness of existence.

Never mind that the cameraman and the director filmed these unhappy people against their will. That little fellow—like the young man who stood before the tanks in Tiananmen Square—is a model of ethics in the age of mass, TV culture. He knew where to find the off button, and how to use it, even against itself. More than any of the critics we have discussed, he understood that TV neither saps our humanity—nor allows us to give that humanity up.

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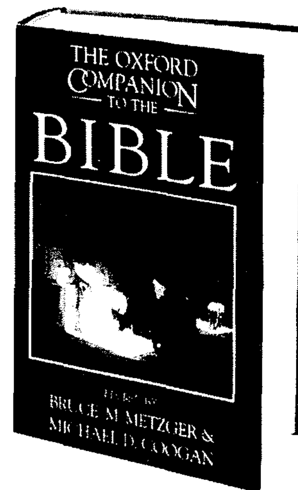

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CURRENT BOOKS

Pacific Games

LET THE SEA MAKE A NOISE: A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur. *By Walter A. McDougall. Basic. 793 pp. $30*

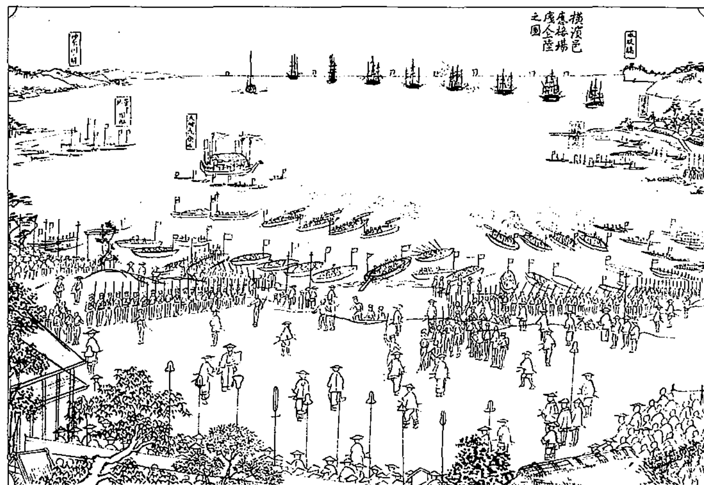
As guiding notions go, the idea that the United States has a Pacific Destiny has enjoyed a surprisingly resilient life. By the late 19th century, West Coast railroad magnates were already insisting that the Atlantic had become the ocean of the past, and they were not alone. The Pacific Rim has beckoned to Americans of all stripes, from the early missionaries drawn to the Sandwich Isles (as the Hawaiian Islands were once known) to trading-house merchants bewitched by the lure of "four hundred million customers," the number at which China's population stood at the turn of this century. Yet the full wave of Pacific enthusiasm swelled only during the 1970s, when free marketeers and competitiveness gurus embraced the creed. Today, both G-7 summit communiqués and business journalists proclaim the "Pacific Century" as an established fact.

But what is the Pacific Century? One might first ask *where* it is, since most discussions of this Asia-Pacific region—perhaps wisely—leave the matter tellingly vague. The many recent books that describe, often with visionary nomenclature, the "East Asian Challenge," the "Asian Miracle," or the Asian "NICs" (newly industrializing countries) share a common theme: Because of their recent growth rates, Asian economies must be inherently superior. American reporting from this part of the globe conjures up a picture of undifferentiated diligence, adaptation, and progress. It also leaves a nagging sense in the national consciousness that our future dynamism, if we are to be so blessed, can be found only on western Pacific shores.

One reads far less about the serious flaws in the Asian Success Story. It is seldom emphasized, for example, that successful Asian capitalism remains mostly a *coastal* and *East Asian* phenomenon. Within China, India, Indochina, and Indonesia, much of Asia's *interior* still reveals overpopulated misery, disastrous governance, ecological crisis, and dwindling resources. Industrialization may have irrevocably changed the texture of Korean and Japanese culture, spawning inventiveness and creativity, but the same cannot be said for Indonesia or Thailand.

Mercifully, McDougall, a professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, has not added another volume to that already precariously tall stack of Pacific booster books. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 for *The Heavens and the Earth*, a political history of the space age, McDougall here has written an equally entertaining and informative kind of history. One of its virtues is that it goes well beyond the old story of cross-cultural conflict and Western intrusions in Asia since the 16th century. Traversing more than 400 years of diplomatic and military history, McDougall breaks into caches of Euro-imperial, Asian, and American history, ransacking these storehouses for materials that emerge from old, settled "national" histories and fashioning them into a wider tale, that of the "North Pacific."

McDougall sees an enduring competition among Pacific peoples that is every bit as heated as similar contests were in the Americas, Africa, or the Asian heartland. It is a competition populated with as diverse and colorful a cast of characters as perhaps ever peopled a nonfiction book: doomed Russian sailors facing Japanese naval guns at Tsushima Bay, clever Polynesian rulers such as Kamehameha IV, naval visionaries in America or Japan, inventors who had little or nothing to do with the Pacific (Robert Fulton's steam engine and Rudolf Diesel's internal combustion engine changed the Pacific tempo forever), fumbling rulers like Russia's Nicholas II, visionary railway financiers like Collis P. Huntington and Count Sergei Yulyevich Witte.



To structure such a wealth of materials, McDougall divides it into three technological eras—the age of sail and muscle, the age of steam and rail, and the age of the internal combustion engine. But McDougall steers clear of the sort of technological determinism that marks such histories as Carlo Cipolla's *Guns, Sails and Empires* (1966). To McDougall, the dominant technologies of conquest or naval expansion are less important historically than the fact that easier and faster passage shrank the buffer zones that once kept American, Japanese, and Russian ambitions from colliding too frequently. The Trans-Siberian railway moved millions closer to Manchuria. Rogue sea currents lost their power to becalm or disorient when steam-powered ships could cross directly from point to point. And air travel, the most emphatic consequence of the internal combustion era, has thrown millions of European and Asian people together in the contemporary Pacific.

In the Pacific, Japan and America crossed purposes early, and indeed Japanese-American antagonism is perhaps the dominant leitmotif of the second half of McDougall's history. From the anti-immigration mood in the early 20th century, and from American obstruction of Japanese aims on mainland Asia, arose periodic crises, some of which became full-blown war scares. Books such as *The Menace of Japan, Must We Fight Japan?* and *The Next War* appeared in the United States soon after World War I. Let us hope that the current crop of look-alike titles does not prove so prescient.

Despite its length, McDougall's book is supremely readable. But it is not without its weaknesses. One is the author's incessant striving to cast events in the North Pacific as the pivot of world politics in the 19th and 20th centuries, when the fulcrum was still in Europe—where it remained right up through the Cold War.

Also puzzling are the 14 colloquies that McDougall scatters throughout his chronicle. To these periodic *aka iki* (a Hawaiian word approximating "high deliberative councils") he summons five major historical personages. These five spirits then judge, squabble with, or applaud the living storyteller, the "Scholar"—McDougall himself. The ghosts first appear in the book's opening pages when the author purports to nod off during a flight over the Pacific. They include Kaahumanu, Hawaiian king Kamehameha's chief consort; William Henry Seward, U.S. secretary of state during the American Civil War; Saito Hirosi, Japan's ambassador to the United States during the 1930s; Count Witte, tsarist Russia's prime minister after 1905; and Father Junípero Serra, the Franciscan monk who built a string of 18th-century missions in California.

In his acknowledgments, McDougall thanks his editors and publisher for having accepted "the notion, not of a historical novel, but of a novelistic history written, though it be serious nonfiction, in a spirit of magic." The colloquy that comes immediately after an account of the U.S. annexation of the Hawaiian Islands gives the "magical" tone:

Kaahumanu: So they stole my kingdom after all. . . . So the Americans took my islands. Why do you say the Japanese own Waikiki?
Scholar: There are tidal waves yet to come, Kaahumanu.
Seward: Excuse me, your highness, but Americans did not steal your kingdom. They settled it, made it prosper. . . .
Scholar: But they did use force, Mr. Seward. . . .The Army Corps of Engineers finally got its chance, and did some outstanding work on ports and roads—
Saito: —to make Hawaii a military base and exclude the Chinese and Japanese?

And on it goes for another seven pages. Yet one must ask what this device finally achieves. Yes, it keeps the narrative fresh, providing the reader relief from the dense currents of economic, diplomatic, and military fact. It also allows McDougall to clarify and qualify his own narrative. Still, it will be a very patient reader who is not irritated by the distracting jump-cut rhythm thus given to the book.

My greatest misgiving, however, concerns the coherence of the "North Pacific" as a region. Large reaches of the map have assumed, in different ages, a recognizable coherence through shared experience of conquest, culture, trade, or ecology. Obviously that coherence is also a historical phenomenon, which can exist in one period and vanish in another. Consider how "Turkestan" or "Hindustan" show, by the quaintness of their names today, the transience of shared experience. The area encompassed by "Southeast Asia," in fact, became a widely recognized region only during the 1940s, when the term denoted a theater of war.

Incontestably, the North Pacific has a special coherence as a geographic area. The case for it as a distinct region of cultural coherence is less clear. By joining hitherto separate imperial or national histories, McDougall's "North Pacific" lends new perspective to the American westward expansion, to the sale of Alaska to the United States, to Japan's opening to the West, to the humiliations of China, and to the diplomatic chicanery over the Hawaiian Islands. All these fit without too much artifice into a North Pacific structure.

But it seems to me that the North Pacific only rarely figured as an arena per se in the minds of the competitors working there. McDougall strains to fit European diplomatic maneuvering into a total North Pacific "game," one that is perhaps intended to resemble the "Great Game" that Victorian Britain and imperial Russia played for control of Central Asia during the last century. Sharp conflict in Manchuria? To be sure. Tense talks over Sakhalin? Definitely. But this reviewer is hard pressed to cobble together into some lasting, grander scheme the many conflicts, large and small, that have erupted in the North Pacific during the last four centuries. I cannot see how these add up to make the North Pacific a special, coherent place, a place (in McDougall's words) "of explosions . . . racial explosions, the explosions of war, the explosiveness of the environment itself, the sense of a dangerous heaven."

Perhaps McDougall himself may be secretly skeptical of the coherence of "the Pacific." For, if his region embraces *all* the Pacific Ocean north of the Equator, then he has allowed too many key places and events to slip past almost without notice. Korea's early history, Spain's and Portugal's dream of Christianizing China, and Canada's role during the 20th century only begin the list of raw data for a Pacific history that are omitted here. Such omissions add up. Instead of evoking a grand region that previous historians have neglected, McDougall often seems himself to be renarrating a familiar contest—a "North Pacific Triangle" with Russia, Japan, and the United States standing in each corner.

Finally, the book ends with a large irony. The ever-growing numbers of pundits who speak of the Pacific region and America's Pacific Century will feel, during most of the

book, that they have found their historian. They will be surprised, then, and perhaps dumbfounded by the conclusion. In his closing pages, McDougall describes an America in diplomatic and economic retreat from Asia, just one generation after the end of the Korean War. He sees this withdrawal as, in fact, having been fated to occur "exactly because the United States won such a thorough victory in the Pacific War [World War II]," and because America so overextended itself thereafter. America, he writes, "took upon [itself] the burden of defending the rimlands and opened its markets and lands to the enterprise and immigrants of Asia and Mexico—all in the name of ideals of freedom, enterprise, equality and human dignity introduced to the North Pacific by white men." I, for one, do not disagree that America's most influential time in Asia now lies behind it. At this time of new hosannas to the Pacific Age, the supreme irony lies in the American *retreat* from the western Pacific. We are leaving to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China the vibrant markets we helped nurture, protect, and create.

> *—James Clad, a former Wilson Center Fellow and formerly the Southeast Asia correspondent for the* Far Eastern Economic Review, *is the author of* Behind the Myth: Business, Money, and Power in Southeast Asia *(1989).*

The Nature of Virtue

THE MORAL SENSE. By James Q. Wilson.
Free Press. 313 pp. $22.95

For nearly three decades, James Q. Wilson has been one of America's leading authorities on crime and drug abuse. No narrow technocrat or data-cruncher, Wilson, a political scientist at the University of California at Los Angeles, is that rare academic who possesses both the gift of lucid expression and the respect for the ordinary citizen necessary to discuss complex social problems in a broad, accessible way. He has written important books on bureaucracy, government regulation, urban politics, schooling, and welfare. But the study of crime and its regulation has remained at the center of his interests, not simply as a social and political problem but as a philosophical conundrum. Through his study of criminality, Wilson examines the fundamental questions of political philosophy: What is the nature of human nature, and what are the sources of social order? What are the "natural" human drives, dispositions, and potentialities (if any), and how can they be melded into a relatively stable and peaceful social order? What causes individuals to violate that order? Does criminal conduct represent the breakthrough of unruly nature, aberrations of biology, or the failure of social order? How can such conduct be prevented without jeopardizing the flourishing of humanity?

In *Crime and Human Nature* (1985), Wilson and his co-author, psychologist Richard J. Herrnstein, explored the question of why the few engage repeatedly in criminal conduct. In this splendid new work, Wilson examines the rest of us: the vast majority who remain essentially decent, law-abiding, and, at times, compassionate, even in the face of desperate circumstances and obvious self-interest.

Crime and Human Nature proved controversial among social scientists largely because of its willingness to take seriously the possibility of biological causes of persistent criminality, a position that raises fears of discrimination, indifference to the social causes of crime, and ultimately, eugenics. *The Moral*

Sense may well provoke a similar reaction, for it too appeals to a concept of "human nature" informed by contemporary biological research—only here to support the politically more acceptable conviction that human beings are naturally social and hence naturally moral. Nevertheless, any belief in human nature challenges the reigning intellectual pieties of the day, indeed of the last two centuries, which have proclaimed human beings to be either natureless lumps formed by their social maker or rational calculators of economic, biological, or psychological self-interest. Human morality is thus unmasked as nothing more than ideology, social utility, rational choice, or simply taste.

Wilson attributes the pervasive moral skepticism and relativism of our age to the intellectual triarchy of Darwin (wrongly understood), Marx, and Freud. To revive a view of human morality more consonant with both ordinary experience and contemporary science, he turns instead to the triumvirate of Darwin (rightly understood), Adam Smith, and, above all, Aristotle. From this perspective, human morality—in the sense of feelings such as sympathy and fairness, which guide our moral judgments if not our conduct—is the natural and legitimate outgrowth of a child's innate sociability and normal development. Because the human infant is so dependent on adult care, the formation of "attachment" between caregiver and child—what used to be called "love"—is biologically essential and, thanks to natural selection, innate. Behaviorally and psychologically, this translates into a growing child's natural desire to please those upon whom he or she depends and a natural fear of failing to do so. From such fear and desire we learn to be sensitive to the feelings and reactions of others and to control and judge our own. Out of this "universal attachment between child and parent," Wilson writes, "the former begins to develop a sense of empathy and fairness, to learn self-control, and to acquire a conscience."

To suggest that the development of such moral sentiments as sympathy, fairness, self-control, and duty is natural is, however, not to say that human beings are innately good or that universal moral rules exist. Wilson acknowledges that awareness of this universal human nature enables us to deduce only "a handful of rules or solutions [e.g., incest taboos] to any but the most elemental (albeit vitally important) human problems." Why then does Wilson believe that such knowledge is vital to us? Why should this whole intellectual squabble over "human nature" and "human morality" matter to those beyond the agonistic world of academia? After all, if the moral sense develops naturally even among skeptical intellectuals and their offspring, not to mention among the rest of us, who ought to care about such wrong-headedness?

Wilson's answer, both wise and subtle, is rooted in the traditions of political philosophy and informed by a careful examination of modern social-scientific and biological research. Like Aristotle, Wilson holds that however "natural" the various human virtues may be as potentials, we develop them by habit. In Aristotle's words, "we become just by the practice of just actions, self-controlled by exercising self-control, and courageous by performing acts of courage." The family may be the primary training ground of virtue (and of vice), but the completion of such moral development depends on the *polis*. For Wilson, no less than Aristotle, lawgivers help make citizens good "by inculcating [good] habits in them." To accomplish this goal, both families and lawgivers must have a correct understanding of human nature and of their proper task; otherwise, moral development will be stunted or distorted. In Wilson's view, this latter fate—misunderstood human nature leading to a troubled social order—is our own. The inadequacies of our contemporary thinking about character, he argues, have contributed to many of our current public problems (such as crime, drug abuse, and welfare de-

pendency). To overemphasize the economic causes of crime or poverty—as many on both the Left and the Right are prone to do—may inadvertently discourage the sense of responsibility and reduce the stigma associated with such conduct, thereby helping to rationalize it. To unmask law, morality, and custom as if they merely constituted (in Plato's phrase) "the advantage of the stronger" may unintentionally weaken the legitimacy of constraints both external and internal.

The skepticism and relativism that prevail among intellectual elites thus encourage moral confusion among parents and policy makers, often masquerading as tolerance of lifestyle and value choices. The resulting crisis of confidence may lead to a lack of resolve on the part of families, schools, and governments, which then fail fully to establish and maintain the necessary limits on conduct, to nurture the necessary democratic virtues, and to encourage their extension beyond the narrowest social circles. The moral sentiments, Wilson acknowledges, are relatively weak and fragile by nature, especially in comparison to our "selfish desires" for survival, sex, and power against which they must constantly do battle. Family breakup, intellectual rationalizations, or an "adversary" culture's assault on bourgeois morality in the name of self-expression can all too easily upset the fragile balance between moral sentiments and selfish desires—particularly for those most vulnerable by either biology or circumstance.

Wilson is not arguing that our contemporary social problems all result from culturally induced malformations of character. He clearly recognizes the range of factors contributing to immoral conduct: "The problem of wrong action arises from the conflict among the several moral senses [e.g., duty and sympathy], the struggle between morality and self-interest, and the corrosive effect of those forces [both material and intellectual] that blunt the moral senses."

As multifaceted as it is, though, Wilson's explanation may not go far enough. From the Old Testament to Freud, the Western moral tradition that Wilson seeks to revive has also included an awareness of the human "heart of darkness" and the possible complicity of the "moral senses" themselves in the doing of evil. It is the "dark knowledge" within the Western moral tradition that Wilson does not adequately confront. Although he acknowledges that "sociability is a two-edged sword . . . the source not only of our moral sentiments but also of our concern for reputation and respect" which may compel us to "join in a crowd's assault on an innocent person" or "obey leaders who order us to commit atrocities," the problem of evil may lie deeper. The desire to be liked and to win approval is not sufficient to account for the depravity of ordinary human beings engaged in extraordinary brutalities. Nor is the original parochialism of the moral senses enough to explain the hatred and violence that "we" may direct against "them." Moral particularism may account for *indifference* toward others but not hatred. There may be more of a tendency toward anger and resentment, cruelty and depravity, which is more universal among human beings, more powerfully aided by such moral senses as "justice" and "duty," and more frequently directed against our loved ones as well as against strangers, than Wilson cares to admit.

Such an objection does not, however, diminish my admiration for this wise and lucid book written against the spirit of our age. *The Moral Sense* is a powerful reminder of our nature as moral beings and of the responsibility of families, schools, and governments to foster its development.

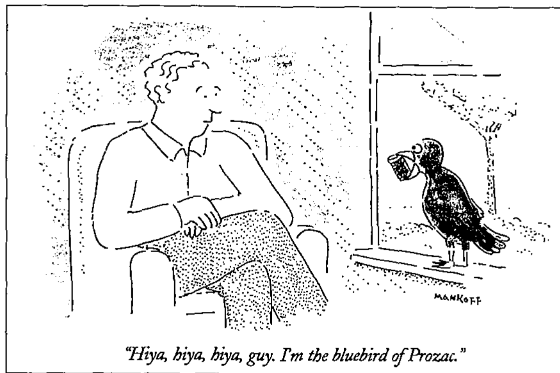
—Howard L. Kaye is professor of sociology at Franklin and Marshall College and the author of The Social Meaning of Modern Biology, from Social Darwinism to Sociobiology *(1986).*

What the Medicine Said

LISTENING TO PROZAC: A Psychiatrist Explores Antidepressant Drugs and the Remaking of the Self. *By Peter D. Kramer. Viking. 409 pp. $23*

On the evening after I began reading Peter Kramer's *Listening to Prozac*, I had an appointment with a woman in her mid-forties for whom I had prescribed Prozac several months earlier for depression. Joan, an intelligent, poised, and successful employee of a large company, had developed many of the classic symptoms of depression. They included an abiding sense of sadness, the inability to feel pleasure in activities that used to give her pleasure, low self-esteem, frequent crying episodes, poor appetite, weight loss, diminished energy, marked indecisiveness, and a deep sense of fragility. These symptoms had begun after she separated from her husband, three months before she first called me.

I could have prescribed a number of other antidepressants for Joan but chose Prozac, a relatively new drug that causes fewer troublesome side effects and is about as effective as the others in treating depression. Introduced in the United States in January 1988, Prozac, whose generic name is Fluoxetine, has by now been taken by more than nine million patients around the world, about half of them in the United States. Most antidepressants affect several chemicals in the brain, known as neurotransmitters, that appear to be related to depression. Prozac was the first to be introduced that affects only one of these, serotonin, which is one reason it causes fewer side effects than the older antidepressants.



"Hiya, hiya, hiya, guy. I'm the bluebird of Prozac."

Though Prozac has been accused during the past couple of years of causing serious side effects—especially violence and suicide—these accusations seem to have been unjustified, and the drug has been enjoying immense popularity among psychiatrists, other physicians, and significant segments of the general public.

Within a month of starting to take Prozac, Joan began to feel better. A month later, it was clear that her depression had mostly lifted. Her sadness had disappeared, she could feel pleasure, her energy and appetite were back, and she felt self-assured. By the fourth month of treatment, Joan's depression was gone. In fact, she felt better than she had felt before she became depressed. "I feel much more relaxed," were the words I recorded in her chart. "I think more clearly. . . . I felt at risk; I don't anymore." When I saw Joan for our next appointment three weeks later—on the evening after I had begun reading *Listening to Prozac*—she was feeling not only better but *different*: "I just feel free—to talk to people, to be loose. The last time I felt free was in the 1970s. . . . But even then it wasn't like this. I can be me and it's OK, and when I *am* me people are responsive to me." She attributed the change to Prozac, and so, tentatively, did I.

In *Listening to Prozac*, Peter Kramer, a psychiatrist on the faculty of Brown University, and one I have known since he completed his psychiatric training, describes several patients not very different from Joan in their responses to Prozac. Though I had not yet finished the book when I saw Joan at our next appointment, I suggested to her that she read it. I

thought she might learn about the medication as well as discover, in reading about the reactions of others to it, something about her own response.

I have not yet heard Joan's thoughts about the book, but I can report on mine. I find it original, interesting, troubling, provocative, highly speculative, probably wrong in some places, imaginatively right in others, and much more theoretically ambitious than one would expect of a book written for a popular audience. I think I can safely infer that I am not the only psychiatrist recommending the book to patients currently on, or considering, Prozac. The book has appeared on the best seller list of the *New York Times Book Review*, an unusual achievement for a work that addresses so complex a theme.

Having attended to his patients' responses to Prozac, Kramer concluded that the medication can tell us something important about both mental illness and the nature of being human. As a psychotherapist who had used talk as the agent of therapeutic change, Kramer was "used to seeing patients' personalities change slowly, through painfully acquired insight and hard practice in the world. But recently I had seen personalities altered almost instantly, by medication. . . . Prozac seemed to give social confidence to the habitually timid, to make the sensitive brash, to lend the introvert the social skills of a salesman." By observing these changes, by "listening to Prozac," Kramer felt forced to conclude that much of what he had assumed was primarily a result of personal history—not only mental illnesses but also personality patterns—was, in fact, a result of biological factors, many of them ultimately of genetic origin, that could be profoundly and quickly ameliorated by medications. "Spending time with patients who responded to Prozac," he writes, "had transformed my views about what makes people the way they are. I had come to see inborn, biologically determined temperament where before I had seen slowly acquired, history-laden character." He had come to see, in short, how central biology is not only to mental illness but to personality, to the traits that people display as they live in the world and with each other.

This insight has serious implications not only clinically and scientifically but also in the professional marketplace. For many years, patients with mild depressions or personality difficulties often paid little attention to the question of whether a therapist was a psychiatrist or a psychologist since they assumed they would be treated with "talk therapy" and not medications. A patient who reads Kramer's book, however, and decides that medication would be more effective and faster than psychotherapy in treating his low self-esteem, chronic mild sadness, or obsessionality would likely turn to a psychiatrist, who as a physician is by law allowed, and by training equipped, to prescribe medications, rather than to a clinical psychologist, who is not. This book may well give further impetus to the ongoing efforts by clinical psychologists to obtain prescribing privileges.

Many psychiatrists will object to some of the suppositions and arguments of the book. Some will point out that Prozac is not, in general, as strikingly effective a drug as Kramer (or my case vignette of Joan) suggests. First of all, only a small minority of patients respond to Prozac with a sense of having been "remade." Some psychopharmacologists also argue that the sense of some patients who take Prozac that they are "better than well" may be a result of being "revved up" by the medication rather than of being transformed. Others stress that, though unlikely to cause many of the side effects typical of antidepressants, such as dryness of the mouth, Prozac is not entirely free of side effects, such as, in some patients, anxiety, insomnia, and weight loss, and, like other antidepressants, it may lose efficacy after a period of use. Finally, the evidence for the efficacy of Prozac (and other antidepressants) in "the remaking of the self" is largely anecdotal and based on individual case reports. People have reported feeling "remade" as a

result of a variety of experiences ranging from taking placebo medications to falling in love to winning the lottery. All of this should make one hesitant to attribute such impressive powers to Prozac.

Yet most psychiatrists would agree, I think, that Prozac does have properties that make it significantly different from older antidepressants and efficacious in treating not only depression but other serious conditions including obsessive-compulsive disorder and panic anxiety. Moreover, it appears to help at least some people who experience sensitivity to rejection, excessive inhibition, and chronically low self-esteem.

It is in connection with the use of Prozac as a "mood brightener" in persons who do not have diagnosable mental illnesses that serious ethical questions arise. Should a psychiatrist treat someone with medications who does not have an illness listed in the official diagnostic manual? If a person who does not have what is ordinarily considered an illness can be made to feel and function better by a medication, whether it is Prozac or some better drug that may come along, is it right for his or her physician to prescribe such a medication? Should that condition, or state, now be called an illness simply because it is susceptible to pharmacological amelioration? Should health insurance companies pay for such "cosmetic" psychopharmacological treatment? Might employers one day conclude that an employee—say, a manager, a salesperson, or a receptionist—should be more outgoing and demand that he or she begin treatment with medications as a condition of continued employment? Kramer takes up these and other questions that are bound to face psychiatrists as psychotherapeutic medications are made ever more specific and effective at ameliorating an ever larger roster of illnesses and problematic personality patterns.

Kramer might have profitably devoted more attention than he does to the relationship between psychological suffering and what have traditionally been considered the cultural products of such suffering. It is often assumed that, without their spiritual anguish, some figures in the arts, religion, philosophy, and other creative endeavors would never have produced works that we all consider emblems of human achievement. "Nothing great in politics, poetry, or the arts," Aristotle wrote, "has ever been achieved by anyone without a melancholic temperament." What would happen if this temperament were once and for all eliminated? What if a drug is developed some day that is far better than Prozac—one that helps everyone who takes it and that alleviates, in a clear and predictable way, not only depressions but also the many quirks or characteristics in ourselves that are associated with personal unhappiness and dissatisfaction? Would not such a drug, when taken by people, reduce the likelihood that they would produce a great work of art or invent a new religion?

It might. But it would do so only if they would take it, and, presumably, they would do so only if they wanted to take it. Unless the taking of such medications were to become something that could be forced upon suffering persons, they would be free and able to suffer and produce as they wished. Moreover, more than a few artists suffer from psychological difficulties that interfere with their abilities to realize their gifts, and medications might alleviate those difficulties. Certainly some artists who suffer from severe depression and who cannot do creative work because of it, such as the author William Styron, have been able to resume their productive lives because of treatment with medications.

It is important to remember, moreover, that even if great human achievements are sometimes a product, in part, of human suffering, the overwhelming mass of suffering produces nothing that benefits society or the individual sufferer. Psychological suffering is almost universally unwanted. If a pill could indeed abolish psychological suffering, especially without at the same time distorting the qualities that make one human, such as

the capacity to feel and think fully and freely, that pill would be in most cases a treasure indeed. Only unsuffering and probably unfeeling social and literary critics would want to keep it from those who need it.

In some ways, what Kramer says in *Listening to Prozac* should not surprise any of us. It is hardly news that so much of what we are, both physically and mentally, has a biological basis. But the implications of that reality are becoming ever more weighty as we expand our capacity to affect that biology and, thereby, the essence of our human selves. That capacity is only in its infancy, and from what I can tell, it seems more likely to grow into a blessing than a curse. Humankind, in all its agonized and creative variety, is not slouching toward a pharmacologically normalized Bethlehem to be reborn.

—*Walter Reich, a practicing psychiatrist and Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, is the author of* A Stranger in My House (1984).

Other Titles

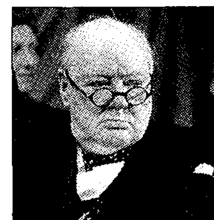
History

CHURCHILL: A Major New Assessment of His Life in Peace and War. *Ed. by Robert Blake and Wm. Roger Louis. Norton. 581 pp. $35*
CHURCHILL: The End of Glory. *By John Charmley. Harcourt Brace. 742 pp. $34.95*

Is the time yet right for a new assessment of Winston Churchill? Charmley, a radical conservative historian at the University of East Anglia, thinks so. His iconoclastic *End of Glory* presents Churchill as a great man but a greater failure, an inept war addict who kept England from successfully exiting a war it could not win (so Charmley believes) but which eventually Germany managed to lose. When published earlier in England, Charmley's revisionism—with its hints that it would have been better for Britain to trust Hitler than to trust America—elicited an almost universally cold response.

Charmley's study is provocatively strident, but in terms of thoroughness, when set beside Louis and Blake's big compilation, it practically dissolves into air. Louis, an historian at the University of Texas, and Blake, the editor of the English *Dictionary of National Biography*, have assembled the academic equivalent of a Hollywood extravaganza. David Cannadine writes on Churchill's family, Gordon Craig on Churchill and Germany, Michael Howard on Churchill and World War I, Stephen Ambrose on Churchill and Eisenhower, Philip Ziegler on Churchill and the monarchy, and on and on the list goes.

While historians (before Charmley) might have desisted from assaulting the central national myth of Churchill's wartime leadership, they have not failed to point out the astonishing combination of talent, energy, and fallibility that marked every phase of Churchill's checkered career. The contributors to this volume carry on in this tradition, many with



elegance. The best of several good pieces on Churchill's attempts to win two world wars is Richard Ollard's cool, compelling analysis of his naval ideas. Those ideas were at best misguided, at worst catastrophically misconceived. Like Napoleon before him, Churchill had a soldier's vision of sea warfare and repeatedly demanded that ships perform duties for which they were

dangerously unsuited. The whole Mediterranean fleet might have been lost to enemy airpower (just as the battle squadron sent to Malaya was lost a few months later) in the bombardment of Tripoli, but for freak weather conditions. Readers may be taken aback by this reconstruction of the widely accepted legend of the "former naval person," who, for his work at the Admiralty prior to World War I, has largely been given credit for Britain's preparedness to fight in that war. Ollard does pay proper tribute to Churchill's real achievements as a naval administrator, especially in improving the survival chances of ordinary seamen, even as he points out his terrifying capriciousness as an armchair admiral.

If there is to be a significant new assessment of Churchill, it will likely concern his contentious record as a peacetime minister. Peter Clarke argues that, in the 1920s, Churchill made a better chancellor of the exchequer and had a surer understanding of economics than his predecessors Lloyd George, Stanley Baldwin, and Neville Chamberlain. And Paul Addison shows how, despite his Tory and aristocratic background, Churchill became "one of the founders of the welfare state." Yet considering the array of historical talents assembled here, their collective verdict is modest enough. Churchill emerges overall as the same familiar figure, though with more nuances. The picture might have been more telling were there not one conspicuous absence among the distinguished contributors—Martin Gilbert, the author of the eight-volume biography of Churchill. To have "a major new assessment" of Churchill without Gilbert's contribution is, as one wit put it, rather like having a discussion of *Hamlet* without mention of Shakespeare.

W. E. B. DU BOIS: Biography of a Race. Vol. I: 1868–1919. *By David Levering Lewis. Holt. 700 pp. $35*

As a 25-year-old graduate student in Berlin, W. E. B. Du Bois confided to his diary his plans "to make a name in [social] science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race." That simple declaration foretold both the promise of academic achievement and the secular messianism that characterize Du Bois's entire career. Lewis, the Martin Luther King, Jr., professor of history at Rutgers University, here describes the first half of a long and eventful life in which Du Bois fulfilled his youthful promise.

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born to free-born parents in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868. A child prodigy—he contributed to black newspapers while still in his teens—he attended Nashville's Fisk University when he was only 16. He subsequently studied with Harvard University philosophers William James and George Santayana and became Harvard's first black Ph.D. Simply by pursuing an academic career, Du Bois defied the conventional wisdom of the time about black progress. Its foremost advocate, Booker T. Washington, believed blacks should forswear the pipe dreams of book learning or even of civic equality and instead strive for economic independence. Du Bois was not one to suffer this "racial humility." Already in 1891, he had written complaining to former U.S. president Rutherford B. Hayes, who had offered promising African-American students scholarship money but then had gone back on his word: "I find men willing to help me use my hands before I have got my brains in working order . . . but I never found a man willing to help me get a Harvard Ph.D."

Booker T. Washington was initially well disposed toward Du Bois. In 1900 he encouraged the younger man, then an Atlanta University professor, to come to Tuskegee Institute. The two large egos, however, soon clashed. Du Bois turned down Washington's offer, and Washington's powerful Tuskegee machine dashed Du Bois's prospective appointment as superintendent of Washington, D.C.'s black schools. As southern blacks increasingly suffered disenfranchisement, lynchings, the effects of Jim Crow laws, and race riots, Du Bois grew impatient and at last furious with Washington's accommodationist stance. In the summer of 1905, he convened a meeting on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls to launch the "first collective attempt by African Americans to demand full citizenship rights in the 20th century." That organization would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People five years later. By then the Wizard of Tuskegee was eclipsed, and it was clear that the 20th cen-

tury would belong to Du Bois. When he died a half century later at age 95, it was the day before Martin Luther King, Jr., marched on Washington—an event which, in effect, culminated the long march Du Bois had started in the darkest days of post-Reconstruction America.

Du Bois was prolific as a young scholar. He wrote 16 research monographs between 1897 and 1914, including *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), the first case study of an African-American community. Four years later he published his classic *Souls of Black Folk*, with its rending words: "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Du Bois gained more renown, though, for the *Crisis*, the magazine he founded in 1910 and edited with a strong hand for decades. Du Bois was an agnostic among a people whose bedrock institution was the church. But in the *Crisis*, he found his own bully pulpit, and, as its circulation topped 100,000, Du Bois became one of the more influential African-American secular preachers of this century.

Lewis's graceful, compelling narrative takes Du Bois up to the year 1919. The second half of Du Bois's life—in which he lost faith in integration, flirted with communism, and surrendered his American nationality to become a citizen of Ghana—promises to make, if anything, an even more stirring, tumultuous volume.

NATIONALISM: Five Roads to Modernity.
By Liah Greenfeld. Harvard. 581 pp. $49.95

Nationalism is a big subject that has been illuminated by small books: Elie Kedourie's pungent *Nationalism* (1960), for instance, and Benedict Anderson's luminous *Imagined Communities* (1983). *Five Roads to Modernity* is an equally important study but one that comes in the large economy size, encompassing five centuries of nationalism in five countries. Curiously, during the last century most observers believed that nationalism's days were numbered, to be replaced by an era of liberal states operating on universal principles (according to John Stuart Mill) or on the precepts of international socialism (courtesy of Karl Marx). Here Greenfeld, a Harvard University sociologist, locates the historical detail that Marx and Mill overlooked in order to show why "it is nationality which has made our world, politically, what it is."

"God's firstborn" among nationalists were the English. The new English aristocracy of the 16th century, often commoners by birth, inherited a world view that did not allow for upward mobility; so they justified their aristocratic claims by identifying the English as a chosen people. (If, instead of invoking this embryonic nationalism, they had forged genealogies for themselves, history might be different today.)

The success of the English national idea proved irresistible when, two centuries later, French aristocrats were searching for a way to oppose royal power. Copying the English, they evoked a national authority greater than the crown's, even while they developed what Greenfeld calls *ressentiment*, a hostile envy, of the English themselves. The French thus established a precedent (which has been followed in every case but America's), according to which a dissatisfied or displaced group adapts a successful foreign example of nationalism but rejects the foreigners who inspire it. In France, Greenfeld writes, instead of the people delegating authority to the nation's representatives, as they did in England, "it was the nation from which authority emanated and it empowered individuals." Eighteenth-century France already possessed those characteristics that today make nationalism appear so dreadful: xenophobia, the subjugation of the individual to the group, and a subsequent recourse to violence or a reign of terror to solve its problems.

Five centuries of nationalism have supplied Greenfeld so many facts and facets to explore that they may obscure how iconoclastic her underlying thesis is. Historians and sociologists have usually assumed that modernity precedes nationalism, that the alienation and materialism of modern life necessitate a nationalistic state to hold together the forces let loose. Greenfeld, however, reverses that chronological order. Not only in England and France but in Germany, Russia, and the United States, she argues, the development of nationalism—the changing from a religion- or estates-based interpretation

to a national interpretation of the social order—was what allowed the peculiarly modern arrangements of power and production to come about.

Corroborating Greenfeld's thesis, Gordon Wood, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1992), shows that the civic ideology of the Founding Fathers transformed America from a feudal land to a modern state. And in fact America is Greenfeld's example of a benevolent nationalism, a nationalism that is "civic" rather than "ethnic." In the early American republic, she argues, nationalism did not need to rely on ethnic appeals (as it would in Russian and Germany) but could identify itself with universal Enlightenment principles of citizenship. Yet today America is preoccupied with ethnic questions in ways it never was before. Indeed, on the eve of the 21st century, America is itself uncertain what it is: a model for the world's future, or the heir to a decaying mythology from a more fortunate past.

Arts & Letters

THE SIXTIES: The Last Journal, 1960–1972.
By Edmund Wilson. Ed. by Lewis M. Dabney. Farrar Straus. 968 pp. $35

When Alfred Kazin published *On Native Grounds* (1942), a study of American literature, he was invited to the home of Edmund Wilson. Amid formalities and drinks, Wilson's then-wife, novelist Mary McCarthy, let Kazin know that contemporary criticism was her husband's property. For all the presumption in such a remark, Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) possessed the intelligence, range, and determination to be *the* American critic. He wrote copiously about everything, from Civil War literature to the Iroquois. He was also the author of fiction, poetry, plays, and, not least, a 3,310-page journal.

Wilson kept this journal for 60 years, using as models the stylistic precision of Flaubert and the Goncourts, the expository thoroughness of the historian Macauley, and the revealing personal intimacy of Boswell. Readers entering into it will find themselves backstage among a goodly portion of the makers of 20th-century American literature. For example, Wilson describes a dinner at the White House in 1962 at which Tennessee Williams misbehaves, André Malraux waxes pompous, and John Kennedy tells yet another assemblage that the White House has never seen so much talent together except when Jefferson dined alone.

As well as retailing gossip and wide learning, Wilson's journal may also provide an answer to why his works are less read today. Even Wilson's best books often seem motivated by an interest somewhat extrinsic to the subject, above all by social and political concerns that now seem outdated. Read today, many of Wilson's pronouncements sound strange, such as his comparison of Lincoln's keeping the Union together to Lenin's great achievement of "binding Russia, with its innumerable ethnic groups scattered through immense spaces, in a tight bureaucratic net."

But the journal itself is usually intimate rather than didactic, and here, rather than in his novels and plays, Wilson creates his most indelible character. How revealing the old seducer is, even poignant, when he describes himself resting his head in a woman's lap and yet so deaf that, when she utters an endearment, he has to lift himself up and "put my ear to her mouth and ask her to repeat it." These journals could well carry some 1960s-style title like "Eros versus Death," as Wilson—resembling an enormous bald frog, aging, his health failing (his exercise regimen was confined to downing strenuous quantities of alcohol)—records his heroic struggle to live a full life both off and on the page. His productivity during the final decade, from *Patriotic Gore* (1962) to *Upstate* (1971), was by any standard impressive. The last journal entry is dated July 11, 1972. The next morning at his desk, attached to an oxygen machine, he was found dead at his worktable.

MOZART AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT: Truth, Virtue, and Beauty in Mozart's Operas.
By Nicholas Till. Norton. 371 pp. $29.95

For contemporary audiences, Mozart's operas too often pass in a blur—a most pleasurable blur, to be sure. One opera seems much like another because there is so little intellectual engagement with the matter of each opera, with its libretto,

its words. The dramatic action is usually dismissed as too trivial and contrived to warrant close attention, the words serving as little more than an excuse for the music. Isn't the music the point?

Well, not entirely. Or so argues Till, who has staged Mozart's operas at the Glyndebourne Festival, and who proposes to understand Mozart by explicating the texts of the operas. To do so, he examines the intellectual currents that ran through 18th-century Europe and places Mozart firmly in their grip. Although Mozart did not write his own librettos, he chose them with great care, and he inadvertently commented upon many of the moral and political debates of the age as he emended the librettos to his liking.

By attending to seemingly inconsequential aspects of the 18th century, Till provides greater insight into Mozart than do more ambitious studies such as Norbert Elias's *Mozart: A Study in Genius* (1991). Till brings up the 18th-century marriage contract, for example, to show its relevance to *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart composed during a time when contractual agreements had assumed a novel and distinctly modern character. Once traditional bonds were loosed, contracts became an essential prop for saving society from dissolution. Marriage in bourgeois society was, Till notes, the central nonpolitical contractual institution of the new order, and *The Marriage of Figaro* celebrates its ability to mediate conflicting interests among the individual, the family, religion, and the state. In contrast to the luminous universe of *Figaro* is the dark world of *Don Giovanni*, where the contractual agreements and promises that sustain society are no longer respected. Giovanni, who makes a point of breaking promises, is a harbinger of chaos, a destructive force who embodies all of the more profound social contradictions underlying the Enlightenment. He is freedom become license, and it is Giovanni's contempt for the marriage contract that finally rouses the statue of Commendatore to action.

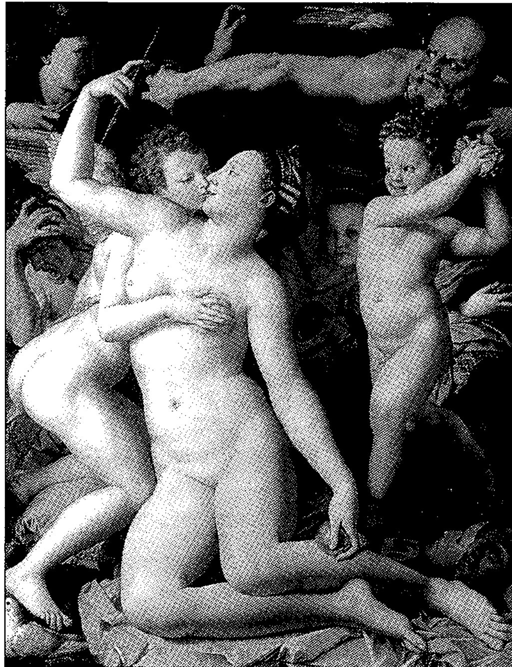
About other seemingly small details within Mozart's operas—the confusions of identity, the disguises, and the incongruous, harmonically skilled servants—Till is consistently acute. After reading *Mozart and the Enlightenment*, an opera lover may return to Mozart eager to hear as well what prompted the composer to set each particular text. Till knows the full range of scholarship about Mozart, yet in one respect he is not only unacademic but refreshingly old-fashioned. He writes, without apology, of faith, moral passion, and spiritual growth. No skeptic's quotation marks hedge the *beauty*, *truth*, and *virtue* in his title. Nor did they in the composer's art.

LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP. *By Allan Bloom. Simon & Schuster. 590 pp. $25*

Allan Bloom (1930–92) is known most widely for his best-selling diatribe, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), but the University of Chicago philosopher enjoyed a somewhat quieter reputation as an outstanding teacher. *Love and Friendship* suggests why. While the polemical edge that marked his best seller is not absent here, *Love and Friendship* is much more a teacher's book, in the best sense. It is a deeply learned and strongly opinionated exploration of what our finest poets, novelists, and philosophers have said about the subject of love and friendship and of the force that drives both—eros.

Or at least once did. Bloom, in his feisty introduction, argues that eros is now a much diminished thing, thanks in part to the triumph of scientific-reductivist ideologies (such as Freudianism and, more recently, "Kinseyism") and assorted degradations of the democratic dogma.

To show how powerful a force eros once was, Bloom conducts a reverse-chronological tour of its place in the Western imagination. He begins with the foremost thinker of early modernity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose notions of sublimity, combining the "purest longing with the fullest bodily satisfaction," provided the basic text of Romanticism. To be sure, Bloom notes, this ideal of the sublime could not survive the skepticism of the modern age: "The high began to appear to be merely moralism, whereas the



low looked like what really counts and what had been covered over by Romanticism." But doomed though his ideal was, the Swiss thinker's exploration of the human heart inspired countless artists who came after him, notably such novelists as Stendhal, Gustave Flaubert, Jane Austen, and Leo Tolstoy. Their better works unfailingly recur to the Rousseau-delineated conflicts between claims of the heart and the rules of society, and Bloom shines in his explication of these various elaborations.

Following Rousseau is Shakespeare, whose plays Bloom credits with depicting the greatest variety of erotic expression—"love's promise of unity, its mysterious attraction to beauty, and its hope to overcome even the ugliness of death," as well as its "folly and disappointment." Bloom also makes a compelling case for Shakespeare as the first philosopher of history, eager to know how the "permanent problems of human nature" are colored by the "typical circumstances of their particular place."

Bloom ends his book with the thinker who has longest engaged his interest, the great Socratic pupil, Plato. In Plato's dialogues, Bloom finds a rare merger of rational reflection and art, a combination that allowed the Greek thinker to range widely across the subject of love: "He explores the tensions between love of one's own and love of the good, and between the politically necessary subordination of eros to the family and the liberation suggested by such questionable erotic phenomena as incest, pederasty, and promiscuity. He sees in eros the possibility of both individual happiness and true human community."

Illuminating as Bloom's explications always are, they leave the reader with a curious sense of incompleteness. Is it because Bloom moves so exclusively in the realm of ideas, never touching ground in the historical conditions that might have occasioned major shifts in the (ever-diminishing) imaginings of eros? Or is it because he never takes too seriously the claims to truth of those beliefs, such as Christianity, that gave definitive shape to notions of love? One ends up wishing that Bloom had a little more of the large historical curiosity he so admired in Shakespeare. That failing aside, Bloom's last legacy is a triumph of humanistic reflection, and a reminder of what constitutes real education.

Contemporary Affairs

LENIN'S TOMB: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire. *By David Remnick. Random House. 576 pp. $25*
BLACK HUNDRED: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia. *By Walter Laqueur. HarperCollins. 317 pp. $27.50*

In a decade or two, it will probably seem inevitable: The collapse of the Soviet Union led to *a*) the reimposition, after a fleeting democratic experiment, of traditional Russian authoritarianism; *b*) Russia's gradual, steady, albeit painful emergence as a democratic, free market society; or *c*) a bloody descent into all-out civil war. At this moment, all these (as well as *d* and *e* and *f*) seem possible. Two excellent studies use recent events in Russia to project two quite divergent futures for that country in its latest "time of troubles."

Mixing the perspective of a historian and the street smarts of a journalist, Remnick recreates the final days of the communist era, on which he earlier reported as a correspondent for the *Wash-*

ington Post. Remnick attempts something more ambitious than the court history that Michael Beschloss and Strobe Talbott presented in *At the Highest Levels* (1993), or the straightforward political analysis of John B. Dunlop's *Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (1993). He hopes to makes comprehensible and alive what happened in the Soviet Union by narrating the story through the voices and experiences of the people there. He paints an immense, vivid canvas, crowded with characters and events from every corner of the collapsing empire. Remnick's account deals, of course, with the "fall of Marxism"; in his explanation, Marxism suffers, as it were, a second kind of fall. Perhaps most observers, in one good Marxist tradition, have written about the Soviet Union's collapse in terms of economics—that is, of economic corruption and inefficiency too extreme to deliver even the minimum of goods to keep a cowed populace in its place. This economic framework is largely missing from Remnick's account; instead he focuses on what he calls the "revenge of history." For decades, history (or rather its interpretation) had been a servant of the Communist Party, which shamelessly rewrote textbooks and airbrushed photographs to support the current party line. But then Gorbachev decreed that the "blank spots" of history be filled in. By admitting the crimes committed by Stalin (the purges, the famines, the Nazi-Soviet pact, the Katyn Forest massacre), Gorbachev hoped indirectly to cleanse the socialist system of its crudest and cruelest features. But once Gorbachev dropped the myth of party infallibility and the threat of physical punishment for historical heresy, people quickly advanced beyond Stalin's tattered image to criticize the very state and system that had enabled that tyrant to rule. "When history was no longer an instrument of the Party, the Party was doomed to failure," Remnick writes. "For history proved precisely that the Party was rotten at its core."

Remnick is optimistic about a "gradual and painful rise from the wreckage of communism," confident "that the former subjects of the Soviet experiment are too historically experienced to return to dictatorship and isolation." In *Black Hundred*, Laqueur presents a darker possibility. A prolific historian of modern Europe who earlier traced the parallels between Russian and German right-wing extremism, Laqueur acknowledges that the demise of the Soviet empire was "probably inevitable" but laments that the "way it did unravel was a disaster." Parliamentary democrats like Boris Yeltsin are still too weak, Laqueur maintains, and they are being challenged by a "nationalist movement firmly believing that Russia can be saved only by a strong, authoritarian government that restores law and order and pursues a conservative policy." In a restrained, pedestrian tone, Laqueur discusses the born-again incarnations of long-suppressed right-wing groups and that stewy concoction of chauvinism, anti-Semitism, anti-Westernism, racism, conspiracy theories, yearning for dictatorship, and messianic interpretations of history that bubbled over in tsarist times and is now on the boil again. The simultaneous collapse of empire, economy, and prestige has caused many Russians to look for easy explanations and identifiable scapegoats. Laqueur can never quite resolve, though, whether the current crop of extremists is merely a local variant of fringe groups that arise in most societies or a unique and grave threat to Russia. Certainly, after Remnick's stirring optimism, *Black Hundred* is a sobering reminder of the ugliness that might prevail should the post-Soviet democratic effort falter.

LIFE'S DOMINION: An Argument about Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom. *By Ronald Dworkin. Knopf. 273 pp. $23*

The United States needs a great book about abortion. Such a book, written perhaps by one of our more eminent political thinkers, would illuminate what may be the leading moral issue of our time for the mass of Americans, who are less "pro-choice" or "pro-life" than confused, troubled, or ambivalent about abortion.

Dworkin, who is the author of *Taking Rights Seriously* (1977) and who divides his time between Oxford University and New York University's law school, is certainly qualified to write such a book. And he very nearly succeeds. He argues that very few "pro-life" advocates actually believe in a "right to life." If they did, he notes, then logically they would insist on prohibiting abortion under all circumstances. The fetus,

after all, would have the same right to life no matter if rape or incest or marital intercourse were the cause of conception, and no matter if bearing the fetus to term might endanger the mother's life. But most abortion foes, Dworkin points out, are willing to make certain exceptions.

Dworkin argues that people on both sides of the issue are secretly united by a devotion to "the sanctity of life" but divided by their different understanding of the sacred. Opponents of abortion see the biological "gift of life" itself as sacred; more liberally inclined folk tend to think that life is made sacred by human "investments" in it. In this view, writes Dworkin, "it may be more frustrating of life's miracle when an adult's ambitions, talents, training, and expectations are wasted because of an . . . unwanted pregnancy than when a fetus dies before any significant investment of that kind has been made." The "pro-choice" position, he argues, is thus really a spiritual view.

Unfortunately, Dworkin soon abandons his provocative venture into moral philosophy for the familiar terrain of rights and interests and constitutional law. For him, as for many other liberal thinkers, abortion (like euthanasia, to which he devotes far fewer pages) ultimately comes down to a clash over individual rights. The pregnant woman, in other words, has them; the fetus does not. Arguing that the "pro-choice" position is religious in character, he adds a new twist, contending that a woman's right to an abortion is grounded not in the sketchy right to privacy cited in the Supreme Court's *Roe* v. *Wade* decision of 1973 but in the First Amendment's protection of the free exercise of religion. (For similar reasons he insists that "any honorable constitution" will guarantee individuals their right to die.) Dworkin's provocative case would have been stronger, however, had he subjected his own assumptions—especially those concerning what is sacred—to the same penetrating scrutiny he gives here to the "pro-life" position.

SYSTEMS OF SURVIVAL: A Dialogue on the Moral Foundations of Commerce and Politics. *By Jane Jacobs. Random House. 236 pp. $22*

What is it that binds society together? Why don't corporations and governments descend into corruption and lawlessness? Jacobs, in a book as ambitious as her landmark *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), ponders this question by examining various commercial and political systems throughout history. Unlike many philosophers who have tried to rest society on a single moral foundation, Jacobs uncovers two separate "systems of survival." On the one hand, a "commercial syndrome," which covers dealings in the marketplace, values working easily with strangers, respecting contracts, and promoting "inventiveness and novelty." The "guardian syndrome," on the other hand—represented by the military, the police, or any other organization of control—prizes obedience, discipline, loyalty, and shows of force. The alternating compatibility and conflict between the two systems allow society to function.

When people stay within their own syndromes—when corporations engage in free trade or when police concentrate on fighting crime and not, for example, meeting an arrest quota—the result, according to Jacobs, is overall success and prosperity for the society. But problems arise when the lines become blurred. The Mafia, for instance, is one of these "monstrous hybrids," a commercial entity that operates under a guardian mentality, adhering to a strict code of discipline, honor, and loyalty. The former Soviet Union, a guardian bureaucracy, strayed disastrously into the commercial syndrome when it undermined local officials by accepting kickbacks for not exposing shoddy workmanship or engaged in the falsification of production figures.

Jacobs's method of argument is peculiar, if not off-putting. Her book is framed as a modified Socratic dialogue whose characters are, among others, a novelist, a lawyer, a biologist, and an environmental activist. At first they doubt the existence of the two syndromes, but gradually through their discussions they come to agree that Jacobs is right and that these two systems do dictate human behavior.

Some readers may be slow to join in this celebration. So much of Jacob's book is taken up with establishing her two systems that she fails to notice all the kinds of human behaviors and actions that they cannot explain: altruism, paternalism, ethnic solidarity, religion, and rituals, to name a few. Nor does her theorizing account for why system abuses occur or indeed for much of what else transpires in the real world. Why is there, for example, insider trading or a savings-and-loan debacle? In interviews, Jacobs has faulted President Clinton's plan to jump-start the American economy as an inappropriate mixing of guardian and commercial syndromes. But when she proposes her own solutions—"Government's role is to create a good climate for new ideas and honest trade"—she sounds like a campaign stump politician afraid to discuss specifics. And, ironically, for a self-professed champion of democratic values, Jacobs seems inadvertently to have ruled out the democratic possibility: Constitutions, political parties, or individual rights, after all, are intrinsic to neither of her systems of survival.

Science & Technology

THE END OF PHYSICS: The Myth of a Unified Theory. *By David Lindley. Basic. 275 pp. $25*

Ancient astronomers, Pythagoras among them, found it aesthetically pleasing that the heavenly bodies orbited in perfect circles—so pleasing, indeed, that they interpreted their observations to support this "truth." Not until the work of Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton (who showed such orbits to be elliptical) did scientific observation consistently produce theories, instead of the other way around. Today, however, physicists are once again formulating elegant theories with little regard for observation or at least without the benefit of empirically verifiable data. As Lindley, a senior editor at *Science*, points out, the existence of such phenomena as the quark, dark matter, and a finite universe can be established only mathematically.

"How can it be that mathematics," Einstein once asked, "being a product of human thought which is independent of experience, is so admirably appropriate to the objects of reality?" That question, even more now than when Einstein was alive, vexes contemporary physicists. Today they contrive ever more arcane theories in pursuit of a "unified theory" or "Theory of Everything"—a grand set of metaprinciples that will account for the complete contents of the universe. The more purely mathematical the pursuit becomes, the more postmodern particle physics seems to resemble premodern science: that is, less an empirical science and more a kind of mathematical aesthetics. Noted Cambridge University physicist Stephen Hawking predicates his "quantum cosmology" on the model of a closed universe because, at bottom, he feels that finiteness is neater than infiniteness. But, as Lindley asks, what can be the utility of a "theory that looks attractive but contains no additional power of prediction, and makes no statements that can be tested?" Lindley is not completely dismissive: "Perhaps physicists will one day find a [unified] theory of such compelling beauty that its truth cannot be denied." Even so, he adds, "this theory of everything, this myth, will indeed spell the end of physics, not because physics has at last been able to explain everything in the universe, but because physics has reached the end of all things it has the power to explain."

POETRY

SEXTUS PROPERTIUS

Selected and Introduced by Joseph Brodsky

Very little is known about Sextus Propertius except that he was born circa 54 B.C. at Assisi in Umbria and died, most likely in Rome, circa 16 B.C. That adds up to too many *circas* for anyone's liking. Nevertheless, from this uncertain chronology we learn that Propertius was a few years younger than Virgil and Horace and a bit older than Tibullus and Ovid. Whether he was personally acquainted with them is of little import. Presumably he was, since he lived most of his life in Rome and shared with some of those poets the patronage of Maecenas. It has also been argued that Propertius's work prefigures Ovid's love poetry.

The little that is known about Propertius is gleaned chiefly from his own verses, that is, from the one book of his which is extant. The book is called *Cynthia Monobiblos*. All in all, it contains 92 poems called "elegies," partly because of their subject matter and tonality and partly because of their form, the so-called elegiac couplet, a combination of hexametric and pentametric lines that was the main poetic medium of the time.

The book owes its title to the addressee and heroine of some of these elegies. "Cynthia" was what you might call a society girl who apparently belonged to a social group inferior to our poet's own equestrian class. This class difference decisively colored the character of their interplay by ruling out the possibility of marital union. She was red-haired and slightly older than Propertius, of delicate constitution, in fact quite sickly, like the poet himself. She also had a number of admirers (the Illyrian praetor is not the poet's invention), was well read, and led a life that could be characterized as financially and emotionally independent. The same could be said of the poet himself.

Cynthia Monobiblos is essentially a book of love poetry. By the time Propertius was writing, this genre was highly developed, and the love lyric had become practically a conceit. Every poet worth his salt would produce a sequence of love elegies offering a description of the sentiment itself as well as of jealousy, rejection, regret, remorse, and so forth, accompanied by the necessary admixture of pastoral imagery and highly erudite classical exempla. It is the latter—rather than the emotional investment in the subject—that furnished the criteria by which love poetry of the period was judged.

Propertius's elegies are extraordinary because they modify the pastoral element by intermixing urban imagery. However, what truly sets Propertius apart from his far better-known contemporaries is the intensity of his actual sentiment for his heroine. His is genuine love poetry: The story

it tells is not so much that of passion as that of pure obsession. The Cynthia of these elegies is not a point of departure for an eloquent journey, as was the customary heroine in the Roman poetry of that period, but both the destination and the very means of transportation. She is the raw nerve of this poet's verses, as well as his own neurosis and its panacea. Toward the end of Part One, one develops a sense that, for all her and his numerous side shows, Cynthia was the one to show him the light.

Propertius openly acknowledges his indebtedness to the Greek poetry of the Hellenistic period and to Callimachus in particular: The anxiety of influence apparently did not cloud his agenda. But more interesting than his usage of Alexandrian tropes and mythological references is the fact that each of the elegies treating the subject of love invariably winds up in a discourse on death. Speak of Eros and Thanatos—Propertius could be used as a case study of their mutual affinity as well as of their affinity with the art of poetry. You may put this affinity down to the state of the poet's health or to his awareness of his medium's essential morbidity; you may also consider the possibility that the grip of one of these deities may suggest—by its strength—the other. Tradition, of course, calls the postcoital condition *petite mort*, but *petit amour* for the postmortem won't do. You also have to bear in mind that, as many of the elegies indicate, Cynthia herself was of a sickly disposition.

Toward the end of Part Two, Cynthia's presence diminishes. Evidently both she and her poet are embarked on different and diverging pursuits. In Part Three she is hardly there; nor in most of Part Four also. Finally, at the end of Part Four, the poet suddenly learns that Cynthia has died. This news results in the famous "queen of elegies": Elegy Number Seven in Part Four. This poem will never die, for here Eros and Thanatos indeed overlap. This poem is about an apparition: Charred by the funeral pyre, the soul of Cynthia visits the poet one night, shortly after her death. What distinguishes this poem from all the works in a similar vein throughout the history of literature is the stated reasons for this visitation. Cynthia's instructions to Propertius are so pragmatic that you end up believing the encounter indeed took place, that this is not so much a poem as a record of what transpired, of words actually spoken by a shade.

I hope that this elegy will whet readers' appetites for Sextus Propertius. His standing with the American public is either nonexistent or incomprehensibly low. This may in part have to do with a singular disservice done him by Ezra Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius"—the moronic pastiche of our eternal sophomore enamored of foreign name-dropping. Largely, though, this is so because, as regards the literature of antiquity, we are the true barbarians. The shorter shrift we give it, the deeper we bury our imaginations and the greater the desert of the human heart. Propertius can make it more habitable. By reading him, we may at least learn what it takes to endure 2,000 years, without being a messiah. Without the knowledge of what it takes to so endure, our run is bound to be short indeed.

Sunt Aliquid Manes; Letum non Omnia Finit . . .

There are ghosts after all, then; death is not the ending:
the soul, like smoke, escapes from the funeral flame.
Beside my bed I saw the wraith of Cynthia.
From that new grave by the noisy road she came
to me who, shaken, still, by the rites, lay restless
in the bed that was once our kingdom and was no more.
Her eyes, her hair, were the same as I had known them;
fire had charred one side of the robe she wore
and had eaten away the beryl ring on her finger;
her lips were withered from water drunk underground.
Her spirit, her voice, were living, but as she stood there
her brittle finger bones made a rattling sound.
"You forget so soon?" she said. "No woman ever
had a truer lover, yet sleep can erase the sight
of the little room we shared in the noisy Subura,
my window worn by ruses of the night,
the rope tossed over the sill where I'd hang for a moment
and hand over hand climb down into your embrace.
Under our cloaks the earth has been warmed by our bodies
as we lay by the crossroads in some shadowy place.
Our pledge was wordless, but our lies, our cheating,
the deaf southwestern wind has brushed away.
When I came to death, no man's voice called my name out,
though yours would have kept me alive another day;
for me no watchman troubled to sound his cleft reed;
a broken tile props up my fallen head.
Who has seen you stand by my grave grief-stricken?
Who has seen your robe grow wet with the tears you shed?
If you could not bear to pass beyond my doorway,
could you not have begged them to carry me slowly here?
Could you not have prayed for a wind to fan the flames high
or made them fragrant with nard? If you held me dear,
would a handful of hyacinths have been too costly
for my grave, or wine poured out of a broken urn?
It was Lygdamus the slave—I knew he was guilty
when I drank the wine. Let him feel the brand-iron burn!
As for Nomas, my woman, she may hide her poisons;
that burning jar will tell her crime to the town—
she, that cheap whore, that lowest of streetwalkers,
now trails in the dust the hem of her golden gown!
And if she hears that a slave has praised my beauty,
loads her shoulders with tasks she must faint beneath—
Petale's chained to a log, that poor old woman,
because she dared to bring to my grave a wreath;
Lalage's hung by her hair, whipped till she's bleeding,
for having asked Nomas a favor in my name.
And you—you let her melt down my golden image
to win her dowry from the fruit of that flame!
What reason I have to berate you!—yet I cannot;
in all your poems, it is my story you tell.

By the immutable chant of the Fates I swear it
(I tell the truth. Be silent, O dog of hell!):
I was faithful to you. If this is false, let adders
hiss on my tomb and coil through my bones, as well.
Beside the river of death there stand two mansions,
and to one or the other the dead must point the prow.
Adulterous Clytemnestra moves toward this one,
and Pasiphae in the wooden guise of the cow.
Toward the other in rose-decked boats go the blest, the godly,
where flowers are stirred by the softest airs of spring
and the air is full of the sound of harp and cymbal,
and turbaned dancers move to the plucked string.
Andromeda is there, and Hypermestre,
telling their stories of suffering and reward—
one as the scapegoat for her mother's boasting,
chained to the rock and rescued by Perseus' sword;
the other the single one of those fifty sisters
not guilty of murder on her wedding night.
Only death's tears can heal the wounds love dealt us;
I would hide your fickleness from all men's sight.
Listen—if your new mistress gives you leave to;
if you can hear my dead voice as I plead—
take care of my nurse Parthenie. You remember
she treated you well: see that she is not in need.
And that best of servants, Latris—do not expect her
to hold the mirror before your new love's face.
The poems you wrote to praise me—burn them, burn them.
Do not seek glory through my vanished grace.
But come to my tomb, and clear away the ivy
whose roots twist 'round my bones in a living mesh,
here where the Anio dawdles past the orchards
and ivory does not yellow, the air is so fresh.
Write a fitting phrase on some random pillar,
brief enough to catch the hurrying eye:
GOLDEN CYNTHIA LIES IN TIVOLI'S EARTH HERE:
NEW REASON TO HALLOW THIS LAND AND THE STREAM NEARBY.
You will have dreams, and you must learn to trust them;
through holy dreams the truth may be revealed.
At night we dead can wander—even Cerberus,
his chain cast off, will stray through forest and field,
until with dawn hell's law returns us to Lethe
where Charon the ferryman counts over his own.
Take your new love. I shall share you with no other
when you come to me here, and bone shall grind on bone."

And suddenly, her sad complaining ended,
she was gone, and I stood with my empty arms extended.

Poem excerpted from *The Poems of Propertius*, translated by Constance Carrier.
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