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## *Reach Out and Elect Someone*

In *The Last Hurrah*, Edwin O'Connor's fine novel about lusty party politics in Boston, Mayor Frank Skeffington tries to instruct his young nephew in the realities of political machinery. Politics, he tells him, is the greatest spectator sport in America. In 1966, Ronald Reagan used a different metaphor. "Politics," he said, "is just like show business."<sup>1</sup>

Although sports has now become a major branch of show business, it still contains elements that make Skeffington's vision of politics somewhat more encouraging than Reagan's. In any sport the standard of excellence is well known to both the players and spectators, and an athlete's reputation rises and falls by his or her proximity to that standard. Where an athlete stands in relation to it cannot be easily disguised or faked, which means that David Garth can do very little to improve the image of an outfielder with a .218 batting average. It also means that a public opinion poll on the question, Who is the best woman tennis player in the world?, is meaningless. The public's opinion has nothing to do with it. Martina Navratilova's serve provides the decisive answer.

One may also note that spectators at a sporting event are usually well aware of the rules of the game and the meaning of each piece of the action. There is no way for a batter who strikes out with the bases loaded to argue the spectators into believing that he has done a useful thing for his team (except, perhaps, by reminding them that he *could* have hit into a double play). The difference between hits and strike-outs, touchdowns and fumbles

bles, aces and double faults cannot be blurred, even by the pomposities and malapropisms of a Howard Cosell. If politics were like a sporting event, there would be several virtues to attach to its name: clarity, honesty, excellence.

But what virtues attach to politics if Ronald Reagan is right? Show business is not entirely without an idea of excellence, but its main business is to please the crowd, and its principal instrument is artifice. If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to *appear* as if you are, which is another matter altogether. And what the other matter is can be expressed in one word: advertising. In Joe McGinnis' book about Richard Nixon's campaign in 1968, *The Selling of the President*, he said much of what needs to be said about politics and advertising, both in his title and in the book. But not quite all. For though the selling of a President is an astonishing and degrading thing, it is only part of a larger point: In America, the fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial.

The television commercial is the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication to issue forth from the electric plug. An American who has reached the age of forty will have seen well over one million television commercials in his or her lifetime, and has close to another million to go before the first Social Security check arrives. We may safely assume, therefore, that the television commercial has profoundly influenced American habits of thought. Certainly, there is no difficulty in demonstrating that it has become an important paradigm for the structure of every type of public discourse. My major purpose here is to show how it has devastated political discourse. But there may be some value in my pointing, first, to its effect on commerce itself.

By bringing together in compact form all of the arts of show business—music, drama, imagery, humor, celebrity—the television commercial has mounted the most serious assault on capitalist ideology since the publication of *Das Kapital*. To un-

derstand why, we must remind ourselves that capitalism, like science and liberal democracy, was an outgrowth of the Enlightenment. Its principal theorists, even its most prosperous practitioners, believed capitalism to be based on the idea that both buyer and seller are sufficiently mature, well informed and reasonable to engage in transactions of mutual self-interest. If greed was taken to be the fuel of the capitalist engine, then surely rationality was the driver. The theory states, in part, that competition in the marketplace requires that the buyer not only knows what is good for him but also what is good. If the seller produces nothing of value, as determined by a rational marketplace, then he loses out. It is the assumption of rationality among buyers that spurs competitors to become winners, and winners to keep on winning. Where it is assumed that a buyer is unable to make rational decisions, laws are passed that invalidate transactions, as, for example, those which prohibit children from making contracts. In America, there even exists in law a requirement that sellers must tell the truth about their products, for if the buyer has no protection from false claims, rational decision-making is seriously impaired.

Of course, the practice of capitalism has its contradictions. Cartels and monopolies, for example, undermine the theory. But television commercials make hash of it. To take the simplest example: To be rationally considered, any claim—commercial or otherwise—must be made in language. More precisely, it must take the form of a proposition, for that is the universe of discourse from which such words as "true" and "false" come. If that universe of discourse is discarded, then the application of empirical tests, logical analysis or any of the other instruments of reason are impotent.

The move away from the use of propositions in commercial advertising began at the end of the nineteenth century. But it was not until the 1950's that the television commercial made linguistic discourse obsolete as the basis for product decisions. By substituting images for claims, the pictorial commercial

made emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decisions. The distance between rationality and advertising is now so wide that it is difficult to remember that there once existed a connection between them. Today, on television commercials, propositions are as scarce as unattractive people. The truth or falsity of an advertiser's claim is simply not an issue. A McDonald's commercial, for example, is not a series of testable, logically ordered assertions. It is a drama—a mythology, if you will—of handsome people selling, buying and eating hamburgers, and being driven to near ecstasy by their good fortune. No claims are made, except those the viewer projects onto or infers from the drama. One can like or dislike a television commercial, of course. But one cannot refute it.

Indeed, we may go this far: The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products. Images of movie stars and famous athletes, of serene lakes and macho fishing trips, of elegant dinners and romantic interludes, of happy families packing their station wagons for a picnic in the country—these tell nothing about the products being sold. But they tell everything about the fears, fancies and dreams of those who might buy them. What the advertiser needs to know is not what is right about the product but what is wrong about the buyer. And so, the balance of business expenditures shifts from *product* research to *market* research. The television commercial has oriented business away from making products of value and toward making consumers feel valuable, which means that the business of business has now become pseudo-therapy. The consumer is a patient assured by psycho-dramas.

All of this would come as a great surprise to Adam Smith, just as the transformation of politics would be equally surprising to the redoubtable George Orwell. It is true, as George Steiner has remarked, that Orwell thought of Newspeak as originating, in part, from "the verbiage of commercial advertising." But when Orwell wrote in his famous essay "The Politics of the English

Language" that politics has become a matter of "defending the indefensible," he was assuming that politics would remain a distinct, although corrupted, mode of discourse. His contempt was aimed at those politicians who would use sophisticated versions of the age-old arts of double-think, propaganda and deceit. That the defense of the indefensible would be conducted as a form of amusement did not occur to him. He feared the politician as deceiver, not as entertainer.

The television commercial has been the chief instrument in creating the modern methods of presenting political ideas. It has accomplished this in two ways. The first is by requiring its form to be used in political campaigns. It is not necessary, I take it, to say very much about this method. Everyone has noticed and worried in varying degrees about it, including former New York City mayor John Lindsay, who has proposed that political "commercials" be prohibited. Even television commentators have brought it to our attention, as for example, Bill Moyers in "The Thirty-second President," a documentary on his excellent television series "A Walk Through the 20th Century." My own awakening to the power of the television commercial as political discourse came as a result of a personal experience of a few years back, when I played a minuscule role in Ramsey Clark's Senate campaign against Jacob Javits in New York. A great believer in the traditional modes of political discourse, Clark prepared a small library of carefully articulated position papers on a variety of subjects from race relations to nuclear power to the Middle East. He filled each paper with historical background, economic and political facts, and, I thought, an enlightened sociological perspective. He might as well have drawn cartoons. In fact, Jacob Javits did draw cartoons, in a manner of speaking. If Javits had a carefully phrased position on any issue, the fact was largely unknown. He built his campaign on a series of thirty-second television commercials in which he used visual imagery, in much the same way as a McDonald's commercial, to project himself as a man of experience, virtue and piety. For all I

know, Javits believed as strongly in reason as did Ramsey Clark. But he believed more strongly in retaining his seat in the Senate. And he knew full well in what century we are living. He understood that in a world of television and other visual media, "political knowledge" means having pictures in your head more than having words. The record will show that this insight did not fail him. He won the election by the largest plurality in New York State history. And I will not labor the commonplace that any serious candidate for high political office in America requires the services of an image manager to design the kinds of pictures that will lodge in the public's collective head. I will want to return to the implications of "image politics" but it is necessary, before that, to discuss the second method by which the television commercial shapes political discourse.

Because the television commercial is the single most voluminous form of public communication in our society, it was inevitable that Americans would accommodate themselves to the philosophy of television commercials. By "accommodate," I mean that we accept them as a normal and plausible form of discourse. By "philosophy," I mean that the television commercial has embedded in it certain assumptions about the nature of communication that run counter to those of other media, especially the printed word. For one thing, the commercial insists on an unprecedented brevity of expression. One may even say, in-stancy. A sixty-second commercial is prolix; thirty seconds is longer than most; fifteen to twenty seconds is about average. This is a brash and startling structure for communication since, as I remarked earlier, the commercial always addresses itself to the psychological needs of the viewer. Thus it is not merely therapy. It is instant therapy. Indeed, it puts forward a psychological theory of unique axioms: The commercial asks us to believe that all problems are solvable, that they are solvable fast, and that they are solvable fast through the interventions of technology, techniques and chemistry. This is, of course, a posterous theory about the roots of discontent, and would ap-

pear so to anyone hearing or reading it. But the commercial disdains exposition, for that takes time and invites argument. It is a very bad commercial indeed that engages the viewer in wondering about the validity of the point being made. That is why most commercials use the literary device of the pseudo-parable as a means of doing their work. Such "parables" as The Ring Around the Collar, The Lost Traveler's Checks and The Phone Call from the Son Far Away not only have irrefutable emotional power but, like Biblical parables, are unambiguously didactic. The television commercial is about products only in the sense that the story of Jonah is about the anatomy of whales, which is to say, it isn't. Which is to say further, it is about how one ought to live one's life. Moreover, commercials have the advantage of vivid visual symbols through which we may easily learn the lessons being taught. Among those lessons are that short and simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones; that drama is to be preferred over exposition; that being sold solutions is better than being confronted with questions about problems. Such beliefs would naturally have implications for our orientation to political discourse: that is to say, we may begin to accept as normal certain assumptions about the political domain that either derive from or are amplified by the television commercial. For example, a person who has seen one million television commercials might well believe that all political problems have fast solutions through simple measures—or ought to. Or that complex language is not to be trusted, and that all problems lend themselves to theatrical expression. Or that argument is in bad taste, and leads only to an intolerable uncertainty. Such a person may also come to believe that it is not necessary to draw any line between politics and other forms of social life. Just as a television commercial will use an athlete, an actor, a musician, a novelist, a scientist or a countless to speak for the virtues of a product in no way within their domain of expertise, television also frees politicians from the limited field of their own expertise. Political figures may

show up anywhere, at any time, doing anything, without being thought odd, presumptuous, or in any way out of place. Which is to say, they have become assimilated into the general television culture as celebrities.

Being a celebrity is quite different from being well known. Harry Truman was well known but he was not a celebrity. Whenever the public saw him or heard him, Truman was talking politics. It takes a very rich imagination to envision Harry Truman or, for that matter, his wife, making a guest appearance on "The Goldbergs" or "I Remember Mama." Politics and politicians had nothing to do with these shows, which people watched for amusement, not to familiarize themselves with political candidates and issues.

It is difficult to say exactly when politicians began to put themselves forward, intentionally, as sources of amusement. In the 1950's, Senator Everett Dirksen appeared as a guest on "What's My Line?" When he was running for office, John F. Kennedy allowed the television cameras of Ed Murrow's "Person to Person" to invade his home. When he was not running for office, Richard Nixon appeared for a few seconds on "Laugh-In," an hour-long comedy show based on the format of a television commercial. By the 1970's, the public had started to become accustomed to the notion that political figures were to be taken as part of the world of show business. In the 1980's came the deluge. Vice-presidential candidate William Miller did a commercial for American Express. So did the star of the Watergate Hearings, Senator Sam Ervin. Former President Gerald Ford joined with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger for brief roles on "Dynasty." Massachusetts Governor Mike Dukakis appeared on "St. Elsewhere." Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill did a stint on "Cheers." Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, George McGovern and Mayor Edward Koch hosted "Saturday Night Live." Koch also played the role of a fight manager in a made-for-television movie starring James Cagney. Mrs. Nancy Reagan appeared on "Different Strokes." Would

anyone be surprised if Gary Hart turned up on "Hill Street Blues"? Or if Geraldine Ferraro played a small role as a Queens housewife in a Francis Coppola film?

Although it may go too far to say that the politician-as-celebrity has, by itself, made political parties irrelevant, there is certainly a conspicuous correlation between the rise of the former and the decline of the latter. Some readers may remember when voters barely knew who the candidate was and, in any case, were not preoccupied with his character and personal life. As a young man, I balked one November at voting for a Democratic mayoralty candidate who, it seemed to me, was both unintelligent and corrupt. "What has that to do with it?" my father protested. "All Democratic candidates are unintelligent and corrupt. Do you want the Republicans to win?" He meant to say that intelligent voters favored the party that best represented their economic interests and sociological perspective. To vote for the "best man" seemed to him an astounding and naive irrelevance. He never doubted that there were good men among Republicans. He merely understood that they did not speak for his class. He shared, with an unflinching eye, the perspective of Big Tim Sullivan, a leader of New York's Tammany Hall in its glory days. As Terence Moran recounts in his essay, "Politics 1984," Sullivan was once displeased when brought the news that the vote in his precinct was 6,382 for the Democrat and two for the Republican. In evaluating this disappointing result, Sullivan remarked, "Sure, didn't Kelly come to me to say his wife's interests of domestic tranquility, give him leave to vote Republican? But what I want to know is, who else voted Republican?"<sup>2</sup>

I will not argue here the wisdom of this point of view. There may be a case for choosing the best man over party (although I know of none). The point is that television does not reveal who the best man is. In fact, television makes impossible the determination of who is better than whom, if we mean by "better"

such things as more capable in negotiation, more imaginative in executive skill, more knowledgeable about international affairs, more understanding of the interrelations of economic systems, and so on. The reason has, almost entirely, to do with "image." But not because politicians are preoccupied with presenting themselves in the best possible light. After all, who isn't? It is a rare and deeply disturbed person who does not wish to project a favorable image. But television gives image a bad name. For on television the politician does not so much offer the audience an image of himself, as offer himself as an image of the audience. And therein lies one of the most powerful influences of the television commercial on political discourse.

To understand how image politics works on television, we may use as an entry point the well-known commercial from which this chapter takes the first half of its title. I refer to the Bell Telephone romances, created by Mr. Steve Horn, in which we are urged to "Reach Out and Touch Someone." The "someone" is usually a relative who lives in Denver or Los Angeles or Atlanta—in any case, very far from where we are, and who, in a good year, we will be lucky to see on Thanksgiving Day. The "someone" used to play a daily and vital role in our lives; that is to say, used to be a member of the family. Though American culture stands vigorously opposed to the idea of family, there nonetheless still exists a residual nag that something essential to our lives is lost when we give it up. Enter Mr. Horn's commercials. These are thirty-second humiliations concerned to provide a new definition of intimacy in which the telephone wire will take the place of old-fashioned co-presence. Even further, these commercials intimate a new conception of family cohesion for a nation of kinsmen who have been split asunder by automobiles, jet aircraft and other instruments of family suicide. In analyzing these commercials, Jay Rosen makes the following observation: "Horn isn't interested in saying anything, he has no message to get across. His goal is not to provide information about Bell, but to somehow bring out from the broken ties of millions of Amer-

ican lives a feeling which might focus on the telephone. . . . Horn does not express himself. You do not express yourself. Horn expresses you."<sup>3</sup>

This is the lesson of all great television commercials: They provide a slogan, a symbol or a focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves. In the shift from party politics to television politics, the same goal is sought. We are not permitted to know who is best at being President or Governor or Senator, but whose image is best in touching and soothing the deep reaches of our discontent. We look at the television screen and ask, in the same voracious way as the Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?" We are inclined to vote for those whose personality, family life, and style, as imaged on the screen, give back a better answer than the Queen received. As Xenophanes remarked twenty-five centuries ago, men always make their gods in their own image. But to this, television politics has added a new wrinkle: Those who would be gods refashion themselves into images the viewers would have them be.

And so, while image politics preserves the idea of self-interest voting, it alters the meaning of "self-interest." Big Tim Sullivan and my father voted for the party that represented their interests, but "interests" meant to them something tangible—patronage, preferential treatment, protection from bureaucracy, support for one's union or community. Thanksgiving turkeys for indigent families. Judged by this standard, blacks may be the only sane voters left in America. Most of the rest of us vote our interests, but they are largely symbolic ones, which is to say, of a psychological nature. Like television commercials, image politics is a form of therapy, which is why so much of it is charming good looks, celebrity and personal disclosure. It is a sobering thought to recall that there are no photographs of Abraham Lincoln smiling, that his wife was in all likelihood a psychopath, and that he was subject to lengthy fits of depression. He

would hardly have been well suited for image politics. We do not want our mirrors to be so dark and so far from amusing. What I am saying is that just as the television commercial empties itself of authentic product information so that it can do its psychological work, image politics empties itself of authentic political substance for the same reason.

It follows from this that history can play no significant role in image politics. For history is of value only to someone who takes seriously the notion that there are patterns in the past which may provide the present with nourishing traditions. "The past is a world," Thomas Carlyle said, "and not a void of grey haze." But he wrote this at a time when the book was the principal medium of serious public discourse. A book is *all* history. Everything about it takes one back in time—from the way it is produced to its linear mode of exposition to the fact that the past tense is its most comfortable form of address. As no other medium before or since, the book promotes a sense of a coherent and usable past. In a conversation of books, history, as Carlyle understood it, is not only a world but a living world. It is the present that is shadowy.

But television is a speed-of-light medium, a present-centered medium. Its grammar, so to say, permits no access to the past. Everything presented in moving pictures is experienced as happening "now," which is why we must be told *in language* that a videotape we are seeing was made months before. Moreover, like its forefather, the telegraph, television needs to move fragments of information, not to collect and organize them. Carlyle was more prophetic than he could imagine: The literal gray haze that is the background void on all television screens is an apt metaphor of the notion of history the medium puts forward. In the Age of Show Business and image politics, political discourse is emptied not only of ideological content but of historical content, as well.

Czeslaw Milosz, winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize for Literature, remarked in his acceptance speech in Stockholm that our

age is characterized by a "refusal to remember"; he cited, among other things, the shattering fact that there are now more than one hundred books in print that deny that the Holocaust ever took place. The historian Carl Schorske has, in my opinion, circled closer to the truth by noting that the modern mind has grown indifferent to history because history has become useless to it; in other words, it is not obstinacy or ignorance but a sense of irrelevance that leads to the diminution of history. Television's Bill Moyers inches still closer when he says, "I worry that my own business . . . helps to make this an anxious age of agitated amnesiacs. . . . We Americans seem to know everything about the last twenty-four hours but very little of the last sixty centuries or the last sixty years."<sup>4</sup> Terence Moran, I believe, lands on the target in saying that with media whose structure is biased toward furnishing images and fragments, we are deprived of access to an historical perspective. In the absence of continuity and context, he says, "bits of information cannot be integrated into an intelligent and consistent whole."<sup>5</sup> We do not refuse to remember; neither do we find it exactly useless to remember. Rather, we are being rendered unfit to remember. For if remembering is to be something more than nostalgia, it requires a contextual basis—a theory, a vision, a metaphor—*something* within which facts can be organized and patterns discerned. The politics of image and instantaneous news provides no such context, is, in fact, hampered by attempts to provide any. A mirror records only what you are wearing today. It is silent about yesterday. With television, we vault ourselves into a continuous, incoherent present. "History," Henry Ford said, "is bunk." Henry Ford was a typographic optimist. "History," the Electric Plug replies, "doesn't exist."

If these conjectures make sense, then in this Orwell was wrong once again, at least for the Western democracies. He envisioned the demolition of history, but believed that it would be accomplished by the state; that some equivalent of the Ministry of Truth would systematically banish inconvenient facts and de-

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 *Analeks* 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 *Ar Anatomia*. 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 a 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 watch, not when you watch, and whether or not you care to watch. . . .<sup>6</sup>

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 anywhere 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.

