



What's New

BY JAMES MORRIS

Novelty beckons Americans as never before. As the wreckage of our headlong race for the next new thing recedes in the rearview mirror, will we remember what we've lost?

NOTHING NEW WAS ONCE THE NORM. THINK OF how many centuries our ancestors lived out their lives in circumstances that changed not at all from cradle to grave—that cycled through the seasons untouched by material advance or technological invention, following patterns that seemed beyond alteration. If they'd had clocks, it wouldn't have mattered whether the hands moved. The exacting second hand on a modern clock and those ubiquitous digital displays, with a colon sometimes pulsing the seconds between hours and minutes, locate us in every moment. We expect time to go not in a circle but like an arrow; if it lands in unfamiliar terrain, so much the better. We're suckers for the new, and “putting things behind us,” whether the things be lovers, careers, addresses, attitudes, fashions, gadgets, or disasters, is our norm.

Several years ago, in one of those Southern California beach communities where everyone is 24 and in perpetual motion so as to live forever, I took a wrong turn looking for a Coke. I entered a sumptuous big-box-store-sized market, where the fruits and vegetables, gently misted and more fully documented than millions of the nation's residents, were a lot better off than they had been outdoors. Olives had a



mammoth circular display table of their own, yogurts a separate wing; affidavits from coddled cows were available on request, and armed clerks kept watch at the door for the rogue chemical additive and, apparently, the Coke truck. On my way out I asked a young clerk, “Is this place new?” An inane question, because the brightly lit answer was all around me. Or so I thought. “New?” he echoed, giving me the look of benign exasperation that is youth’s frequent judgment on age’s confusion. “No,” he said. “It’s been here since January.” We spoke in March.

You don’t go to a grocery store for signs and wonders, but I couldn’t help but wonder whether the precise clerk had given me a sign. Was his way of measuring time peculiar to Californians (there have always been rumors on this coast of an alien world on the other), or did he speak for multitudes? How long had it been before the novelty of the produce palace wore off for him? A week? A weekend? The blithe Californian had come by an alternative route to pretty much the same conclusion as the dour voice in Ecclesiastes: “There is no new thing under the sun. Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new?” That glum fellow (who was, after all, writing a chunk of the *Old Testament*)

had his eye on eternal grand cycles of life and death, achievement and loss. He was a big-picture kind of guy, unswayed by the here-and-gone particulars. I think that, for my young Californian, life was still mostly about the particulars, and of them there was an infinite, cascading supply, each swept from its brief prominence by the one rushing up fast behind. Given a chance, the clerk might have come to a reasonable accommodation with his ancient soul mate: “Dude, there is no new thing under the sun *for long*.”

When I first heard the words “That’s so 20th century,” spoken five years into this century by a friend’s teenage daughter, I tried to put the best face on them. At least she was aware that there had been a 20th century, and her verdict hinted at some familiarity with its defining characteristics. Alas, she wasn’t situating the Great Leap Forward. In an “old” movie on TV, a female character had just negotiated a doorway in a shoulder-padded 1980s power suit. When I commented that the fashion was, technically, only “so 1980s and so 1940s,” she laughed. “You know what I mean. It’s all ancient history.”

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For adults of a certain age and disposition, the 20th is *still* the century, even after the demarcation of 9/11. Though past, it's present, and relaxing our grip on it, and its on us, does not come easy. It's the vast warehouse from which we routinely retrieve our instances of what's foolish and wise, shaming and ennobling, cause for despair and reason to hope. Yet the century has no hold at all on the young. How could it? They reckon time by other clocks. But so, increasingly, do we all. Indeed, the relentless encroachment of the new on our lives—our insistence on it, our adjustment to it—renovates us too. We're new, but maybe not improved.

Of course, there's new and there's new. Newness was sunk into this country with its European foundation supports. In the New World were New Spain, and New Netherland, and New France, and New England, and they were just the beginning. An atlas today shows the astonishing number of locations, large and small, scattered across America that have appended newness to their identities. The New World was a vast staging ground for trial and error, a place of risky, limitless potential. And that defining characteristic of the nation must never be lost—the new that's against stagnation, the new that won't put up with setback, the new that enables medical, scientific, and technological advance and farsighted social policy, the new that says “go west” even when “west” is only a metaphor and the frontier a cloud bank. With that invigorating newness let there be no quarrel. But not everything new resuscitates.

We've come to expect a regular dose of novelty in our

lives—in what we eat and wear, in how we're impressed or amused or provoked or healed. The new is a defibrillator to jolt our flagging selves. “But wait,” comes the objection. “Hasn't that always been so, at a level commensurate with the ability of each age to meet the demand?” Yes, it has. But what's new is the intensity of our expectations and their elevation to entitlement, the proliferation of outlets for satisfying what have become our proliferating needs, and the capacity of so many people to afford to indulge them. What's new is the rapidity with which the new becomes old. We spin through fads and passions as rapidly as tornadoes lift, sustain, and drop the contents of a landscape. What's new is the seemingly infinite upward spiral of American abundance (though not—never—an abundance for all), a stairway not just to heaven but to the emptiness beyond.

What's new is the degree of agitation in normal lives. There's so much less relaxing into anything or luxuriating in the traditional and settled—indeed, so little tolerance for letting things become traditional and settled. Seventy years ago, that so-20th-century Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote a line in the poem “Burnt Norton” that could be our new national motto: “distracted from distraction by distraction.” Our heads are full of noise, and it's not just metaphorical. We're weaning ourselves away from interior silence as if its source were a poisoned spring. The majestic, brooding eagle has been routed by the jittery hummingbird. We're up and doing before the task at hand is down and done. Attention deficit disorder could be the mascot malady for the national

mood. But it faces a scrappy new challenger: restless legs syndrome. The TV ads hawking a drug to tame the willful extremities make a point of reassuring skeptics that the syndrome is “a recognized medical condition,” affecting millions. It's also the perfect external enactment of an inner impatience.

Fewer and fewer of us remember a time before abundance. Those who do need no convincing that abundance beats want. But when does so much of so much become too much of



In the wireless world, remote engagements are the rule.

too much? There's no limit to the previously unsuspected needs of which we're daily made aware. If we can take or leave the excess, shed it like a false friend in narrowed circumstances, no harm is done. But if the excess clings to us like a second skin, if no description of us that omits it is complete, the new selves we've exchanged for old are no bargain. We've bartered Manhattan for trinkets.

An extraordinary proliferation of almost everything, even genders, has become the norm. The trivial paraphernalia that clutter our lives and are continually replaced—upgraded, we like to think—alter us as surely as we're changed by the real historic advances from, say, gaslight to electric bulb, wagon to car, calculator to computer, prayer to vaccine. We come to take as our due things that start out as luxuries and frivolities. We swim daily through a Sargasso Sea of stuff. Random examples are so many and so commonplace that they fall below the register of our notice: paper towels with motifs, and trash bags with texture; water that costs more than milk; the rows of cheeses flaunting their age and breads flaunting their youth that are now available in even the least super of markets; the wild profusion of Dockers, which multiply like pet projects in a congressional budget.

So we rise to new levels of expectation, and the elevation is both wonderful and unsettling—the latter literally so, because we're dislodged from the fixed states we once found acceptable, as if “increase of appetite had grown/By what it fed on.” That's Hamlet on his mother's lust, but it nails our little lusts too. To be fair, Shakespeare can also bolster a counterargument, as when addled old King Lear tells his niggling daughters, “Allow not nature more than nature needs./Man's life is cheap as beast's.”

But Lear did not live to see a \$15,000 Sub-Zero refrigerator.

The upscale contemporary kitchens to which many now aspire are dominated by refrigerators, big and stainless-steel enough to qualify as morgue annexes, and great gas stoves, flaunting their cockpit-class control panels and shooting flames of lagoonish blue from battalions of burners. Granite and marble weigh upon the kitchens' sprawling counters and the island in their midst. When too many kitchens have an island, the new norm will be an archipelago.

A bathroom indoors rather than out, with water that ran hot and cold and a toilet that flushed, was once a new thing, and it was plainly better than the alternative. But how

much better need a bathroom be? Caracalla himself could have learned from the builders of the new luxe bathroom, with its multiple adjacent toilets, bidets for every bottom, and showers roomy enough for a correctional facility. A big tub, raised several steps like the altar in a shrine, is fed by a circle of jets that pummel or caress, depending on your mood. The first time you sink into the water's plush motion, you emit a spontaneous “Sweet!” And next day, you learn that your neighbor's big tub has a diving board.

Jesus said that we'll always have the poor with us; he let the rich find out for themselves that they'll always have the richer.

Nothing will refashion us more than the wonders we're promised by technology—our new toys, our lineless new lifelines. Technological development has brought us to the borders of a wireless state whose terrain we've only begun to enter. To buy into a technology's novelty, we're willing to lock our better judgment in the attic. When the CD was introduced in the early 1980s, for example, the ads promised “Perfect sound. Forever.” OK, maybe not if you used the lustrous discs as coasters or Frisbees, but otherwise. In fact, the sound of those first CDs was awful, and the prospect of its lasting forever was terrifying. But the discs improved, as did the equipment to scan their surfaces and spin their data into sound. The upstart CD won our allegiance and vanquished the venerable LP, though to this day there are those who claim superiority for the analog sound of the vinyl record. Like old priests left to guard the rituals of a dying religion, they continue to dust surfaces, purify the tips of styli, and calibrate the force of tone arms rather than slide a “perfect” disc onto a tray and push a button. (The priests are right, but they've lost the war to that old devil convenience.)

Now we're told that it's time to put the CD, too, behind us, in the Dumpster with the records and cassettes, and welcome the superaudio CD (which may in turn lose a war to that new devil, downloading). At least the CD had a run of a couple of decades. Pity the adolescent but already obsolescing DVD. That's also to go behind us, in favor of one of two incompatible new technologies set for a war of their own. We didn't know we were dissatisfied with DVDs until we got the word, like vagrants being whacked with a cop's nightstick and told to move on.

The cell phone is perhaps the most conspicuous artifact of the new age, a fact of life about which parents really do

need to have a graphic sit-down with their kids. “Novelty always has some power, an unaccustomed mode of begging excites an unaccustomed degree of pity,” said Dr. Johnson. How else to explain the pandemic popularity of this device, an implement that has reduced to Russian roulette—dicing the previously settled purpose of a phone conversation: to communicate? We now drift in and out of such conversations across a minefield of echoes, elisions, and gaps, making what sense we can of large portions of them as if they were encrypted messages in wartime. (Yes, I know, cell phone technology is a work in progress and will one day be perfected, like the initially oval wheel.) The weighty rotary models of the 1950s and ’60s, the high-watermark of phone design, commanded respect. They knew their corded place on desks and bedside tables. They didn’t come with you; you went to them. Drop one on a foot, and you risked a toe. But the old phones did their job. Their designers had calibrated a comfortable distance between earpiece and mouthpiece. Rotary dials could be rushed forward, but they took their own imperial AT&T time to retract. While waiting, you gathered your thoughts.

In a remarkably short time, the cell phone has changed the character—lowered the bar—of daily life. The transfixed young cannot imagine that there was once a time when, if you were on an operating table or snorkeling or committing adultery, you were temporarily out of reach. Individuals who would bristle at the prospect of covert snooping into their lives have come to terms with abject public self-exposure—of their business dealings, their personal entanglements, their pets’ travails (“I told the vet to take the tail but keep it in a jar just in case”), their least movements (“I’m at the airport, the silvery terminal, in a black seat, near the Cinnabon stand, and I need a bathroom”). This widespread eavesdropping on others’ lives is new for ordinary citizens, and it’s accompanied by the same pretense that no one’s listening as government eavesdropping.

The cell phone is the scraggly bellwether of our new “on demand” existence; tattered phone conversations are but one of its capacities. Among the other things it does just as well are take pictures, play music and tiny movies and TV shows, and keep us Web tethered; one day soon it will tutor our children (unless it does that already), make coffee, and pick up the dry cleaning. It’s all the defibrillator we’ll need. And it awaits our commands, or, rather, demands. “On demand” is an unpleasant phrase, suggesting the stomped foot and tedious wail of the denied

child, yet it’s being promoted as the password to our newest world. What we want when we want it; better, what I want when I want it. Bespoke satisfaction. The new technology is a marvel, but it allows us, encourages us, to be extraordinarily self-ish. Imagine two earbudded music listeners sitting face to face, each in a state of acoustic bliss. They share . . . what? The cocoon of silence around them, cradling the din-to-order in their skulls. The technology empties the common ground. Or so goes the common indictment. But does this new splintering of exposure to the largely negligible products of popular culture really matter? If the two were reading books, would we expect them to read aloud to each other?

The magical devices will get smaller and smaller and perhaps be implanted in us, so that images can be projected onto the back of an eyeball and there will never be a moment when we can’t order up diversion. Sure, there’ll be a debate about the risks of driving 80 miles an hour with one eye on the road and the other on ESPN, one hand on a cell phone, the other on a Mocha Magnum, and the wheel in one’s teeth. But it will be a crisis manufactured by the nine remaining Luddites. We’ll develop new capacities to meet our new challenges. Evolution isn’t done with us yet. After all, what would a TV viewer of 50 years ago have made of today’s typically cluttered news broadcast, with a ceaseless flow of information scrolling horizontally and descending vertically around an oblivious talking head in the center? One adapts, and doesn’t look back. A world without the omnipresent beamed image will become harder and harder to recall, as will a world that made less use of the adjective “instant” and one where phones stayed put.

The electrical wires that still trail and tangle in the real and fading world have been, for all our lifetimes, telltale evidence of what leads where. In the wireless replacement world, who knows where what is leading? We think we roam free, but we’re on a new electronic leash. The credit cards and keyboard clicks that seal the deal, over and over again, the radio devices already hidden in ordinary purchases—in clothing and cosmetics and books—draw a map of our wants. And on that grid of our desires we’re tracked and pinned.

In years to come, no one will be able to remember a world where that was not so. ■