

Amusing
Ourselves to
Death

*Public Discourse
in the Age of
Show Business*

Neil Postman



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group
 Penguin Books USA Inc.,
 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
 Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
 Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
 Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
 Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
 Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:
 Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in the United States of America by
 Viking Penguin Inc. 1985
 Published in Penguin Books 1986

26 27 28 29 30

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A section of this book was supported by a commission from the Annenberg Scholars Program, Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California. Specifically, portions of chapters six and seven formed part of a paper delivered at the Scholars Conference, "Creating Meaning: Literacies of Our Time," February 1984.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Postman, Neil.
 Amusing ourselves to death.
 Bibliography: p.
 Includes index.
 I. Mass media — Influence. I. Title.
 P94.P63 1986 302.2'34 86-9513
 ISBN 0 14 00.9438 5

Printed in the United States of America
 Set in Linotron Meridien

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Contents

Foreword vii

Part I

1. The Medium Is the Metaphor	3
2. Media as Epistemology	16
3. Typographic America	30
4. The Typographic Mind	44
5. The Peek-a-Boo World	64

Part II

6. The Age of Show Business	83
7. "Now . . . This"	99
8. Shuffle Off to Bethlehem	114
9. Reach Out and Elect Someone	125
10. Teaching as an Amusing Activity	142
11. The Huxleyan Warning	155
Notes	165
Bibliography	173
Index	177

Foreword

We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another—slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley re-

marked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distracting pain. In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.

Part I.

The Typographic Mind

The first of the seven famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas took place on August 21, 1858, in Ottawa, Illinois. Their arrangement provided that Douglas would speak first, for one hour; Lincoln would take an hour and a half to reply; Douglas, a half hour to rebut Lincoln's reply. This debate was considerably shorter than those to which the two men were accustomed. In fact, they had tangled several times before, and all of their encounters had been much lengthier and more exhausting. For example, on October 16, 1854, in Peoria, Illinois, Douglas delivered a three-hour address to which Lincoln, by agreement, was to respond. When Lincoln's turn came, he reminded the audience that it was already 5 p.m., that he would probably require as much time as Douglas and that Douglas was still scheduled for a rebuttal. He proposed, therefore, that the audience go home, have dinner, and return refreshed for four more hours of talk.¹ The audience amiably agreed, and matters proceeded as Lincoln had outlined.

What kind of audience was this? Who were these people who could so cheerfully accommodate themselves to seven hours of oratory? It should be noted, by the way, that Lincoln and Douglas were not presidential candidates; at the time of their encounter in Peoria they were not even candidates for the United States Senate. But their audiences were not especially concerned with their official status. These were people who regarded such events as essential to their political education, who took them to be an integral part of their social lives, and who

were quite accustomed to extended oratorical performances. Typically at county or state fairs, programs included many speakers, most of whom were allotted three hours for their arguments. And since it was preferred that speakers not go unanswered, their opponents were allotted an equal length of time. (One might add that the speakers were not always men. At one fair lasting several days in Springfield, "Each evening a woman [lectured] in the courtroom on 'Woman's Influence in the Great Progressive Movements of the Day.'"²)

Moreover, these people did not rely on fairs or special events to get their fill of oratory. The tradition of the "stump" speaker was widely practiced, especially in the western states. By the stump of a felled tree or some equivalent open space, a speaker would gather an audience, and, as the saying had it, "take the stump" for two or three hours. Although audiences were mostly respectful and attentive, they were not quiet or unemotional. Throughout the Lincoln-Douglas debates, for example, people shouted encouragement to the speakers ("You tell 'em, Abe!") or voiced terse expressions of scorn ("Answer that one, if you can"). Applause was frequent, usually reserved for a humorous or elegant phrase or a cogent point. At the first debate in Ottawa, Douglas responded to lengthy applause with a remarkable and revealing statement. "My friends," he said, "silence will be more acceptable to me in the discussion of these questions than applause. I desire to address myself to your judgment, your understanding, and your consciences, and not to your passions or your enthusiasms."³ As to the conscience of the audience, or even its judgment, it is difficult to say very much. But as to its understanding, a great deal can be assumed.

For one thing, its attention span would obviously have been extraordinary by current standards. Is there any audience of Americans today who could endure seven hours of talk? or five? or three? Especially without pictures of any kind? Second, these audiences must have had an equally extraordinary capacity to comprehend lengthy and complex sentences aurally. In

Douglas' Ottawa speech he included in his one-hour address three long, legally phrased resolutions of the Abolition platform. Lincoln, in his reply, read even longer passages from a published speech he had delivered on a previous occasion. For all of Lincoln's celebrated economy of style, his sentence structure in the debates was intricate and subtle, as was Douglas'. In the second debate, at Freeport, Illinois, Lincoln rose to answer Douglas in the following words:

It will readily occur to you that I cannot, in half an hour, notice all the things that so able a man as Judge Douglas can say in an hour and a half; and I hope, therefore, if there be anything that he has said upon which you would like to hear something from me, but which I omit to comment upon, you will bear in mind that it would be expecting an impossibility for me to cover his whole ground.⁴

It is hard to imagine the present occupant of the White House being capable of constructing such clauses in similar circumstances. And if he were, he would surely do so at the risk of burdening the comprehension or concentration of his audience. People of a television culture need "plain language" both aurally and visually, and will even go so far as to require it in some circumstances by law. The Gettysburg Address would probably have been largely incomprehensible to a 1985 audience.

The Lincoln-Douglas audience apparently had a considerable grasp of the issues being debated, including knowledge of historical events and complex political matters. At Ottawa, Douglas put seven interrogatives to Lincoln, all of which would have been rhetorically pointless unless the audience was familiar with the Dred Scott decision, the quarrel between Douglas and President Buchanan, the disaffection of some Democrats, the Abolition platform, and Lincoln's famous "House divided" speech at Cooper Union. Further, in answering Douglas' questions in a later debate, Lincoln made a subtle distinction be-

tween what he was, or was not, "pledged" to uphold and what he actually believed, which he surely would not have attempted unless he assumed the audience could grasp his point. Finally, while both speakers employed some of the more simple-minded weapons of argumentative language (e.g., name-calling and bombastic generalities), they consistently drew upon more complex rhetorical resources—sarcasm, irony, paradox, elaborated metaphors, fine distinctions and the exposure of contradiction, none of which would have advanced their respective causes unless the audience was fully aware of the means being employed.

It would be false, however, to give the impression that these 1858 audiences were models of intellectual propriety. All of the Lincoln-Douglas debates were conducted amid a carnival-like atmosphere. Bands played (although not during the debates), hawkers sold their wares, children romped, liquor was available. These were important social events as well as rhetorical performances, but this did not trivialize them. As I have indicated, these audiences were made up of people whose intellectual lives and public business were fully integrated into their social world. As Winthrop Hudson has pointed out, even Methodist camp meetings combined picnics with opportunities to listen to oratory.⁵ Indeed, most of the camp grounds originally established for religious inspiration—Chautauqua, New York; Ocean Grove, New Jersey; Bayview, Michigan; Junaluska, North Carolina—were eventually transformed into conference centers, serving educational and intellectual functions. In other words, the use of language as a means of complex argument was an important, pleasurable and common form of discourse in almost every public arena.

To understand the audience to whom Lincoln and Douglas directed their memorable language, we must remember that these people were the grandsons and granddaughters of the Enlightenment (American version). They were the progeny of Franklin, Jefferson, Madison and Tom Paine, the inheritors of

the Empire of Reason, as Henry Steele Commager has called eighteenth-century America. It is true that among their number were frontiersmen, some of whom were barely literate, and immigrants to whom English was still strange. It is also true that by 1858, the photograph and telegraph had been invented, the advance guard of a new epistemology that would put an end to the Empire of Reason. But this would not become evident until the twentieth century. At the time of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, America was in the middle years of its most glorious literary outpouring. In 1858, Edwin Markham was six years old; Mark Twain was twenty-three; Emily Dickinson, twenty-eight; Whitman and James Russell Lowell, thirty-nine; Thoreau, forty-one; Melville, forty-five; Whittier and Longfellow, fifty-one; Hawthorne and Emerson, fifty-four and fifty-five; Poe had died nine years before.

I choose the Lincoln-Douglas debates as a starting point for this chapter not only because they were the preeminent example of political discourse in the mid-nineteenth century but also because they illustrate the power of typography to control the character of that discourse. Both the speakers and their audience were habituated to a kind of oratory that may be described as literary. For all of the hoopla and socializing surrounding the event, the speakers had little to offer, and audiences little to expect, but language. And the language that was offered was clearly modeled on the style of the written word. To anyone who has read what Lincoln and Douglas said, this is obvious from beginning to end. The debates opened, in fact, with Douglas making the following introduction, highly characteristic of everything that was said afterward:

Ladies and Gentlemen: I appear before you today for the purpose of discussing the leading political topics which now agitate the public mind. By an arrangement between Mr. Lincoln and myself, we are present here today for the purpose of having a joint discussion, as the representatives of the two great political parties of the

State and Union, upon the principles in issue between those parties, and this vast concourse of people shows the deep feeling which pervades the public mind in regard to the questions dividing us.⁶

This language is pure print. That the occasion required it to be spoken aloud cannot obscure that fact. And that the audience was able to process it through the ear is remarkable only to people whose culture no longer resonates powerfully with the printed word. Not only did Lincoln and Douglas write all their speeches in advance, but they also planned their rebuttals in writing. Even the spontaneous interactions between the speakers were expressed in a sentence structure, sentence length and rhetorical organization which took their form from writing. To be sure, there were elements of pure orality in their presentations. After all, neither speaker was indifferent to the moods of the audiences. Nonetheless, the resonance of typography was ever-present. Here was argument and counterargument, claim and counterclaim, criticism of relevant texts, the most careful scrutiny of the previously uttered sentences of one's opponent. In short, the Lincoln-Douglas debates may be described as expository prose lifted whole from the printed page. That is the meaning of Douglas' reproach to the audience. He claimed that his appeal was to understanding and not to passion, as if the audience were to be silent, reflective readers, and his language the text which they must ponder. Which brings us, of course, to the questions, What are the implications for public discourse of a written, or typographic, metaphor? What is the character of its content? What does it demand of the public? What uses of the mind does it favor?

One must begin, I think, by pointing to the obvious fact that the written word, and an oratory based upon it, *has a content*: a semantic, paraphrasable, propositional content. This may sound odd, but since I shall be arguing soon enough that much of our discourse today has only a marginal propositional con-

tent, I must stress the point here. Whenever language is the principal medium of communication—especially language controlled by the rigors of print—an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result. The idea may be banal, the fact irrelevant, the claim false, but there is no escape from meaning when language is the instrument guiding one's thought. Though one may accomplish it from time to time, it is very hard to say nothing when employing a written English sentence. What else is exposition good for? Words have very little to recommend them except as carriers of meaning. The shapes of written words are not especially interesting to look at. Even the sounds of sentences of spoken words are rarely engaging except when composed by those with extraordinary poetic gifts. If a sentence refuses to issue forth a fact, a request, a question, an assertion, an explanation, it is nonsense, a mere grammatical shell. As a consequence a language-centered discourse such as was characteristic of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America tends to be both content-laden and serious, all the more so when it takes its form from print.

It is serious because meaning demands to be understood. A written sentence calls upon its author to say something, upon its reader to know the import of what is said. And when an author and reader are struggling with semantic meaning, they are engaged in the most serious challenge to the intellect. This is especially the case with the act of reading, for authors are not always trustworthy. They lie, they become confused, they overgeneralize, they abuse logic and, sometimes, common sense. The reader must come armed, in a serious state of intellectual readiness. This is not easy because he comes to the text alone. In reading, one's responses are isolated, one's intellect thrown back on its own resources. To be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community. Thus, reading is by its nature a serious business. It is also, of course, an essentially rational activity.

From Erasmus in the sixteenth century to Elizabeth Eisenstein in the twentieth, almost every scholar who has grappled with the question of what reading does to one's habits of mind has concluded that the process encourages rationality; that the sequential, propositional character of the written word fosters what Walter Ong calls the "analytic management of knowledge." To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning. It means to uncover lies, confusions, and overgeneralizations, to detect abuses of logic and common sense. It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. To accomplish this, one must achieve a certain distance from the words themselves, which is, in fact, encouraged by the isolated and impersonal text. That is why a good reader does not cheer an apt sentence or pause to applaud even an inspired paragraph. Analytic thought is too busy for that, and too detached.

I do not mean to imply that prior to the written word analytic thought was not possible. I am referring here not to the potentialities of the individual mind but to the predispositions of a cultural mind-set. In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas. The public for whom it is intended is generally competent to manage such discourse. In a print culture, writers make mistakes when they lie, contradict themselves, fail to support their generalizations, try to enforce illogical connections. In a print culture, readers make mistakes when they don't notice, or even worse, don't care.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, print put forward a definition of intelligence that gave priority to the objective, rational use of the mind and at the same time encouraged forms of public discourse with serious, logically ordered content. It is no accident that the Age of Reason was coexistent with the growth of a print culture, first in Europe and then in America. The spread of typography kindled the hope that the world and

its manifold mysteries could at least be comprehended, predicted, controlled. It is in the eighteenth century that science—the preeminent example of the analytic management of knowledge—begins its refashioning of the world. It is in the eighteenth century that capitalism is demonstrated to be a rational and liberal system of economic life, that religious superstition comes under furious attack, that the divine right of kings is shown to be a mere prejudice, that the idea of continuous progress takes hold, and that the necessity of universal literacy through education becomes apparent.

Perhaps the most optimistic expression of everything that typography implied is contained in the following paragraph from John Stuart Mill's autobiography:

So complete was my father's reliance on the influence of mankind, wherever [literacy] is allowed to reach them, that he felt as if all would be gained if the whole population were taught to read, if all sorts of opinions were allowed to be addressed to them by word and in writing, and if, by means of the suffrage, they could nominate a legislature to give effect to the opinion they adopted.⁷

This was, of course, a hope never quite realized. At no point in the history of England or America (or anywhere else) has the dominion of reason been so total as the elder Mill imagined typography would allow. Nonetheless, it is not difficult to demonstrate that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American public discourse, being rooted in the bias of the printed word, was serious, inclined toward rational argument and presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content.

Let us take religious discourse as an illustration of this point. In the eighteenth century believers were as much influenced by the rationalist tradition as anyone else. The New World offered freedom of religion to all, which implied that no force other than reason itself could be employed to bring light to the unbeliever. "Here Deism will have its full chance," said Ezra Stiles

in one of his famous sermons in 1783. "Nor need libertines [any] more to complain of being overcome by any weapons but the gentle, the powerful ones of argument and truth."⁸

Leaving aside the libertines, we know that the Deists were certainly given their full chance. It is quite probable, in fact, that the first four presidents of the United States were Deists. Jefferson, certainly, did not believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ and, while he was President, wrote a version of the Four Gospels from which he removed all references to "fantastic" events, retaining only the ethical content of Jesus' teaching. Legend has it that when Jefferson was elected President, old women hid their Bibles and shed tears. What they might have done had Tom Paine become President or been offered some high post in the government is hard to imagine. In *The Age of Reason*, Paine attacked the Bible and all subsequent Christian theology. Of Jesus Christ, Paine allowed that he was a virtuous and amiable man but charged that the stories of his divinity were absurd and profane, which, in the way of the rationalist, he tried to prove by a close textual analysis of the Bible. "All national institutions of churches," he wrote, "whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."⁹ Because of *The Age of Reason*, Paine lost his standing among the pantheon of Founding Fathers (and to this day is treated ambiguously in American history textbooks). But Ezra Stiles did not say that libertines and Deists would be loved: only that with reason as their jury, they would have their say in an open court. As indeed they did. Assisted by the initial enthusiasms evoked by the French Revolution, the Deist attack on churches as enemies of progress and on religious superstition as enemy of rationality became a popular movement.¹⁰ The churches fought back, of course, and when Deism ceased to attract interest, they fought among themselves. Toward the mid-eighteenth century, Theodore Frelinghuysen and William Tennent led a revivalist movement among Presbyterians. They were followed by the

three great figures associated with religious "awakenings" in America—Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and, later in the nineteenth century, Charles Finney.

These men were spectacularly successful preachers, whose appeal reached regions of consciousness far beyond where reason rules. Of Whitefield, it was said that by merely pronouncing the word "Mesopotamia," he evoked tears in his audience. Perhaps that is why Henry Coswell remarked in 1839 that "religious mania is said to be the prevailing form of insanity in the United States."¹¹ Yet it is essential to bear in mind that quarrels over doctrine between the revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the established churches fiercely opposed to them were argued in pamphlets and books in largely rational, logically ordered language. It would be a serious mistake to think of Billy Graham or any other television revivalist as a latter-day Jonathan Edwards or Charles Finney. Edwards was one of the most brilliant and creative minds ever produced by America. His contribution to aesthetic theory was almost as important as his contribution to theology. His interests were mostly academic; he spent long hours each day in his study. He did not speak to his audiences extemporaneously. He read his sermons, which were tightly knit and closely reasoned expositions of theological doctrine.¹² Audiences may have been moved emotionally by Edwards' language, but they were, first and foremost, required to understand it. Indeed Edwards' fame was largely a result of a book, *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton*, published in 1737. A later book, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, published in 1746, is considered to be among the most remarkable psychological studies ever produced in America.

Unlike the principal figures in today's "great awakening"—Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, et al.—yesterday's leaders of revivalist movements in America were men of learning, faith in reason, and generous expository gifts. Their

disputes with the religious establishments were as much about theology and the nature of consciousness as they were about religious inspiration. Finney, for example, was no "backcountry rustic," as he was sometimes characterized by his doctrinal opponents.¹³ He had been trained as a lawyer, wrote an important book on systematic theology, and ended his career as a professor at and then president of Oberlin College.

The doctrinal disputes among religionists not only were argued in carefully drawn exposition in the eighteenth century, but in the nineteenth century were settled by the extraordinary expedient of founding colleges. It is sometimes forgotten that the churches in America laid the foundation of our system of higher education. Harvard, of course, was established early—in 1636—for the purpose of providing learned ministers to the Congregational Church. And, sixty-five years later, when Congregationalists quarreled among themselves over doctrine, Yale College was founded to correct the lax influences of Harvard (and, to this day, claims it has the same burden). The strong intellectual strain of the Congregationalists was matched by other denominations, certainly in their passion for starting colleges. The Presbyterians founded, among other schools, the University of Tennessee in 1784, Washington and Jefferson in 1802 and Lafayette in 1826. The Baptists founded, among others, Colgate (1817), George Washington (1821), Furman (1826), Denison (1832) and Wake Forest (1834). The Episcopalians founded Hobart (1822), Trinity (1823) and Kenyon (1824). The Methodists founded eight colleges between 1830 and 1851, including Wesleyan, Emory, and Depauw. In addition to Harvard and Yale, the Congregationalists founded Williams (1793), Middlebury (1800), Amherst (1821) and Oberlin (1833).

If this preoccupation with literacy and learning be a "form of insanity," as Coswell said of religious life in America, then let there be more of it. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, religious thought and institutions in America were dominated

by an austere, learned, and intellectual form of discourse that is largely absent from religious life today. No clearer example of the difference between earlier and modern forms of public discourse can be found than in the contrast between the theological arguments of Jonathan Edwards and those of, say, Jerry Falwell, or Billy Graham, or Oral Roberts. The formidable content to Edwards' theology must inevitably engage the intellect; if there is such a content to the theology of the television evangelicals, they have not yet made it known.

The differences between the character of discourse in a print-based culture and the character of discourse in a television-based culture are also evident if one looks at the legal system.

In a print-based culture, lawyers tended to be well educated, devoted to reason, and capable of impressive expository argument. It is a matter frequently overlooked in histories of America that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the legal profession represented "a sort of privileged body in the scale of intellect," as Tocqueville remarked. Folk heroes were made of some of those lawyers, like Sergeant Prentiss of Alabama, or "Honest" Abe Lincoln of Illinois, whose craftiness in manipulating juries was highly theatrical, not unlike television's version of a trial lawyer. But the great figures of American jurisprudence—John Marshall, Joseph Story, James Kent, David Hoffman, William Wirt and Daniel Webster—were models of intellectual elegance and devotion to rationality and scholarship. They believed that democracy, for all of its obvious virtues, posed the danger of releasing an undisciplined individualism. Their aspiration was to save civilization in America by "creating a rationality for the law."¹⁴ As a consequence of this exalted view, they believed that law must not be merely a learned profession but a liberal one. The famous law professor Job Tyson argued that a lawyer must be familiar with the works of Seneca, Cicero, and Plato.¹⁵ George Sharswood, perhaps envisioning the degraded state of legal education in the twentieth century, remarked in 1854 that to read law exclusively will damage the

mind, "shackle it to the technicalities with which it has become so familiar, and disable it from taking enlarged and comprehensive views even of topics falling within its compass."¹⁶

The insistence on a liberal, rational and articulate legal mind was reinforced by the fact that America had a written constitution, as did all of its component states, and that law did not grow by chance but was explicitly formulated. A lawyer needed to be a writing and reading man par excellence, for reason was the principal authority upon which legal questions were to be decided. John Marshall was, of course, the great "paragon of reason, as vivid a symbol to the American imagination as Natty Bumppo."¹⁷ He was the preeminent example of Typographic Man—detached, analytical, devoted to logic, abhorring contradiction. It was said of him that he never used analogy as a principal support of his arguments. Rather, he introduced most of his decisions with the phrase "It is admitted. . . ." Once one admitted his premises, one was usually forced to accept his conclusion.

To an extent difficult to imagine today, earlier Americans were familiar not only with the great legal issues of their time but even with the language famous lawyers had used to argue their cases. This was especially true of Daniel Webster, and it was only natural that Stephen Vincent Benét in his famous short story would have chosen Daniel Webster to contend with the Devil. How could the Devil triumph over a man whose language, described by Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, had the following characteristics?

. . . his clearness and downright simplicity of statement, his vast comprehensiveness of topics, his fertility in illustrations drawn from practical sources; his keen analysis, and suggestion of difficulties; his power of disentangling a complicated proposition, and resolving it in elements so plain as to reach the most common minds; his vigor in generalizations, planting his own arguments behind the whole battery of his opponents; his wariness and cau-

tion not to betray himself by heat into untenable positions, or to spread his forces over useless ground.¹⁸

I quote this in full because it is the best nineteenth-century description I know of the character of discourse expected of one whose mind is formed by the printed word. It is exactly the ideal and model James Mill had in mind in prophesying about the wonders of typography. And if the model was somewhat unreachable, it stood nonetheless as an ideal to which every lawyer aspired.

Such an ideal went far beyond the legal profession or the ministry in its influence. Even in the everyday world of commerce, the resonances of rational, typographic discourse were to be found. If we may take advertising to be the voice of commerce, then its history tells very clearly that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries those with products to sell took their customers to be not unlike Daniel Webster: they assumed that potential buyers were literate, rational, analytical. Indeed, the history of newspaper advertising in America may be considered, all by itself, as a metaphor of the descent of the typographic mind, beginning, as it does, with reason, and ending, as it does, with entertainment. In Frank Presbrey's classic study *The History and Development of Advertising*, he discusses the decline of typography, dating its demise in the late 1860's and early 1870's. He refers to the period before then as the "dark ages" of typographical display.¹⁹ The dark ages to which he refers began in 1704 when the first paid advertisements appeared in an American newspaper, *The Boston News-Letter*. These were three in number, occupying altogether four inches of single-column space. One of them offered a reward for the capture of a thief; another offered a reward for the return of an anvil that was "taken up" by some unknown party. The third actually offered something for sale, and, in fact, is not unlike real estate advertisements one might see in today's *New York Times*:

At Oysterbay, on *Long Island* in the Province of N. York. There is a very good Fulling-Mill, to be Let or Sold, as also a Plantation, having on it a large new Brick house, and another good house by it for a Kitchen & workhouse, with a Barn, Stable &c. a young Orchard and 20 acres clear land. The Mill is to be Let with or without the Plantation; Enquire of Mr. William *Bradford* Printer in N. York, and know further.²⁰

For more than a century and a half afterward, advertisements took this form with minor alterations. For example, sixty-four years after Mr. Bradford advertised an estate in Oyster Bay, the legendary Paul Revere placed the following advertisement in the *Boston Gazette*:

Whereas many persons are so unfortunate as to lose their Fore-Teeth by Accident, and otherways, to their great Detriment, not only in Looks, but Speaking both in Public and Private:—This is to inform all such, that they may have them re-placed with false Ones, that look as well as the Natural, and Answers the End of Speaking to all Intents, by PAUL REVERE, Goldsmith, near the Head of Dr. Clarke's Wharf, Boston.²¹

Revere went on to explain in another paragraph that those whose false teeth had been fitted by John Baker, and who had suffered the indignity of having them loosen, might come to Revere to have them tightened. He indicated that he had learned how to do this from John Baker himself.

Not until almost a hundred years after Revere's announcement were there any serious attempts by advertisers to overcome the lineal, typographic form demanded by publishers.²² And not until the end of the nineteenth century did advertising move fully into its modern mode of discourse. As late as 1890, advertising, still understood to consist of words, was regarded as an essentially serious and rational enterprise whose purpose was to convey information and make claims in propositional

form. Advertising was, as Stephen Douglas said in another context, intended to appeal to understanding, not to passions. This is not to say that during the period of typographic display, the claims that were put forward were true. Words cannot guarantee their truth content. Rather, they assemble a context in which the question, Is this true or false? is relevant. In the 1890's that context was shattered, first by the massive intrusion of illustrations and photographs, then by the nonpropositional use of language. For example, in the 1890's advertisers adopted the technique of using slogans. Presbrey contends that modern advertising can be said to begin with the use of two such slogans: "You press the button; we do the rest" and "See that hump?" At about the same time, jingles started to be used, and in 1892, Procter and Gamble invited the public to submit rhymes to advertise Ivory Soap. In 1896, H-O employed, for the first time, a picture of a baby in a high chair, the bowl of cereal before him, his spoon in hand, his face ecstatic. By the turn of the century, advertisers no longer assumed rationality on the part of their potential customers. Advertising became one part depth psychology, one part aesthetic theory. Reason had to move itself to other arenas.

To understand the role that the printed word played in providing an earlier America with its assumptions about intelligence, truth and the nature of discourse, one must keep in view that the act of reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had an entirely different quality to it than the act of reading does today. For one thing, as I have said, the printed word had a monopoly on both attention and intellect, there being no other means, besides the oral tradition, to have access to public knowledge. Public figures were known largely by their written words, for example, not by their looks or even their oratory. It is quite likely that most of the first fifteen presidents of the United States would not have been recognized had they passed the average citizen in the street. This would have been the case as well of the great lawyers, ministers and scientists of that era. To

think about those men was to think about what they had written, to judge them by their public positions, their arguments, their knowledge as codified in the printed word. You may get some sense of how we are separated from this kind of consciousness by thinking about any of our recent presidents; or even preachers, lawyers and scientists who are or who have recently been public figures. Think of Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter or Billy Graham, or even Albert Einstein, and what will come to your mind is an image, a picture of a face, most likely a face on a television screen (in Einstein's case, a photograph of a face). Of words, almost nothing will come to mind. This is the difference between thinking in a word-centered culture and thinking in an image-centered culture.

It is also the difference between living in a culture that provides little opportunity for leisure, and one that provides much. The farm boy following the plow with book in hand, the mother reading aloud to her family on a Sunday afternoon, the merchant reading announcements of the latest clipper arrivals—these were different kinds of readers from those of today. There would have been little casual reading, for there was not a great deal of time for that. Reading would have had a sacred element in it, or if not that, would have at least occurred as a daily or weekly ritual invested with special meaning. For we must also remember that this was a culture without electricity. It would not have been easy to read by either candlelight or, later, gaslight. Doubtless, much reading was done between dawn and the start of the day's business. What reading would have been done was done seriously, intensely, and with steadfast purpose. The modern idea of testing a reader's "comprehension," as distinct from something else a reader may be doing, would have seemed an absurdity in 1790 or 1830 or 1860. What else was reading but comprehending? As far as we know, there did not exist such a thing as a "reading problem," except, of course, for those who could not attend school. To attend school meant to learn to read, for without that capacity,

one could not participate in the culture's conversations. But most people could read and did participate. To these people, reading was both their connection to and their model of the world. The printed page revealed the world, line by line, page by page, to be a serious, coherent place, capable of management by reason, and of improvement by logical and relevant criticism.

Almost anywhere one looks in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then, one finds the resonances of the printed word and, in particular, its inextricable relationship to all forms of public expression. It may be true, as Charles Beard wrote, that the primary motivation of the writers of the United States Constitution was the protection of their economic interests. But it is also true that they assumed that participation in public life required the capacity to negotiate the printed word. To them, mature citizenship was not conceivable without sophisticated literacy, which is why the voting age in most states was set at twenty-one, and why Jefferson saw in universal education America's best hope. And that is also why, as Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager have pointed out, the voting restrictions against those who owned no property were frequently overlooked, but not one's inability to read.

It may be true, as Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, that the spirit that fired the American mind was the fact of an ever-expanding frontier. But it is also true, as Paul Anderson has written, that "it is no mere figure of speech to say that farm boys followed the plow with book in hand, be it Shakespeare, Emerson, or Thoreau."²³ For it was not only a frontier mentality that led Kansas to be the first state to permit women to vote in school elections, or Wyoming the first state to grant complete equality in the franchise. Women were probably more adept readers than men, and even in the frontier states the principal means of public discourse issued from the printed word. Those who could read had, inevitably, to become part of the conversation.

It may also be true, as Perry Miller has suggested, that the religious fervor of Americans provided much of their energy; or, as earlier historians told it, that America was created by an idea whose time had come. I quarrel with none of these explanations. I merely observe that the America they try to explain was dominated by a public discourse which took its form from the products of the printing press. For two centuries, America declared its intentions, expressed its ideology, designed its laws, sold its products, created its literature and addressed its deities with black squiggles on white paper. It did its talking in typography, and with that as the main feature of its symbolic environment rose to prominence in world civilization.

The name I give to that period of time during which the American mind submitted itself to the sovereignty of the printing press is the Age of Exposition. Exposition is a mode of thought, a method of learning, and a means of expression. Almost all of the characteristics we associate with mature discourse were amplified by typography, which has the strongest possible bias toward exposition: a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for reasons I am most anxious to explain, the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business.

6.

The Age of Show Business

A dedicated graduate student I know returned to his small apartment the night before a major examination only to discover that his solitary lamp was broken beyond repair. After a whiff of panic, he was able to restore both his equanimity and his chances for a satisfactory grade by turning on the television set, turning off the sound, and with his back to the set, using its light to read important passages on which he was to be tested. This is one use of television—as a source of illuminating the printed page.

But the television screen is more than a light source. It is also a smooth, nearly flat surface on which the printed word may be displayed. We have all stayed at hotels in which the TV set has had a special channel for describing the day's events in letters rolled endlessly across the screen. This is another use of television—as an electronic bulletin board.

Many television sets are also large and sturdy enough to bear the weight of a small library. The top of an old-fashioned RCA console can handle as many as thirty books, and I know one woman who has securely placed her entire collection of Dickens, Flaubert, and Turgenev on the top of a 21-inch Westinghouse. Here is still another use of television—as bookcase.

I bring forward these quixotic uses of television to ridicule the hope harbored by some that television can be used to support the literate tradition. Such a hope represents exactly what Marshall McLuhan used to call "rear-view mirror" thinking: the assumption that a new medium is merely an extension or

amplification of an older one; that an automobile, for example, is only a fast horse, or an electric light a powerful candle. To make such a mistake in the matter at hand is to misconstrue entirely how television redefines the meaning of public discourse. Television does not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it. If television is a continuation of anything, it is of a tradition begun by the telegraph and photograph in the mid-nineteenth century, not by the printing press in the fifteenth.

What is television? What kinds of conversations does it permit? What are the intellectual tendencies it encourages? What sort of culture does it produce?

These are the questions to be addressed in the rest of this book, and to approach them with a minimum of confusion, I must begin by making a distinction between a technology and a medium. We might say that a technology is to a medium as the brain is to the mind. Like the brain, a technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is a use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates.

Of course, like the brain itself, every technology has an inherent bias. It has within its physical form a predisposition toward being used in certain ways and not others. Only those who know nothing of the history of technology believe that a technology is entirely neutral. There is an old joke that mocks that naive belief. Thomas Edison, it goes, would have revealed his discovery of the electric light much sooner than he did except for the fact that every time he turned it on, he held it to his mouth and said, "Hello? Hello?"

Not very likely. Each technology has an agenda of its own. It is, as I have suggested, a metaphor waiting to unfold. The printing press, for example, had a clear bias toward being used as a

linguistic medium. It is *conceivable* to use it exclusively for the reproduction of pictures. And, one imagines, the Roman Catholic Church would not have objected to its being so used in the sixteenth century. Had that been the case, the Protestant Reformation might not have occurred, for as Luther contended, with the word of God on every family's kitchen table, Christians do not require the Papacy to interpret it for them. But in fact there never was much chance that the press would be used solely, or even very much, for the duplication of icons. From its beginning in the fifteenth century, the press was perceived as an extraordinary opportunity for the display and mass distribution of written language. Everything about its technical possibilities led in that direction. One might even say it was invented for that purpose.

The technology of television has a bias, as well. It is conceivable to use television as a lamp, a surface for texts, a bookcase, even as radio. But it has not been so used and will not be so used, at least in America. Thus, in answering the question, What is television?, we must understand as a first point that we are not talking about television as a technology but television as a medium. There are many places in the world where television, though the same technology as it is in America, is an entirely different medium from that which we know. I refer to places where the majority of people do not have television sets, and those who do have only one; where only one station is available; where television does not operate around the clock; where most programs have as their purpose the direct furtherance of government ideology and policy; where commercials are unknown, and "talking heads" are the principal image; where television is mostly used as if it were radio. For these reasons and more television will not have the same meaning or power as it does in America, which is to say, it is possible for a technology to be so used that its potentialities are prevented from developing and its social consequences kept to a minimum.

But in America, this has not been the case. Television has found in liberal democracy and a relatively free market economy a nurturing climate in which its full potentialities as a technology of images could be exploited. One result of this has been that American television programs are in demand all over the world. The total estimate of U.S. television program exports is approximately 100,000 to 200,000 hours, equally divided among Latin America, Asia and Europe.¹ Over the years, programs like "Gunsmoke," "Bonanza," "Mission: Impossible," "Star Trek," "Kojak," and more recently, "Dallas" and "Dynasty" have been as popular in England, Japan, Israel and Norway as in Omaha, Nebraska. I have heard (but not verified) that some years ago the Lapps postponed for several days their annual and, one supposes, essential migratory journey so that they could find out who shot J.R. All of this has occurred simultaneously with the decline of America's moral and political prestige, worldwide. American television programs are in demand not because America is loved but because American television is loved.

We need not be detained too long in figuring out why. In watching American television, one is reminded of George Bernard Shaw's remark on his first seeing the glittering neon signs of Broadway and 42nd Street at night. It must be beautiful, he said, if you cannot read. American television is, indeed, a beautiful spectacle, a visual delight, pouring forth thousands of images on any given day. The average length of a shot on network television is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests, always has something new to see. Moreover, television offers viewers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skills to comprehend it, and is largely aimed at emotional gratification. Even commercials, which some regard as an annoyance, are exquisitely crafted, always pleasing to the eye and accompanied by exciting music. There is no question but that the best photography in the world is presently seen on television commercials. American

television, in other words, is devoted entirely to supplying its audience with entertainment.

Of course, to say that television is entertaining is merely banal. Such a fact is hardly threatening to a culture, not even worth writing a book about. It may even be a reason for rejoicing. Life, as we like to say, is not a highway strewn with flowers. The sight of a few blossoms here and there may make our journey a trifle more endurable. The Lapps undoubtedly thought so. We may surmise that the ninety million Americans who watch television every night also think so. But what I am claiming 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 matter is presented as entertaining, which is another issue altogether.

To say it still another way: Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to "join them tomorrow." What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters' invitation because we know that the "news" is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say. Everything about a news show tells us this—the good looks and amiability of the cast, their pleasant banter, the exciting music that opens and closes the show, the vivid film footage, the attractive commercials—all these and more suggest that what we have just seen is no cause for weeping. A news show, to put it plainly, is a format for entertain-

ment, not for education, reflection or catharsis. And we must not judge too harshly those who have framed it in this way. They are not assembling the news to be read, or broadcasting it to be heard. They are televising the news to be seen. They must follow where their medium leads. There is no conspiracy here, no lack of intelligence, only a straightforward recognition that "good television" has little to do with what is "good" about exposition or other forms of verbal communication but everything to do with what the pictorial images look like.

I should like to illustrate this point by offering the case of the eighty-minute discussion provided by the ABC network on November 20, 1983, following its controversial movie *The Day After*. Though the memory of this telecast has receded for most, I choose this case because, clearly, here was television taking its most "serious" and "responsible" stance. Everything that made up this broadcast recommended it as a critical test of television's capacity to depart from an entertainment mode and rise to the level of public instruction. In the first place, the subject was the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. Second, the film itself had been attacked by several influential bodies politic, including the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority. Thus, it was important that the network display television's value and serious intentions as a medium of information and coherent discourse. Third, on the program itself no musical theme was used as background—a significant point since almost all television programs are embedded in music, which helps to tell the audience what emotions are to be called forth. This is a standard theatrical device, and its absence on television is always ominous. Fourth, there were no commercials during the discussion, thus elevating the tone of the event to the state of reverence usually reserved for the funerals of assassinated Presidents. And finally, the participants included Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, and Elie Wiesel, each of whom is a symbol of sorts of serious discourse. Although Kissinger, somewhat later, made an appearance on the hit show "Dynasty," he was then and still is a

paradigm of intellectual sobriety; and Wiesel, practically a walking metaphor of social conscience. Indeed, the other members of the cast—Carl Sagan, William Buckley and General Brent Scowcroft—are, each in his way, men of intellectual bearing who are not expected to participate in trivial public matters.

The program began with Ted Koppel, master of ceremonies, so to speak, indicating that what followed was not intended to be a debate but a *discussion*. And so those who are interested in philosophies of discourse had an excellent opportunity to observe what serious television means by the word "discussion." Here is what it means: Each of six men was given approximately five minutes to say something about the subject. There was, however, no agreement on exactly what the subject was, and no one felt obliged to respond to anything anyone else said. In fact, it would have been difficult to do so, since the participants were called upon, seriatim, as if they were finalists in a beauty contest, each being given his share of minutes in front of the camera. Thus, if Mr. Wiesel, who was called upon last, had a response to Mr. Buckley, who was called upon first, there would have been four commentaries in between, occupying about twenty minutes, so that the audience (if not Mr. Wiesel himself) would have had difficulty remembering the argument which prompted his response. In fact, the participants—most of whom were no strangers to television—largely avoided addressing each other's points. They used their initial minutes and then their subsequent ones to intimate their position or give an impression. Dr. Kissinger, for example, seemed intent on making viewers feel sorry that he was no longer their Secretary of State by reminding everyone of books he had once written, proposals he had once made, and negotiations he had once conducted. Mr. McNamara informed the audience that he had eaten lunch in Germany that very afternoon, and went on to say that he had at least fifteen proposals to reduce nuclear arms. One would have thought that the discussion would turn on this

issue, but the others seemed about as interested in it as they were in what he had for lunch in Germany. (Later, he took the initiative to mention three of his proposals but they were not discussed.) Elie Wiesel, in a series of quasi-parables and paradoxes, stressed the tragic nature of the human condition, but because he did not have the time to provide a context for his remarks, he seemed quixotic and confused, conveying an impression of an itinerant rabbi who has wandered into a coven of Gentiles.

In other words, this was no discussion as we normally use the word. Even when the "discussion" period began, there were no arguments or counterarguments, no scrutiny of assumptions, no explanations, no elaborations, no definitions. Carl Sagan made, in my opinion, the most coherent statement—a four-minute rationale for a nuclear freeze—but it contained at least two questionable assumptions and was not carefully examined. Apparently, no one wanted to take time from his own few minutes to call attention to someone else's. Mr. Koppel, for his part, felt obliged to keep the "show" moving, and though he occasionally pursued what he discerned as a line of thought, he was more concerned to give each man his fair allotment of time.

But it is not time constraints alone that produce such fragmented and discontinuous language. When a television show is in process, it is very nearly impermissible to say, "Let me think about that" or "I don't know" or "What do you mean when you say . . . ?" or "From what sources does your information come?" This type of discourse not only slows down the tempo of the show but creates the impression of uncertainty or lack of finish. It tends to reveal people in the *act of thinking*, which is as disconcerting and boring on television as it is on a Las Vegas stage. Thinking does not play well on television, a fact that television directors discovered long ago. There is not much to see in it. It is, in a phrase, not a performing art. But television demands a performing art, and so what the ABC network gave us was a picture of men of sophisticated verbal skills and political

understanding being brought to heel by a medium that requires them to fashion performances rather than ideas. Which accounts for why the eighty minutes were very entertaining, in the way of a Samuel Beckett play: The intimations of gravity hung heavy, the meaning passeth all understanding. The performances, of course, were highly professional. Sagan abjured the turtle-neck sweater in which he starred when he did "Cosmos." He even had his hair cut for the event. His part was that of the logical scientist speaking in behalf of the planet. It is to be doubted that Paul Newman could have done better in the role, although Leonard Nimoy might have. Scowcroft was suitably military in his bearing—terse and distant, the unbreakable defender of national security. Kissinger, as always, was superb in the part of the knowing world statesman, weary of the sheer responsibility of keeping disaster at bay. Koppel played to perfection the part of a moderator, pretending, as it were, that he was sorting out ideas while, in fact, he was merely directing the performances. At the end, one could only applaud those performances, which is what a good television program always aims to achieve; that is to say, applause, not reflection.

I do not say categorically that it is impossible to use television as a carrier of coherent language or thought in process. William Buckley's own program, "Firing Line," occasionally shows people in the act of thinking but who also happen to have television cameras pointed at them. There are other programs, such as "Meet the Press" or "The Open Mind," which clearly strive to maintain a sense of intellectual decorum and typographic tradition, but they are scheduled so that they do not compete with programs of great visual interest, since otherwise, they will not be watched. After all, it is not unheard of that a format will occasionally go against the bias of its medium. For example, the most popular radio program of the early 1940's featured a ventriloquist, and in those days, I heard more than once the feet of a tap dancer on the "Major Bowes' Amateur Hour." (Indeed, if I am not mistaken, he even once featured a pantomimist.) But

ventriloquism, dancing and mime do not play well on radio, just as sustained, complex talk does not play well on television. It can be made to play tolerably well if only one camera is used and the visual image is kept constant—as when the President gives a speech. But this is not television at its best, and it is not television that most people will choose to watch. The single most important fact about television is that people *watch* it, which is why it is called “television.” And what they watch, and like to watch, are moving pictures—millions of them, of short duration and dynamic variety. It is in the nature of the medium that it must suppress the content of ideas in order to accommodate the requirements of visual interest; that is to say, to accommodate the values of show business.

Film, records and radio (now that it is an adjunct of the music industry) are, of course, equally devoted to entertaining the culture, and their effects in altering the style of American discourse are not insignificant. But television is different because it encompasses all forms of discourse. No one goes to a movie to find out about government policy or the latest scientific advances. No one buys a record to find out the baseball scores or the weather or the latest murder. No one turns on radio anymore for soap operas or a presidential address (if a television set is at hand). But everyone goes to television for all these things and more, which is why television resonates so powerfully throughout the culture. Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore—and this is the critical point—how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged. It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse. It is that off the screen the same metaphor prevails. As typography once dictated the style of conducting politics, religion, business, education, law and other important social matters, television now takes command. In courtrooms, classrooms, operating rooms, board rooms, churches and even airplanes, Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do

not exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials. For the message of television as metaphor is not only that all the world is a stage but that the stage is located in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In Chicago, for example, the Reverend Greg Sakowicz, a Roman Catholic priest, mixes his religious teaching with rock 'n' roll music. According to the Associated Press, the Reverend Sakowicz is both an associate pastor at the Church of the Holy Spirit in Schaumburg (a suburb of Chicago) and a disc jockey at WKQX. On his show, “The Journey Inward,” Father Sakowicz chats in soft tones about such topics as family relationships or commitment, and interposes his sermons with “the sound of *Billboard's* Top 10.” He says that his preaching is not done “in a churchy way,” and adds, “You don't have to be boring in order to be holy.”

Meanwhile in New York City at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Father John J. O'Connor put on a New York Yankee baseball cap as he mugged his way through his installation as Archbishop of the New York Archdiocese. He got off some excellent gags, at least one of which was specifically directed at Mayor Edward Koch, who was a member of his audience; that is to say, he was a congregant. At his next public performance, the new archbishop donned a New York Mets baseball cap. These events were, of course, televised, and were vastly entertaining, largely because Archbishop (now Cardinal) O'Connor has gone Father Sakowicz one better: Whereas the latter believes that you don't have to be boring to be holy, the former apparently believes you don't have to be holy at all.

In Phoenix, Arizona, Dr. Edward Dietrich performed triple bypass surgery on Bernard Schuler. The operation was successful, which was nice for Mr. Schuler. It was also on television, which was nice for America. The operation was carried by at least fifty television stations in the United States, and also by the British Broadcasting Corporation. A two-man panel of narrators (a

play-by-play and color man, so to speak) kept viewers informed about what they were seeing. It was not clear as to why this event was televised, but it resulted in transforming both Dr. Dietrich and Mr. Schuler's chest into celebrities. Perhaps because he has seen too many doctor shows on television, Mr. Schuler was uncommonly confident about the outcome of his surgery. "There is no way in hell they are going to lose me on live TV," he said.²

As reported with great enthusiasm by both WCBS-TV and WNBC-TV in 1984, the Philadelphia public schools have embarked on an experiment in which children will have their curriculum sung to them. Wearing Walkman equipment, students were shown listening to rock music whose lyrics were about the eight parts of speech. Mr. Jocko Henderson, who thought of this idea, is planning to delight students further by subjecting mathematics and history, as well as English, to the rigors of a rock music format. In fact, this is not Mr. Henderson's idea at all. It was pioneered by the Children's Television Workshop, whose television show "Sesame Street" is an expensive illustration of the idea that education is indistinguishable from entertainment. Nonetheless, Mr. Henderson has a point in his favor. Whereas "Sesame Street" merely attempts to make learning to read a form of light entertainment, the Philadelphia experiment aims to make the classroom itself into a rock concert.

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, a rape trial was televised, to the delight of audiences who could barely tell the difference between the trial and their favorite mid-day soap opera. In Florida, trials of varying degrees of seriousness, including murder, are regularly televised and are considered to be more entertaining than most fictional courtroom dramas. All of this is done in the interests of "public education." For the same high purpose, plans are afoot, it is rumored, to televise confessionals. To be called "Secrets of the Confessional Box," the program will, of course, carry the warning that some of its material may be offensive to children and therefore parental guidance is suggested.

On a United Airlines flight from Chicago to Vancouver, a stewardess announces that its passengers will play a game. The passenger with the most credit cards will win a bottle of champagne. A man from Boston with twelve credit cards wins. A second game requires the passengers to guess the collective age of the cabin crew. A man from Chicago guesses 128, and wins another bottle of wine. During the second game, the air turns choppy and the Fasten Seat Belt sign goes on. Very few people notice, least of all the cabin crew, who keep up a steady flow of gags on the intercom. When the plane reaches its destination, everyone seems to agree that it's fun to fly from Chicago to Vancouver.

On February 7, 1985, *The New York Times* reported that Professor Charles Pine of Rutgers University (Newark campus) was named Professor of the Year by the Council for the Support and Advancement of Education. In explaining why he has such a great impact on his students, Professor Pine said: "I have some gimmicks I use all the time. If you reach the end of the blackboard, I keep writing on the wall. It always gets a laugh. The way I show what a glass molecule does is to run over to one wall and bounce off it, and run over to the other wall." His students are, perhaps, too young to recall that James Cagney used this "molecule move" to great effect in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. If I am not mistaken, Donald O'Connor duplicated it in *Singin' in the Rain*. So far as I know, it has been used only once before in a classroom: Hegel tried it several times in demonstrating how the dialectical method works.

The Pennsylvania Amish try to live in isolation from mainstream American culture. Among other things, their religion opposes the veneration of graven images, which means that the Amish are forbidden to see movies or to be photographed. But apparently their religion has not got around to disallowing seeing movies *when* they are being photographed. In the summer of 1984, for example, a Paramount Pictures crew descended upon Lancaster County to film the movie *Witness*, which is

about a detective, played by Harrison Ford, who falls in love with an Amish woman. Although the Amish were warned by their church not to interfere with the film makers, it turned out that some Amish welders ran to see the action as soon as their work was done. Other devout lay in the grass some distance away, and looked down on the set with binoculars. "We read about the movie in the paper," said an Amish woman. "The kids even cut out Harrison Ford's picture." She added: "But it doesn't really matter that much to them. Somebody told us he was in *Star Wars* but that doesn't mean anything to us."³ The last time a similar conclusion was drawn was when the executive director of the American Association of Blacksmiths remarked that he had read about the automobile but that he was convinced it would have no consequences for the future of his organization.

In the Winter, 1984, issue of the *Official Video Journal* there appears a full-page advertisement for "The Genesis Project." The project aims to convert the Bible into a series of movies. The end-product, to be called "The New Media Bible," will consist of 225 hours of film and will cost a quarter of a billion dollars. Producer John Heyman, whose credits include *Saturday Night Fever* and *Grease*, is one of the film makers most committed to the project. "Simply stated," he is quoted as saying, "I got hooked on the Bible." The famous Israeli actor Topol, best known for his role as Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, will play the role of Abraham. The advertisement does not say who will star as God but, given the producer's background, there is some concern that it might be John Travolta.

At the commencement exercises at Yale University in 1983, several honorary degrees were awarded, including one to Mother Teresa. As she and other humanitarians and scholars, each in turn, received their awards, the audience applauded appropriately but with a slight hint of reserve and impatience, for it wished to give its heart to the final recipient who waited shyly in the wings. As the details of her achievements were being

recounted, many people left their seats and surged toward the stage to be closer to the great woman. And when the name Meryl Streep was announced, the audience unleashed a sonic boom of affection to wake the New Haven dead. One man who was present when Bob Hope received his honorary doctorate at another institution said that Dr. Streep's applause surpassed Dr. Hope's. Knowing how to please a crowd as well as anyone, the intellectual leaders at Yale invited Dick Cavett, the talk-show host, to deliver the commencement address the following year. It is rumored that this year, Don Rickles will receive a Doctorate of Humane Letters and Lola Falana will give the commencement address.

Prior to the 1984 presidential elections, the two candidates confronted each other on television in what were called "debates." These events were not in the least like the Lincoln-Douglas debates or anything else that goes by the name. Each candidate was given five minutes to address such questions as, "What is (or would be) your policy in Central America? His opposite number was then given one minute for a rebuttal. In such circumstances, complexity, documentation and logic can play no role, and, indeed, on several occasions syntax itself was abandoned entirely. It is no matter. The men were less concerned with giving arguments than with "giving off" impressions, which is what television does best. Post-debate commentary largely avoided any evaluation of the candidates' ideas, since there were none to evaluate. Instead, the debates were conceived as boxing matches, the relevant question being, "Who KO'd whom? The answer was determined by the "style" of the men—how they looked, fixed their gaze, smiled, and delivered one-liners. In the second debate, President Reagan got off a swell one-liner when asked a question about his age. The following day, several newspapers indicated that Ron had KO'd Fritz with his joke. Thus, the leader of the free world is chosen by the people in the Age of Television.

What all of this means is that our culture has moved toward a

new way of conducting its business, especially its important business. The nature of its discourse is changing as the demarcation line between what is show business and what is not becomes harder to see with each passing day. Our priests and presidents, our surgeons and lawyers, our educators and newscasters need worry less about satisfying the demands of their discipline than the demands of good showmanship. Had Irving Berlin changed one word in the title of his celebrated song, he would have been as prophetic, albeit more terse, as Aldous Huxley. He need only have written, *There's No Business But Show Business*.

7.

"Now . . . This"

The American humorist H. Allen Smith once suggested that of all the worrisome words in the English language, the scariest is "uh oh," as when a physician looks at your X-rays, and with knitted brow says, "Uh oh." I should like to suggest that the words which are the title of this chapter are as ominous as any, all the more so because they are spoken without knitted brow—indeed, with a kind of idiot's delight. The phrase, if that's what it may be called, adds to our grammar a new part of speech, a conjunction that does not connect anything to anything but does the opposite: separates everything from everything. As such, it serves as a compact metaphor for the discontinuities in so much that passes for public discourse in present-day America.

"Now . . . this" is commonly used on radio and television newscasts to indicate that what one has just heard or seen has no relevance to what one is about to hear or see, or possibly to anything one is ever likely to hear or see. The phrase is a means of acknowledging the fact that the world as mapped by the speeded-up electronic media has no order or meaning and is not to be taken seriously. There is no murder so brutal, no earthquake so devastating, no political blunder so costly—for that matter, no ball score so tantalizing or weather report so threatening—that it cannot be erased from our minds by a newscaster saying, "Now . . . this." The newscaster means that you have thought long enough on the previous matter (approximately forty-five seconds), that you must not be morbidly pre-

stroy the records of the past. Certainly, this is the way of the Soviet Union, our modern-day Oceania. But as Huxley more accurately foretold it, nothing so crude as all that is required. Seemingly benign technologies devoted to providing the populace with a politics of image, instancy and therapy may disappear history just as effectively, perhaps more permanently, and without objection.

We ought also to look to Huxley, not Orwell, to understand the threat that television and other forms of imagery pose to the foundation of liberal democracy—namely, to freedom of information. Orwell quite reasonably supposed that the state, through naked suppression, would control the flow of information, particularly by the banning of books. In this prophecy, Orwell had history strongly on his side. For books have always been subjected to censorship in varying degrees wherever they have been an important part of the communication landscape. In ancient China, the *Annals* of Confucius were ordered destroyed by Emperor Chi Huang Ti. Ovid's banishment from Rome by Augustus was in part a result of his having written *Ars Amatoria*. Even in Athens, which set enduring standards of intellectual excellence, books were viewed with alarm. In *Areopagitica*, Milton provides an excellent review of the many examples of book censorship in Classical Greece, including the case of Protagoras, whose books were burned because he began one of his discourses with the confession that he did not know whether or not there were gods. But Milton is careful to observe that in all the cases before his own time, there were only two types of books that, as he puts it, "the magistrate cared to take notice of": books that were blasphemous and books that were libelous. Milton stresses this point because, writing almost two hundred years after Gutenberg, he knew that the magistrates of his own era, if unopposed, would disallow books of every conceivable subject matter. Milton knew, in other words, that it was in the printing press that censorship had found its true métier; that, in fact, information and ideas did not become a

profound cultural problem until the maturing of the Age of Print. Whatever dangers there may be in a word that is written, such a word is a hundred times more dangerous when stamped by a press. And the problem posed by typography was recognized early: for example, by Henry VIII, whose Star Chamber was authorized to deal with wayward books. It continued to be recognized by Elizabeth I, the Stuarts, and many other post-Gutenberg monarchs, including Pope Paul IV, in whose reign the first *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* was drawn. To paraphrase David Riesman only slightly, in a world of printing, information is the gunpowder of the mind; hence come the censors in their austere robes to dampen the explosion.

Thus, Orwell envisioned that (1) government control over (2) printed matter posed a serious threat for Western democracies. He was wrong on both counts. (He was, of course, right on both counts insofar as Russia, China and other pre-electronic cultures are concerned.) Orwell was, in effect, addressing himself to a problem of the Age of Print—in fact, to the same problem addressed by the men who wrote the United States Constitution. The Constitution was composed at a time when most free men had access to their communities through a leaflet, a newspaper or the spoken word. They were quite well positioned to share their political ideas with each other in forms and contexts over which they had competent control. Therefore, their greatest worry was the possibility of government tyranny. The Bill of Rights is largely a prescription for preventing government from restricting the flow of information and ideas. But the Founding Fathers did not foresee that tyranny by government might be superseded by another sort of problem altogether, namely, the corporate state, which through television now controls the flow of public discourse in America. I raise no strong objection to this fact (at least not here) and have no intention of launching into a standard-brand complaint against the corporate state. I merely note the fact with apprehension, as did George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, when he wrote:

Television is the new state religion run by a private Ministry of Culture (the three networks), offering a universal curriculum for all people, financed by a form of hidden taxation without representation. You pay when you wash, not when you watch, and whether or not you care to watch. . . .⁶

Earlier in the same essay, Gerbner said:

Liberation cannot be accomplished by turning [television] off. Television is for most people the most attractive thing going any time of the day or night. We live in a world in which the vast majority will not turn off. If we don't get the message from the tube, we get it through other people.

I do not think Professor Gerbner meant to imply in these sentences that there is a conspiracy to take charge of our symbolic world by the men who run the "Ministry of Culture." I even suspect he would agree with me that if the faculty of the Annenberg School of Communication were to take over the three networks, viewers would hardly notice the difference. I believe he means to say—and in any case, I do—that in the Age of Television, our information environment is completely different from what it was in 1783; that we have less to fear from government restraints than from television glut; that, in fact, we have no way of protecting ourselves from information disseminated by corporate America; and that, therefore, the battles for liberty must be fought on different terrains from where they once were.

For example, I would venture the opinion that the traditional civil libertarian opposition to the banning of books from school libraries and from school curricula is now largely irrelevant. Such acts of censorship are annoying, of course, and must be opposed. But they are trivial. Even worse, they are distracting, in that they divert civil libertarians from confronting those questions that have to do with the claims of new technologies.

To put it plainly, a student's freedom to read is not seriously injured by someone's banning a book on Long Island or in Anaheim or anyplace else. But as Gerbner suggests, television clearly does impair the student's freedom to read, and it does so with innocent hands, so to speak. Television does not ban books, it simply displaces them.

The fight against censorship is a nineteenth-century issue which was largely won in the twentieth. What we are confronted with now is the problem posed by the economic and symbolic structure of television. Those who run television do not limit our access to information but in fact widen it. Our Ministry of Culture is Huxleyan, not Orwellian. It does everything possible to encourage us to watch continuously. But what we watch is a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment. In America, we are never denied the opportunity to amuse ourselves.

Tyrants of all varieties have always known about the value of providing the masses with amusements as a means of pacifying discontent. But most of them could not have even hoped for a situation in which the masses would ignore that which does not amuse. That is why tyrants have always relied, and still do, on censorship. Censorship, after all, is the tribute tyrants pay to the assumption that a public knows the difference between serious discourse and entertainment—and cares. How delighted would be all the kings, czars and führers of the past (and commissars of the present) to know that censorship is not a necessity when all political discourse takes the form of a jest.

IO.

Teaching as an Amusing Activity

There could not have been a safer bet when it began in 1969 than that "Sesame Street" would be embraced by children, parents and educators. Children loved it because they were raised on television commercials, which they intuitively knew were the most carefully crafted entertainments on television. To those who had not yet been to school, even to those who had just started, the idea of being *taught* by a series of commercials did not seem peculiar. And that television should entertain them was taken as a matter of course.

Parents embraced "Sesame Street" for several reasons, among them that it assuaged their guilt over the fact that they could not or would not restrict their children's access to television. "Sesame Street" appeared to justify allowing a four- or five-year-old to sit transfixed in front of a television screen for unnatural periods of time. Parents were eager to hope that television could teach their children something other than which breakfast cereal has the most crackle. At the same time, "Sesame Street" relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read—no small matter in a culture where children are apt to be considered a nuisance. They could also plainly see that in spite of its faults, "Sesame Street" was entirely consonant with the prevailing spirit of America. Its use of cute puppets, celebrities, catchy tunes, and rapid-fire editing was certain to give pleasure to the children and would therefore serve as adequate preparation for their entry into a fun-loving culture.

As for educators, they generally approved of "Sesame Street," too. Contrary to common opinion, they are apt to find new methods congenial, especially if they are told that education can be accomplished more efficiently by means of the new techniques. (That is why such ideas as "teacher-proof" textbooks, standardized tests, and, now, micro-computers have been welcomed into the classroom.) "Sesame Street" appeared to be an imaginative aid in solving the growing problem of teaching Americans how to read, while, at the same time, encouraging children to love school.

We now know that "Sesame Street" encourages children to love school only if school is like "Sesame Street." Which is to say, we now know that "Sesame Street" undermines what the traditional idea of schooling represents. Whereas a classroom is a place of social interaction, the space in front of a television set is a private preserve. Whereas in a classroom, one may ask a teacher questions, one can ask nothing of a television screen. Whereas school is centered on the development of language, television demands attention to images. Whereas attending school is a legal requirement, watching television is an act of choice. Whereas in school, one fails to attend to the teacher at the risk of punishment, no penalties exist for failing to attend to the television screen. Whereas to behave oneself in school means to observe rules of public decorum, television watching requires no such observances, has no concept of public decorum. Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself.

Yet "Sesame Street" and its progeny, "The Electric Company," are not to be blamed for laughing the traditional classroom out of existence. If the classroom now begins to seem a stale and flat environment for learning, the inventors of television itself are to blame, not the Children's Television Workshop. We can hardly expect those who want to make good television shows to concern themselves with what the classroom is for. They are concerned with what television is for. This

does not mean that "Sesame Street" is not educational. It is, in fact, nothing but educational—in the sense that every television show is educational. Just as reading a book—any kind of book—promotes a particular orientation toward learning, watching a television show does the same. "The Little House on the Prairie," "Cheers" and "The Tonight Show" are as effective as "Sesame Street" in promoting what might be called the television style of learning. And this style of learning is, by its nature, hostile to what has been called book-learning or its handmaiden, school-learning. If we are to blame "Sesame Street" for anything, it is for the pretense that it is any ally of the classroom. That, after all, has been its chief claim on foundation and public money. As a television show, and a good one, "Sesame Street" does not encourage children to love school or anything about school. It encourages them to love television.

Moreover, it is important to add that whether or not "Sesame Street" teaches children their letters and numbers is entirely irrelevant. We may take as our guide here John Dewey's observation that the content of a lesson is the least important thing about learning. As he wrote in *Experience and Education*: "Perhaps the greatest of all pedagogical fallacies is the notion that a person learns only what he is studying at the time. Collateral learning in the way of formation of enduring attitudes . . . may be and often is more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history. . . . For these attitudes are fundamentally what count in the future."¹ In other words, the most important thing one learns is always something about *how* one learns. As Dewey wrote in another place, we learn what we do. Television educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them. And that is as precisely remote from what a classroom requires of them as reading a book is from watching a stage show.

Although one would not know it from consulting various recent proposals on how to mend the educational system, this point—that reading books and watching television differ en-

tirely in what they imply about learning—is the primary educational issue in America today. America is, in fact, the leading case in point of what may be thought of as the third great crisis in Western education. The first occurred in the fifth century B.C., when Athens underwent a change from an oral culture to an alphabet-writing culture. To understand what this meant, we must read Plato. The second occurred in the sixteenth century, when Europe underwent a radical transformation as a result of the printing press. To understand what this meant, we must read John Locke. The third is happening now, in America, as a result of the electronic revolution, particularly the invention of television. To understand what this means, we must read Marshall McLuhan.

We face the rapid dissolution of the assumptions of an education organized around the slow-moving printed word, and the equally rapid emergence of a new education based on the speed-of-light electronic image. The classroom is, at the moment, still tied to the printed word, although that connection is rapidly weakening. Meanwhile, television forges ahead, making no concessions to its great technological predecessor, creating new conceptions of knowledge and how it is acquired. One is entirely justified in saying that the major educational enterprise now being undertaken in the United States is not happening in its classrooms but in the home, in front of the television set, and under the jurisdiction not of school administrators and teachers but of network executives and entertainers. I don't mean to imply that the situation is a result of a conspiracy or even that those who control television want this responsibility. I mean only to say that, like the alphabet or the printing press, television has by its power to control the time, attention and cognitive habits of our youth gained the power to control their education.

This is why I think it accurate to call television a curriculum. As I understand the word, a curriculum is a specially constructed information system whose purpose is to influence,

teach, train or cultivate the mind and character of youth. Television, of course, does exactly that, and does it relentlessly. In so doing, it competes successfully with the school curriculum. By which I mean, it damn near obliterates it.

Having devoted an earlier book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, to a detailed examination of the antagonistic nature of the two curriculums—television and school—I will not burden the reader or myself with a repetition of that analysis. But I would like to recall two points that I feel I did not express forcefully enough in that book and that happen to be central to this one. I refer, first, to the fact that television's principal contribution to educational philosophy is the idea that teaching and entertainment are inseparable. This entirely original conception is to be found nowhere in educational discourses, from Confucius to Plato to Cicero to Locke to John Dewey. In searching the literature of education, you will find it said by some that children will learn best when they are interested in what they are learning. You will find it said—Plato and Dewey emphasized this—that reason is best cultivated when it is rooted in robust emotional ground. You will even find some who say that learning is best facilitated by a loving and benign teacher. But no one has ever said or implied that significant learning is effectively, durably and truthfully achieved when education is entertainment. Education philosophers have assumed that becoming acculturated is difficult because it necessarily involves the imposition of restraints. They have argued that there must be a sequence to learning, that perseverance and a certain measure of perspiration are indispensable, that individual pleasures must frequently be submerged in the interests of group cohesion, and that learning to be critical and to think conceptually and rigorously do not come easily to the young but are hard-fought victories. Indeed, Cicero remarked that the purpose of education is to free the student from the tyranny of the present, which cannot be pleasurable for those, like the young, who are struggling

hard to do the opposite—that is, accommodate themselves to the present.

Television offers a delicious and, as I have said, original alternative to all of this. We might say there are three commandments that form the philosophy of the education which television offers. The influence of these commandments is observable in every type of television programming—from "Seame Street" to the documentaries of "Nova" and "The National Geographic" to "Fantasy Island" to MTV. The commandments are as follows:

Thou shalt have no prerequisites

Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required. There must not be even a hint that learning is hierarchical, that it is an edifice constructed on a foundation. The learner must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice. This is why you shall never hear or see a television program begin with the caution that if the viewer has not seen the previous programs, this one will be meaningless. Television is a nongraded curriculum and excludes no viewer for any reason, at any time. In other words, in doing away with the idea of sequence and continuity in education, television undermines the idea that sequence and continuity have anything to do with thought itself.

Thou shalt induce no perplexity

In television teaching, perplexity is a superhighway to low ratings. A perplexed learner is a learner who will turn to another station. This means that there must be nothing that has to be remembered, studied, applied or, worst of all, endured. It is assumed that any information, story or idea can be made imme-

diately accessible, since the contentment, not the growth, of the learner is paramount.

Thou shalt avoid exposition like the ten plagues visited upon Egypt

Of all the enemies of television-teaching, including continuity and perplexity, none is more formidable than exposition. Arguments, hypotheses, discussions, reasons, refutations or any of the traditional instruments of reasoned discourse turn television into radio or, worse, third-rate printed matter. Thus, television-teaching always takes the form of story-telling, conducted through dynamic images and supported by music. This is as characteristic of "Star Trek" as it is of "Cosmos," of "Different Strokes" as of "Sesame Street," of commercials as of "Nova." Nothing will be taught on television that cannot be both visualized and placed in a theatrical context.

The name we may properly give to an education without prerequisites, perplexity and exposition is entertainment. And when one considers that save for sleeping there is no activity that occupies more of an American youth's time than television-viewing, we cannot avoid the conclusion that a massive reorientation toward learning is now taking place. Which leads to the second point I wish to emphasize: The consequences of this reorientation are to be observed not only in the decline of the potency of the classroom but, paradoxically, in the refashioning of the classroom into a place where both teaching and learning are intended to be vastly amusing activities.

I have already referred to the experiment in Philadelphia in which the classroom is reconstituted as a rock concert. But this is only the silliest example of an attempt to define education as a mode of entertainment. Teachers, from primary grades through college, are increasing the visual stimulation of their lessons; are reducing the amount of exposition their students must cope with; are relying less on reading and writing assign-

ments; and are reluctantly concluding that the principal means by which student interest may be engaged is entertainment. With no difficulty I could fill the remaining pages of this chapter with examples of teachers' efforts—in some instances, unconscious—to make their classrooms into second-rate television shows. But I will rest my case with "The Voyage of the Mimi," which may be taken as a synthesis, if not an apotheosis, of the New Education. "The Voyage of the Mimi" is the name of an expensive science and mathematics project that has brought together some of the most prestigious institutions in the field of education—the United States Department of Education, the Bank Street College of Education, the Public Broadcasting System, and the publishing firm Holt, Rinehart and Winston. The project was made possible by a \$3.65 million grant from the Department of Education, which is always on the alert to put its money where the future is. And the future is "The Voyage of the Mimi." To describe the project succinctly, I quote from four paragraphs in *The New York Times* of August 7, 1984:

Organized around a twenty-six-unit television series that depicts the adventures of a floating whale-research laboratory, [the project] combines television viewing with lavishly illustrated books and computer games that simulate the way scientists and navigators work. . . .

"The Voyage of the Mimi" is built around fifteen-minute television programs that depict the adventures of four young people who accompany two scientists and a crusty sea captain on a voyage to monitor the behavior of humpback whales off the coast of Maine. The crew of the converted tuna trawler navigates the ship, tracks down the whales and struggles to survive on an uninhabited island after a storm damages the ship's hull. . . .

Each dramatic episode is then followed by a fifteen-minute documentary on related themes. One such documentary involved a visit by one of the teen-age actors to Ted Taylor, a nuclear physicist in Greenport, L.I., who has devised a way of purifying sea water by freezing it.

The television programs, which teachers are free to record off the air and use at their convenience, are supplemented by a series of books and computer exercises that pick up four academic themes that emerge naturally from the story line: map and navigational skills, whales and their environment, ecological systems and computer literacy.

The television programs have been broadcast over PBS; the books and computer software have been provided by Holt, Rinehart and Winston; the educational expertise by the faculty of the Bank Street College. Thus, "The Voyage of the Mimi" is not to be taken lightly. As Frank Withrow of the Department of Education remarked, "We consider it the flagship of what we are doing. It is a model that others will begin to follow." Everyone involved in the project is enthusiastic, and extraordinary claims of its benefits come trippingly from their tongues. Janice Trebbi Richards of Holt, Rinehart and Winston asserts, "Research shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and television can do this better than any other medium." Officials of the Department of Education claim that the appeal of integrating three media—television, print, and computers—lies in their potential for cultivating higher-order thinking skills. And Mr. Withrow is quoted as saying that projects like "The Voyage of the Mimi" could mean great financial savings, that in the long run "it is cheaper than anything else we do." Mr. Withrow also suggested that there are many ways of financing such projects. "With 'Sesame Street,'" he said, "it took five or six years, but eventually you can start bringing in the money with T-shirts and cookie jars."

We may start thinking about what "The Voyage of the Mimi" signifies by recalling that the idea is far from original. What is here referred to as "integrating three media" or a "multi-media presentation" was once called "audio-visual aids," used by teachers for years, usually for the modest purpose of enhancing

student interest in the curriculum. Moreover, several years ago, the Office of Education (as the Department was then called) supplied funds to WNET for a similarly designed project called "Watch Your Mouth," a series of television dramatizations in which young people inclined to misuse the English language fumbled their way through a variety of social problems. Linguists and educators prepared lessons for teachers to use in conjunction with each program. The dramatizations were compelling—although not nearly as good as "Welcome Back, Kotter," which had the unassailable advantage of John Travolta's charisma—but there exists no evidence that students who were required to view "Watch Your Mouth" increased their competence in the use of the English language. Indeed, since there is no shortage of mangled English on everyday commercial television, one wondered at the time why the United States government would have paid anyone to go to the trouble of producing additional ineptitudes as a source of classroom study. A videotape of any of David Susskind's programs would provide an English teacher with enough linguistic aberrations to fill a semester's worth of analysis.

Nonetheless, the Department of Education has forged ahead, apparently in the belief that ample evidence—to quote Ms. Richards again—"shows that learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting, and that television can do this better than any other medium." The most charitable response to this claim is that it is misleading. George Comstock and his associates have reviewed 2,800 studies on the general topic of television's influence on behavior, including cognitive processing, and are unable to point to persuasive evidence that "learning increases when information is presented in a dramatic setting."² Indeed, in studies conducted by Cohen and Salomon; Meringoff; Jacoby, Hoyer and Sheluga; Stauffer, Frost and Rybolt; Stern; Wilson; Neuman; Katz, Adoni and Parness; and Gunter, quite the opposite conclusion is justified.³ Jacoby et al. found, for example, that only 3.5 percent of viewers were

able to answer successfully twelve true/false questions concerning two thirty-second segments of commercial television programs and advertisements. Stauffer et al. found in studying students' responses to a news program transmitted via television, radio and print, that print significantly increased correct responses to questions regarding the names of people and numbers contained in the material. Stern reported that 51 percent of viewers could not recall a single item of news a few minutes after viewing a news program on television. Wilson found that the average television viewer could retain only 20 percent of the information contained in a fictional televised news story. Katz et al. found that 21 percent of television viewers could not recall any news items within one hour of broadcast. On the basis of his and other studies, Salomon has concluded that "the meanings secured from television are more likely to be segmented, concrete and less inferential, and those secured from reading have a higher likelihood of being better tied to one's stored knowledge and thus are more likely to be inferential."⁴ In other words, so far as many reputable studies are concerned, television viewing does not significantly increase learning, is inferior to and less likely than print to cultivate higher-order, inferential thinking.

But one must not make too much of the rhetoric of grantmanship. We are all inclined to transform our hopes into tenacious claims when an important project is at stake. Besides, I have no doubt that Ms. Richards can direct us to several studies that lend support to her enthusiasm. The point is that if you want money for the redundant purpose of getting children to watch even more television than they already do—and dramatizations at that—you have to escalate the rhetoric to Herculean proportions.

What is of greatest significance about "The Voyage of the Mimi" is that the content selected was obviously chosen because it is eminently *televisable*. Why are these students studying the behavior of humpback whales? How critical is it that the

"academic themes" of navigational and map-reading skills be learned? Navigational skills have never been considered an "academic theme" and in fact seem singularly inappropriate for most students in big cities. Why has it been decided that "whales and their environment" is a subject of such compelling interest that an entire year's work should be given to it?

I would suggest that "The Voyage of the Mimi" was conceived by someone's asking the question, What is television good for?, not, What is education good for? Television is good for dramatizations, shipwrecks, seafaring adventures, crusty old sea captains, and physicists being interviewed by actor-celebrities. And that, of course, is what we have got in "The Voyage of the Mimi." The fact that this adventure sit-com is accompanied by lavishly illustrated books and computer games only underscores that the television presentation controls the curriculum. The books whose pictures the students will scan and the computer games the students will play are dictated by the content of the television shows, not the other way around. Books, it would appear, have now become an audio-visual aid; the principal carrier of the content of education is the television show, and its principal claim for a preeminent place in the curriculum is that it is entertaining. Of course, a television production can be used to stimulate interest in lessons, or even as the focal point of a lesson. But what is happening here is that the content of the school curriculum is being determined by the character of television, and even worse, that character is apparently not included as part of what is studied. One would have thought that the school room is the proper place for students to inquire into the ways in which media of all kinds—including television—shape people's attitudes and perceptions. Since our students will have watched approximately sixteen thousand hours of television by high school's end, questions should have arisen, even in the minds of officials at the Department of Education, about who will teach our students how to look at television, and when not to, and with what critical equipment when

they do. "The Voyage of the Mimi" project bypasses these questions; indeed, hopes that the students will immerse themselves in the dramatizations in the same frame of mind used when watching "St. Elsewhere" or "Hill Street Blues." (One may also assume that what is called "computer literacy" does not involve raising questions about the cognitive biases and social effects of the computer, which, I would venture, are the most important questions to address about new technologies.)

"The Voyage of the Mimi," in other words, spent \$3.65 million for the purpose of using media in exactly the manner that media merchants want them to be used—mindlessly and invisibly, as if media themselves have no epistemological or political agenda. And, in the end, what will the students have learned? They will, to be sure, have learned something about whales, perhaps about navigation and map reading, most of which they could have learned just as well by other means. Mainly, they will have learned that learning is a form of entertainment or, more precisely, that anything worth learning can take the form of an entertainment, and ought to. And they will not rebel if their English teacher asks them to learn the eight parts of speech through the medium of rock music. Or if their social studies teacher sings to them the facts about the War of 1812. Or if their physics comes to them on cookies and T-shirts. Indeed, they will expect it and thus will be well prepared to receive their politics, their religion, their news and their commerce in the same delightful way.

II.

The Huxleyan Warning

There are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled. In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque.

No one needs to be reminded that our world is now marred by many prison-cultures whose structure Orwell described accurately in his parables. If one were to read both *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and then for good measure, Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, one would have a fairly precise blueprint of the machinery of thought-control as it currently operates in scores of countries and on millions of people. Of course, Orwell was not the first to teach us about the spiritual devastations of tyranny. What is irreplaceable about his work is his insistence that it makes little difference if our wardens are inspired by right- or left-wing ideologies. The gates of the prison are equally impenetrable, surveillance equally rigorous, icon-worship equally pervasive.

What Huxley teaches is that in the age of advanced technology, spiritual devastation is more likely to come from an enemy with a smiling face than from one whose countenance exudes suspicion and hate. In the Huxleyan prophecy, Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours. There is no need for wardens or gates or Ministries of Truth. When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in

short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.

In America, Orwell's prophecies are of small relevance, but Huxley's are well under way toward being realized. For America is engaged in the world's most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug. This is an experiment that began slowly and modestly in the mid-nineteenth century and has now, in the latter half of the twentieth, reached a perverse maturity in America's consuming love-affair with television. As nowhere else in the world, Americans have moved far and fast in bringing to a close the age of the slow-moving printed word, and have granted to television sovereignty over all of their institutions. By ushering in the Age of Television, America has given the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future.

Those who speak about this matter must often raise their voices to a near-hysterical pitch, inviting the charge that they are everything from wimps to public nuisances to Jeremiahs. But they do so because what they want others to see appears benign, when it is not invisible altogether. An Orwellian world is much easier to recognize, and to oppose, than a Huxleyan. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us. We are not likely, for example, to be indifferent to the voices of the Sakharovs and the Timmermans and the Walesas. We take arms against such a sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe and Jefferson. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?

I fear that our philosophers have given us no guidance in this

matter. Their warnings have customarily been directed against those consciously formulated ideologies that appeal to the worst tendencies in human nature. But what is happening in America is not the design of an articulated ideology. No *Mein Kampf* or *Communist Manifesto* announced its coming. It comes as the unintended consequence of a dramatic change in our modes of public conversation. But it is an ideology nonetheless, for it imposes a way of life, a set of relations among people and ideas, about which there has been no consensus, no discussion and no opposition. Only compliance. Public consciousness has not yet assimilated the point that technology is ideology. This, in spite of the fact that before our very eyes technology has altered every aspect of life in America during the past eighty years. For example, it would have been excusable in 1905 for us to be unprepared for the cultural changes the automobile would bring. Who could have suspected then that the automobile would tell us how we were to conduct our social and sexual lives? Would reorient our ideas about what to do with our forests and cities? Would create new ways of expressing our personal identity and social standing?

But it is much later in the game now, and ignorance of the score is inexcusable. To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple. Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation. Introduce the alphabet to a culture and you change its cognitive habits, its social relations, its notions of community, history and religion. Introduce the printing press with movable type, and you do the same. Introduce speed-of-light transmission of images and you make a cultural revolution. Without a vote. Without polemics. Without guerrilla resistance. Here is ideology, pure if not serene. Here is ideology without

words, and all the more powerful for their absence. All that is required to make it stick is a population that devoutly believes in the inevitability of progress. And in this sense, all Americans are Marxists, for we believe nothing if not that history is moving us toward some preordained paradise and that technology is the force behind that movement.

Thus, there are near insurmountable difficulties for anyone who has written such a book as this, and who wishes to end it with some remedies for the affliction. In the first place, not everyone believes a cure is needed, and in the second, there probably isn't any. But as a true-blue American who has imbibed the unshakable belief that where there is a problem, there must be a solution, I shall conclude with the following suggestions.

We must, as a start, not delude ourselves with preposterous notions such as the straight Luddite position as outlined, for example, in Jerry Mander's *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*. Americans will not shut down any part of their technological apparatus, and to suggest that they do so is to make no suggestion at all. It is almost equally unrealistic to expect that nontrivial modifications in the availability of media will ever be made. Many civilized nations limit by law the amount of hours television may operate and thereby mitigate the role television plays in public life. But I believe that this is not a possibility in America. Once having opened the Happy Medium to full public view, we are not likely to countenance even its partial closing. Still, some Americans have been thinking along these lines. As I write, a story appears in *The New York Times* (September 27, 1984) about the plans of the Farmington, Connecticut, Library Council to sponsor a "TV Turnoff." It appears that such an effort was made the previous year, the idea being to get people to stop watching television for one month. The *Times* reports that the turnoff the previous January was widely noted by the media. Ms. Ellen Babcock, whose family participated, is quoted as saying, "It will be interesting to see if the

impact is the same this year as last year, when we had terrific media coverage." In other words, Ms. Babcock hopes that by watching television, people will learn that they ought to stop watching television. It is hard to imagine that Ms. Babcock does not see the irony in this position. It is an irony that I have confronted many times in being told that I must appear on television to promote a book that warns people against television. Such are the contradictions of a television-based culture.

In any case, of how much help is a one-month turnoff? It is a mere pittance; that is to say, a penance. How comforting it must be when the folks in Farmington are done with their punishment and can return to their true occupation. Nonetheless, one applauds their effort, as one must applaud the efforts of those who see some relief in limiting certain kinds of content on television—for example, excessive violence, commercials on children's shows, etc. I am particularly fond of John Lindsay's suggestion that political commercials be banned from television as we now ban cigarette and liquor commercials. I would gladly testify before the Federal Communications Commission as to the manifold merits of this excellent idea. To those who would oppose my testimony by claiming that such a ban is a clear violation of the First Amendment, I would offer a compromise: Require all political commercials to be preceded by a short statement to the effect that common sense has determined that watching political commercials is hazardous to the intellectual health of the community.

I am not very optimistic about anyone's taking this suggestion seriously. Neither do I put much stock in proposals to improve the quality of television programs. Television, as I have implied earlier, serves us most usefully when presenting junk-entertainment; it serves us most ill when it co-opts serious modes of discourse—news, politics, science, education, commerce, religion—and turns them into entertainment packages. We would all be better off if television got worse, not better.

"The A-Team" and "Cheers" are no threat to our public health. "60 Minutes," "Eye-Witness News" and "Sesame Street" are.

The problem, in any case, does not reside in *what* people watch. The problem is in *that* we watch. The solution must be found in *how* we watch. For I believe it may fairly be said that we have yet to learn *what* television is. And the reason is that there has been no worthwhile discussion, let alone widespread public understanding, of what information is and how it gives direction to a culture. There is a certain poignancy in this, since there are no people who more frequently and enthusiastically use such phrases as "the information age," "the information explosion," and "the information society." We have apparently advanced to the point where we have grasped the idea that a change in the forms, volume, speed and context of information *means* something, but we have not got any further.

What is information? Or more precisely, *what are* information? What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? What are the main psychic effects of each form? What is the relation between information and reason? What is the kind of information that best facilitates thinking? Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say that there is too much information? How would one know? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require? Does television, for example, give a new meaning to "piety," to "patriotism," to "privacy"? Does television give a new meaning to "judgment" or to "understanding"? How do different forms of information persuade? Is a newspaper's "public" different from television's "public"? How do different information forms dictate the type of content that is expressed?

These questions, and dozens more like them, are the means through which it might be possible for Americans to begin talking back to their television sets, to use Nicholas Johnson's

phrase. For no medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are. It is not important that those who ask the questions arrive at my answers or Marshall McLuhan's (quite different answers, by the way). This is an instance in which the asking of the questions is sufficient. To ask is to break the spell. To which I might add that questions about the psychic, political and social effects of information are as applicable to the computer as to television. Although I believe the computer to be a vastly overrated technology, I mention it here because, clearly, Americans have accorded it their customary mindless inattention; which means they will use it as they are told, without a whimper. Thus, a central thesis of computer technology—that the principal difficulty we have in solving problems stems from insufficient data—will go unexamined. Until, years from now, when it will be noticed that the massive collection and speed-of-light retrieval of data have been of great value to large-scale organizations but have solved very little of importance to most people and have created at least as many problems for them as they may have solved.

In any case, the point I am trying to make is that only through a deep and unflinching awareness of the structure and effects of information, through a demystification of media, is there any hope of our gaining some measure of control over television, or the computer, or any other medium. How is such media consciousness to be achieved? There are only two answers that come to mind, one of which is nonsense and can be dismissed almost at once; the other is desperate but it is all we have.

The nonsensical answer is to create television programs whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conception of news, political debate, religious thought, etc. I imagine such demonstrations would of necessity take the form of parodies, along the lines of "Saturday Night Live" and "Monty Python,"

the idea being to induce a nationwide horse laugh over television's control of public discourse. But, naturally, television would have the last laugh. In order to command an audience large enough to make a difference, one would have to make the programs vastly amusing, in the television style. Thus, the act of criticism itself would, in the end, be co-opted by television. The parodists would become celebrities, would star in movies, and would end up making television commercials.

The desperate answer is to rely on the only mass medium of communication that, in theory, is capable of addressing the problem: our schools. This is the conventional American solution to all dangerous social problems, and is, of course, based on a naive and mystical faith in the efficacy of education. The process rarely works. In the matter at hand, there is even less reason than usual to expect it to. Our schools have not yet even got around to examining the role of the printed word in shaping our culture. Indeed, you will not find two high school seniors in a hundred who could tell you—within a five-hundred-year margin of error—when the alphabet was invented. I suspect most do not even know that the alphabet was invented. I have found that when the question is put to them, they appear puzzled, as if one had asked, When were trees invented, or clouds? It is the very principle of myth, as Roland Barthes pointed out, that it transforms history into nature, and to ask of our schools that they engage in the task of de-mythologizing media is to ask something the schools have never done.

And yet there is reason to suppose that the situation is not hopeless. Educators are not unaware of the effects of television on their students. Stimulated by the arrival of the computer, they discuss it a great deal—which is to say, they have become somewhat "media conscious." It is true enough that much of their consciousness centers on the question, How can we use television (or the computer, or word processor) to control education? They have not yet got to the question, How can we use education to control television (or the computer, or word pro-

cessor)? But our reach for solutions ought to exceed our present grasp, or what's our dreaming for? Besides, it is an acknowledged task of the schools to assist the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture. That this task should now require that they learn how to distance themselves from their forms of information is not so bizarre an enterprise that we cannot hope for its inclusion in the curriculum; even hope that it will be placed at the center of education.

What I suggest here as a solution is what Aldous Huxley suggested, as well. And I can do no better than he. He believed with H. G. Wells that we are in a race between education and disaster, and he wrote continuously about the necessity of our understanding the politics and epistemology of media. For in the end, he was trying to tell us that what afflicted the people in *Brave New World* was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.