



As Seen on TV

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In ten years, says Jacques Attali¹, more than two billion TV screens will be switched on at any given time. I suggest that it is primarily in this massive, ubiquitous and obtrusive presence of TV-transmitted images that the true impact of television on the way we act and think ought to be sought. Television has conquered the Earth and its inhabitants. What, though, is the outcome of that most successful of known invasions?

Since the beginning of the invasion evaluations of the new medium's impact on human lives and on the fashion in which they are shared oscillated between cassandric and panglossian. The Cassandrians saw the medium as a next gigantic stride on the road to the totalitarian rule which society has travelled since the beginning of modern times: a *Wunderwaffe* of Big Brother and his henchmen, the unsurpassed and irresistible weapon of intellectual disablement, brainwashing, indoctrination and imposition of thoughtless conformity, wielded by those placed in front of the TV cameras against those sitting in front of the TV screens. The Panglossians welcomed the medium as a next gigantic stride on the road to emancipation which humanity followed since that great awakening called Enlightenment: knowledge being power, and the screen being a glass window through which the crown jewels of human wisdom can be contemplated. TV in the Panglossians' portrayal is, or is bound to become, a most powerful weapon of individual freedom of self-construction and self-assertion.

Cassandrians and Panglossians go on picking bones with each other, and their *querelle* is restaged and given new vigour with each successive computing invention and the supply to the shops of every new or newish medium. But on one point the antagonists saw eye to eye: TV, just like the rest of the new media, is primarily a way of doing what humans, singly or collectively, strove to do all

along — only they had no time, money, tools, or know-how to do it on such a scale or as fast and with effects as great as they wished their actions to be. As a matter of fact, one can be a Cassandrian or a Panglossian only in so far as one believes that the *ends* are given and only the *means* are missing — and so the significance of any change consists in affecting the facility with which objectives (which have been already known) are pursued and attained (by the means heretofore unknown or unavailable).

One possibility which seldom appeared in the disputations swayed by the cassandrian-cum-panglossian obsessions was that television did not so much change the hands of the players as the game itself; that in the case of the media, as in so many other cases, it is the means that seek the goals to which they could be applied, or through their sheer presence conjure up new ends without seeking them; that new means tend to set new objectives as well as a new game whose objectives are most important stakes; and that the failure to remember that few if any consequences of the new departures are anticipated, let alone designed in advance, results in the memory-induced blindness to the true nature of new realities which follow. I suggest that the paramount effect of television has been the slow yet relentless *cancellation* of the objectives which used to give sense to the cassandrian vs. panglossian *querelle*.

To Marshall McLuhan goes the credit for the first breach in the cognitive frame jointly fixed by the antagonists in that *querelle*. The discovery that the 'media are the message' shifted attention from the contents of scripts, from their perception and retention, from things planned and controlled or controllable in principle, to the irreversible transformation of the ways scripts are scripted and staged, images are perceived and retention operates — things neither planned nor fully controllable. It was as if the drug's ostensible targets had changed

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places with its side-effects.



That breach was soon widened by Elihu Katz's seminal reversal of the assumed relation between 'reality' and its 'media representation': his discovery that events may exist solely in and through 'being seen on TV'. From there but one step remained to Jean Baudrillard's *simulacrum*² — that curious entity which, after the pattern of psychosomatic ailment, puts paid to the hallowed distinction between reality and pretence, the 'true thing' and its representation, the fact and the *faitiche*³, the given and the 'made up'. Simulacrum is *hyperreality*, a presence more real than reality, since it is a kind of reality which no longer allows an 'outside' from which it could be scrutinized, critically assessed and censured.

In a room carpeted wall-to-wall, you never see the floor beneath: you would be hard put when asked what the floor beneath is made of — but unless asked, you would hardly ever give the floor a second thought. With the sun never setting on more than two billion switched-on TV screens, the world seen is the world 'as seen on TV'. There is little point in asking whether what you see on TV is the truth or a lie. There is little point as well in asking whether the presence of television makes the world better or worse. Indeed, what would the benchmark for such a judgement be like? Where, except in the imagination, is that 'world minus television' that the entry of television could improve or make worse? You cannot imagine your own funeral without you yourself watching it, and the question whether your gaze makes the funeral a better or a worse occasion makes no sense. It becomes ever more difficult to visualize the world other than a 'photo opportunity' taken up: a world without TV visualizing it. The world makes itself present to the eye as a succession of recordable images, and whatever is not fit to be recorded as an image does not really belong in it. Holiday-makers arm themselves with camcorders: only when viewing their video-recorded exploits on a TV screen back home can they be truly sure that the holidays did indeed happen.

A world with television differs from the bygone world without it, and one is naturally prompted, duly following the canons of induction, to conclude that it is the advent of the television which made the difference. Since there are reasons to dislike the world 'as seen on TV', there are also proxy reasons to blame the messenger for the substance of that difference. Blaming the messenger for the evils of the message is a time-honoured custom: most messages tend to be carried these days through the TV aerials and cables, and so there are good grounds to anticipate that blaming television for the ills of the world which the TV producers and the spectators of TV programmes jointly inhabit will go on unabated.

And yet there are equally good if not better grounds to suppose that the astonishing headway made by the electronic medium would be unthinkable if the world were not ready to absorb it. These grounds are no worse than were the reasons which allowed Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, one of the principal fomentors of the 1848 Revolution, to shout at the mob flooding the streets of Paris: 'Let me pass. I have to follow them. I am their leader!'

This is not to say that television is 'merely' a carrier of messages and that the substance of the message would not change were the messenger replaced. But it does mean that were they different, the messages would stand little chance of being heard, and that the messages likely to be heard can hardly be carried by a different messenger. Whatever TV does to the world we inhabit, there seems to be a 'perfect fit' between the two. If television leads the world, it is because it follows it; if it manages to disseminate new patterns of life, it is because it replicates such patterns in its own mode of being. Our *Lebenswelt* and the world 'as seen on TV' wink and beckon to each other. TV is, indeed, 'user friendly' — and we are the users it is friendly with.



However tempting such a pastime might be, to wrangle over what comes first and second would be an idle pursuit. Should it be said instead that between the world 'as seen on TV' and the *Lebenswelt* in which we frame our life politics and which we create and recreate through conducting it, there is a *Wahlverwantschaft* as well as a circular (or perhaps a helix-like) reinforcement? We are entitled to bewail the shape of either one of these two worlds, but we need to address our complaints to both of them, joined in an infrangible embrace. Wishing to change the way TV operates calls for nothing less than changing the world.

I intend therefore to suspend for the rest of the argument the question of how the guilt ought to be apportioned to each of the two entities locked in mutual feedback, and the related question of from which end to start if a change for the better is adumbrated. I wish to focus instead on several instances of consonance (or should we speak rather of resonance?) between the *modus operandi* of television and the modality of the world we shape while being shaped by it, and particularly on such among them which seem particularly relevant to the present state and the future of democracy, that is (to use Cornelius Castoriadis's definition) — the autonomous society composed of autonomous individuals.

Speed vs. slowness

In his passionate critique of television and its works, Pierre Bourdieu⁴ points out that 'one of the major problems posited by television is the relation between thought and speed'. This is not just the problem of the difficulty to think fast, of the time needed to gather thoughts, to reflect and compare the weight of arguments. More is involved: in a rapid exchange, when there is no time to pause and think twice before uttering a sentence, the 'received ideas' — trivial ideas, the shared-by-all ideas, ideas that do not prompt nor need reflection since they are deemed self-evident and, like axioms, require no proof — are inadvertently privileged. It is the questioning of the allegedly 'obvious', the scrutiny

of what is usually left unspoken, bringing to attention aspects normally left out of consideration or passed over in silence, that requires time. But to no other communicative medium does Benjamin Franklin's famed adage 'Time is Money' apply more fully. Time is the resource television is notoriously short of. As a French journalist quipped — were Emile Zola allowed to make his defence of Dreyfus on television, he would be given no more time than to shout 'J'accuse!'.

Television, whether public or private, has no other world to operate in but the world conquered and ruled by market competition. The 'ratings' (or *l'audimat* whose meekly accepted authority Bourdieu berates) is, we may say, the 'garrison left by the conquerors in the conquered city'. The ratings record the show's 'holding power': to get a respectable score, the attention of viewers must be retained for the duration of the show, and the viewers must trust that this indeed would happen once they select the show from among many others on offer. For commercial television, this is a matter of life and death: there would be no one left in the managerial offices and the studios to assess the outcome of experimental tinkering with the omnipotence of the rating's verdict. But public television is in no better a position to resist: it operates in the same world, in the world in which market-style competition rules supreme, and the governments of the day with no exception urge that we respect and obey this. Ministers would find themselves in dire straits were they to spend 'the taxpayers' money' on performance which the taxpayers neither enjoy nor wish to enjoy. The ratings race is the competition which all television channels must join and in which they must prove their worth. But none would be able to attract viewers unless it reckons with their capacity and abides by their predilections.

Human attention is what is primarily at stake in the media competition and the coveted good on which media capitalize — but it is also the most scarce and essentially the least expendable of resources. Since the sum total of attention cannot be increased, the vying for attention is a zero-sum



game and cannot but be a war of redistribution: messages can gain more attention solely at the expense of absorption and retention. According to some assessments, one copy of a daily newspaper may contain as many bits of information as an average person at the time of the Renaissance was exposed to in the course of a whole life. There is little wonder therefore that, as George Steiner pithily commented, cultural products are these days calculated 'for maximum impact and instant obsolescence': they must be sharp and shocking (*more* sharp and shocking than those beside them) to be noticed, but they can count for a briefest of time spans only, being bound to make room for new sharp shocks. Steiner describes the resulting mode of being-in-the-world as *casino culture*: each game is short, games replace each other in quick succession, the stakes of the game change with a lightning speed and often devalue before the game is over. And, of course, in every casino there is a variety of games, each earnestly trying to lure prospective players with colourful flashing lights and promises of dazzling jackpots calculated to outshine the other games in the building.

In a casino, also in casino-like culture, long-term planning makes little sense. One needs to take each game as it comes. Each game is a self-enclosed episode: losing or winning one of them has no influence on the outcome of others. Time spent in a casino is a series of new beginnings, each one leading rapidly to a finish, and life patched together by a casino culture reads as a collection of short stories, not a novel.

Television chimes well with the skills and attitudes trained and cultivated by the casino culture and, prompted by the survival instinct, bends over backward to chime better still. And so the news presenters try to deliver their lines standing up rather than sitting at their desks, while the words they speak are accompanied by rhythmic, metronome-like beats emphasizing the rapid passage of time.

Casualty, accident and emergency rooms become favourite settings of dramas: nowhere else are lives sliced so thinly and the transience of luck and misfortune put so blatantly on display. In countless quizzes it is the fastest fingers on the bell, not the deepest thought, that wins the game. The speed of response counts more than the pool of knowledge from which responses are drawn: knowledge which takes longer to dig up than the fleeting moment allotted to players does not count at all: surfing fast, not diving deep is the name of the life-game 'as seen on TV'. The success of a surfer depends on the ability to stay on the surface.

The casino culture of instantaneity and episodicity portends the end of 'politics as we know it'. Ours is the time of fast food, but also of fast thinkers and fast talkers. Abraham Lincoln could keep the audience spell-bound during his four-hour long election speeches. His successors won't survive the electoral campaign if they don't excel in the art of soundbiting and cannot produce short sharp witticisms fit for short sharp headlines. Grigori Yavlinski who lectured the much suffering Russians about the arcane causes of their endless suffering and the intricate ways out of their troubles scraped together five percent of votes, while fifty-odd percent of Russians who offered their votes to Vladimir Putin did not mind at all their favourite's notorious parsimony with words. Two politicians who recently won landslide electoral victories, Putin in Russia and Tony Blair in Britain, wisely abstained from expounding their political programmes and philosophies: were they to behave differently, they could perhaps alienate some of the voters by opposing their preferences, but they would lose many, many more by demanding a mental effort they would neither wish nor be able to make, risking boredom and fading interest. Knowing from Anthony Giddens' analyses that the absence of guidelines one can trust is a most vulnerable and painful aspect of life in our increasingly fluid social setting,



Blair preferred to dwell on the appeal to trust him, leaving sorely under-discussed the policies which the electors were supposed to trust him to promote. The other constant motif of Blair's electoral speeches was that of 'modernization', a term as vacuous by itself as it is useful in implying a gloss of scientific seriousness and expertise on the universal and perpetual human desire to make things better. After electoral victory there was of course no reason to abandon the victorious strategy. Of one of Blair's recent newspaper conferences Simon Hoggart⁵, *The Guardian* columnist, had the following to say:

"Not for the first time, I was struck by the way a Blair speech is closer to a musical composition than to a mere rhetoric. Like a piece of music, its aim isn't to inform but to create good feelings. It's no more about facts and policies than the Pastoral Symphony is an examination of the common agricultural policy."

Nobody ever finished listening to Blair's speech and said: 'well, I learned something there'. Instead they praise the bravura performance and enjoy the afterglow created by the mood.

To keep in touch with the surfers, no politician can risk venturing beneath the surface. And *doxa*, that unreflected-upon common creed that colours all reflection is the politician's equivalent of the surfers' surface. Politicians feel safe when they keep their public discourse at the level of what Nick Lee⁶ recently dubbed 'inscrutable clarity'; 'a certainty that passes as such as long as its grounds remain occulted'. The less political speeches contain words, the further they keep from inspiring dangerous thoughts.

But let me repeat: it would be neither reasonable nor fair to lay the blame for such a radical transformation of political process on the television screens. The defenders of the ways mass media operate may be more right than they think when they reiterate that media do no more, yet no less either, than to supply what their customers need. In the 'liquid' stage of the modern era (the stage I attempted to describe in more detail in my *Liquid Modernity*), mobility, or rather the ability to keep

on the move, is the very stuff of which a new hierarchy of power is built, the paramount stratifying factor, while speed and acceleration are principal strategies aiming at slanting that factor in one's favour. If this is the case, then two intimately linked capacities acquire an unprecedented survival-and-success value. One is *flexibility*: the ability to change tack at short notice, to adjust instantaneously to changed circumstances, never being burdened with habits too solidly settled or possessions too heavy to move around or too close to heart to leave behind. The other is *all-roundness*, versatility if not dilettantism: one should beware of putting all the eggs in one basket — time dedicated to making one's expertise deeper (and so, inevitably more narrowly focused) may be sorely missed when this particular expertise is no more in demand while other skills rise in price. We know from the students of evolution that in a fast changing climate it is the 'generalistic', un-specialized and un-choosy species that have the best chance of survival.

Of Bill Gates, who to most of the top executives world-wide 'is a heroic figure', indeed a present-day equivalent of Henry Ford and John D. Rockefeller rolled into one, Richard Sennett⁷, who has studied him at close quarters, has the following to say:

"His products are furious in coming forth and as rapid in disappearing, whereas Rockefeller wanted to own oil rigs, building machinery, or railroads for the long term...[he] spoke of positioning himself in a network of possibilities rather than paralyzing oneself in one particular job... [He is willing] to destroy what he has made, given the demands of the immediate moment... [He is] someone who has the confidence to dwell in disorder, someone who flourishes in the midst of dislocation."



We are not all Bill Gates; when trickled down to the less endowed and resourceful among us Bill Gates's meat may prove a poison. Gates's mode of life may be a victorious strategy for a few; for the rest it is a recipe for trials and tribulations of a perpetually insecure present and a stubbornly uncertain future. This argument won't cut much ice, though, once confronted with life's hard realities. It is Gates's mode of life that holds the day, and as long as this remains the case, Gates's nomadic spirit will continue to be the shining light for those whom it shows the road to success as much as to all those whom it lures into the wilderness he helped to set up. And as long as it does, sound bites have no reason to fear for their future.

Private vs. Public

Alain Ehrenberg⁸, a French sociologist, has selected an October 1983 Wednesday as the date of cultural breakthrough (at least in French history). On that day a certain Viviane, neither a celebrity nor a person for whatever reason in the limelight, just an 'ordinary' French woman like the millions who watched her, appeared in front of television cameras to announce that her husband, Michel, suffers from premature ejaculation and for that reason she never experienced, when with him, any pleasure. This was, indeed, a breakthrough: the meeting between television, that ultimate embodiment of publicness, and bedroom intimacy, the ultimate symbol of privacy. Viviane's announcement could have shocked the viewers and reverberate for a while through the wide spectrum of French media — but the thousands of Vivianes and Michels who followed the suit have long ceased to make waves. 'Talk-shows', the public confessions of private *Erlebnisse*, have since become the most common, most trivial and most predictable of television pursuits, and also the ones which boast invariably the highest ratings. We live now in confessional society. We have installed microphones in confessionals and connected them to the public-address network, and venting one's intimacies in public has become the duty *sine qua*

non of every public figure and the compulsive obsession of all the rest. As the great British wit Peter Ustinov put it, 'This is a free country, madam. We have a right to share your privacy in a public place'. The less witty journalists dress as guardians of public interest defending the 'people's right to know'.

That Wednesday evening was indeed a moment of cultural upheaval for France (other countries may date a similar onslaught differently), and that for several closely connected reasons.

The first reason has already been mentioned: the passage between private and public has been thrown wide open, the line separating the two spaces has been effaced and the long inconclusive process of its renegotiation has been set in motion. Not only the ban traditionally imposed on the public display of emotions has been lifted, but meticulous scrutiny and unrestrained display of private sentiments, dreams and obsessions was encouraged, and in accordance with the behaviourist formula reinforced by being rewarded with rounds of the audience's applause — more hectic the more savage and tempestuous the confessed passions were. Day in and day out, presenters and anchorpersons nudge the invited audience, and by proxy the viewers glued to their TV screens, to 'open up', drop all defences and let themselves go, stopping at nothing and shaking off the outdated ideas of decorum and decency. The lesson delivered is that no inner thoughts and feelings are too private to be vented in public.

The second reason to speak of the TV-led (or rather TV-assisted) cultural revolution is the birth and rapid development of a language which allows private sentiments to be publicly shared and compared. The 'subjective' used to be a synonym of the ineffable: the difficulty, perhaps even impossibility of articulate expression was very nearly a defining feature of *private* sentiments and the principal obstacle to the transgression of the private/public boundary.



As we know from Ludwig Wittgenstein, there is not and cannot be such a thing as a private language, if private stands for the impossibility of being communicated. 'Talk shows' are public courses in a new language, spanning the divide between the communicable and the inarticulable, between private and public. The appearance of such a language does more than enable actors and spectators to tell what they feel. Once such language has appeared and the subjective *Erlebnisse* acquired names, having thereby become objects that can be sought, found, examined and talked about (moved, as Martin Heidegger would say, from the invisible world of *Zuhandenheit* to the all-too-tangible territory of *Vorhandenheit*), only then can such sentiments and affections be recognized for what they are as fit to be communicated. Language creates its own public and its own public space.

The third reason is the inherent propensity of talk-shows to represent human life and its subject-matter as an aggregate of individually experienced problems craving individual resolution using individually possessed resources. Again, it is well-nigh impossible to say whether this formidable departure would be better described as TV-led or as TV-assisted. What is certain is that whatever 'is seen on TV' is in tune with the experience supplied seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day by the 'real world'. As Ulrich Beck⁹ pointedly commented, our lives become now 'biographical solutions of systemic contradictions'. You may say that finding such a solution is an impossible task, that systemic contradictions cannot be *resolved* through individual life politics — but there you are, there is no obvious way leading from life politics to confronting systemic contradictions point blank and so to contemplate striking at their roots.

"Experts dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual. *History* shrinks to *the (eternal) present*, and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life... [O]utside turned inside and made private...[T]he individual will have to 'pay for' the consequences of decisions not tak-

en... [I]n order for one to survive, an *ego-centred world view* must be developed, which turns the relation of ego and world on its head, so to speak, conceiving of and making them useful for the purpose of shaping an individual biography".

Chat-shows help to accomplish that wondrous transformation, to make the world *ego-centred*, to conjure up a magic avatar: the reincarnation of the socially produced antinomies and risks as problems definable in individual terms, problems which have emerged individually and individually need to be confronted and tackled. One suffered because one was not skillful and knowledgeable to stave off suffering; the lack of resolve and determination figure invariably at the top of the long list of individual neglects and errors which are blamed for causing the trouble. The issue of a 'wrong kind of society' is taken off the agenda, or rather never allowed to appear on it; and the void left thereby in the argument is made all but invisible by being filled with denunciation and deprecation of individual un-fitness and in-adequacy. The verdict is made fool-proof by the trial being continually rehearsed and the sentence endlessly reiterated.

Around the institution of the chat-show, a community is created. It is however, an oxymoronic community, a community of individuals united only by their self-enclosure and their self-containment. What the members of such a bizarre community have in common is that each one of them suffers in solitude, each one struggles to lift himself out of trouble by Baron Münchhausen's feat of pulling at his own boot straps, and no one counts on making the job easier by joining forces with others who go through a similar agony. The 'individuality' of problems means that their resolution can gain nothing from being shared in any other way but talking about them and listening to others who do the same. And 'community' means a quantity of individuals who gather under one roof or in front of their TV sets in order to behave according to that pattern.

The audience of chat-shows, just like the pop-



ulation of the individualized world from which that audience is drawn, does not make a team. However coordinated their thoughts and moves may be, members of the audience enter their togetherness as singles and finish it reinforced in their conviction that singles they are bound to remain. During the session, their problems have not acquired a new quality; they have not been translated into public issues. They have been merely publicly declared to be private problems and publicly confirmed to be such.

It may be that 'outside had been turned inside' and was made private. It is also true, however, that with inside turned outside whatever stays outside has been effectively shadowed out. With 'the private' covering the public stage wall-to-wall, no room is left for anything which cannot or would not be turned inside, and no entry is allowed for it onto the public stage until it has been recycled into the private. In this sense TV is a *sine qua non* condition of 'turning the outside inside', of shifting the task of resolving social problems to individual biographies. For politics, the impact is shattering.

The substance of democratic politics (that is the mode of being of an autonomous society composed of autonomous individuals) is the on-going process of a two-way translation: of private troubles into public issues, and public interests into individual rights and duties. It is this two-pronged translation which first fell victim to 'turning the outside inside', the act that had been made feasible by turning the inside outside. With such a casualty, politics has been effectively disarmed. It is now the turn of public faults to become 'ineffable' (that is, unless re-processed as personal inadequacies). Ethical flaws of policies can hardly be grasped in any form other than ethical sins of the politicians — no one proposed an injunction when President Clinton effectively abolished the American welfare state by removing it from federal tasks, while the only time when Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary, was inches away from a forced resignation was when the tabloids disclosed his marital infidelity, not when he allowed the sale of British-made arms to a government guilty of the massacre of its sub-

jects.

If there is no room for the idea of a *wrong* society, there would be hardly any chance for the idea of a *good* society to be born, let alone make waves. If the perception of socially committed injustice is the embryo from which models of a just society grow, the perception of personal inadequacy may give birth solely to a model of individual fitness, individual cunning and all-round adequacy. The great accomplishment of the media, which assist in re-making the *Lebenswelt* in the likeness of the world 'as seen on TV', is speeding up and facilitating the replacement of politics as a collective endeavour with life politics, the consummately individual pursuit.

Authority vs. Idolatry

Politics with a capital 'P' needs leaders with authority. Life politics, on the other hand, needs idols. The difference between the two cannot be greater, even as some leaders happen to be idolized while idols sometimes claim authority by pointing out the massiveness of their worship.

Politics is many things, but it would hardly be any of them were it not the art of translating individual problems into public issues, and common interests into individual rights and duties. Leaders are experts in such translation. They give public (generic) names to individually suffered worries and so lay the ground for a collective handling of problems which could neither be perceived from inside of individual experience nor tackled by individuals separately. They also propose what the individuals may or must do to make a collective action effective. Leaders sketch and promote visions of a good society or a better society, of social justice or a society fairer than the one known until now, of a decent and humane way of living together or a shared life more humane than the life lived at present. And then they suggest what ought to be done to achieve any or all such improvements.



Life politics, on the other hand, is from beginning to end enclosed in the framework of individuality: individual body complete with the 'inner self', personal identity claimed and granted, 'the space' of which, as a rule, one wants to have 'more' and which one struggles to keep free from the other's interference. In Anthony Giddens'¹⁰ famous definition, life politics is centred on 'self-identity as such':

In so far as it is focused upon the life-span, considered as an internally referential system, the reflexive project of the self is oriented only to control. It has no morality other than authenticity, a modern version of the old maxim to 'thine own self be true'. Today, however, given the lapse of tradition, the question 'what shall I be?' is inextricably bound up with 'How shall I live?'

Life politics is self-centred and self-referential. Contrary to what Giddens implies, 'authenticity' is not another form of morality, but a denial of the relevance of ethics. Morality is a feature of interpersonal relations, not of the person's relation to oneself: stretching oneself towards the Other, 'being *for*' the Other and endowing the Other's needs with causal power over one's own endeavours is the constitutive trait of the moral self and moral conduct: if life politics subordinated to the pursuit of 'authenticity' leads occasionally to similar results, it does so only accidentally, 'doing favours' to the Other being but a derivative of self-concern which comes, if at all, as a second thought. Furthermore, 'authenticity' itself is not an updated version of 'being true to oneself'. The locating of life politics at the centre of life is intimately related to the collapse of trust in the 'inner truth' of the self.

Unlike at the time of Sartre's *projet de la vie*, what is being practised under the name of 'authenticity' today is not a lifelong pilgrimage to the 'heart of the true self', but a long and in principle interminable series of tourist escapades in search of more exciting modes of life, prompted by the never placated fear that some attractive and pleasurable models might have been overlooked or foolishly discounted. The successive experiments cannot very often, and not necessarily, be plotted in a straight-line itinerary.

It is here that idols come in handy. As the demand for models of a good society is shrinking and the few on offer are hard put to lure prospective customers, new and improved models of a good life (good *individual* life, individually composed and individually enjoyed), the more varied and numerous the better, are eagerly sought. Unlike the leaders of yore, idols are made to the measure of that new demand. Idols do not show the way; they offer themselves as *examples*: 'this is how I, lonely individual like all the rest of you, cope with the challenges of life and manage to swim while buffeted by tides; I have been pestered by the same troubles and worries that haunt you, but I've managed to cope and surmount adversity; I've had my share of stumblings and falls, but I never threw in the towel, and each time I recovered and got my act together. True, you are not like me; no two people are exactly like each other; everyone is a universe as complete as it is separate and different, and each one of us needs to use his own brains, make his own decisions and face up to his own risks; but we can learn something from each other's wrong and right moves, from mishaps and strokes of luck. I've ended up rich and famous, so perhaps it stands to reason to suppose that I've mastered the difficult art of life better than many others and that it is worth your while to have a closer look at how this has been done. Of course there is no foolproof recipe and what works well in one case may fail in another. But the more hints and clues you get, the greater is the chance of picking the one that suits you best.'



Acute interest in the secrets of celebrities' private lives is not generated by mere love of gossip, and TV cameras peeping into celebrities' private pastimes is not just the high-tech version of the old keyhole. The up-dating on the celebrities' love affairs, style of dressing and self-presentation, choice of residence and holidays, daily diet and the contents of ice-boxes — the stuff that fills prime-time television and supplies headlines for the tabloid front pages — does not merely pander to timeless human curiosity. In the world in which the individually conducted life politics elbows out all other political games in town, examples perform the function once attempted by political programmes and platforms, and gossipy reports about the celebrities' ways and means increasingly play the vital role which was once performed by political gatherings, manifestos and pamphlets. They tell the perplexed what to live for and how to go after things worth living for. They are, indeed, the indispensable educational equipment which life politics cannot do without but would not get from any other source.

It is reasonable to go a step further and to suppose that it is the necessity of engaging in life politics, brought about by progressive individualization, that lies at the root of the astonishing growth of the cult of celebrities: even of the 'idols' phenomenon itself. Crowds of watchers are needed to infuse the example on display with the authority able to transmogrify a mere individual adventure into a model worth emulating — and the ubiquitous craving for such models assures a crowded audience. By the sheer power of its numbers, the crowd bestows charisma on the idols; and charisma of idols makes a watcher a crowd. The world-wide reach of cable and satellite networks of course facilitates the interplay between demand and supply. Whatever the idols may lack in quality is compensated fully by the sheer quantity of avid spectators.

Idolatry fits the contemporary mode of life also in another respect: it chimes well with the fragmentariness of individual life-courses. In the notoriously 'flexible' world of abrupt and unpre-

dictable change, reasonable life politics requires that the span of life is sliced into episodes which (as if obedient to Hume's warning *post hoc non est propter hoc*) follow, but do not determine one another. The perpetual ability to be 'born again', 'have another try' or 'start from the beginning', to abandon the old and embrace the new, acquires under present conditions the supreme survival value: this is, roughly, the lesson which the politicians keep hammering home whenever they appeal for 'more flexibility'. Already several years ago, as Richard Sennett calculated¹¹, a young American with at least two years of college could expect 'to change jobs at least eleven times in the course of working, and change his or her skill base at least three times during those forty years of labour' — and since those words were written the pace of change did not stay still. One thing young people could be certain of is that the way they will live their lives tomorrow will be unlike the way they live today. Perpetuity of 'new starts' has replaced the perpetuity of a life-project pursued with dogged determination. It is *inconsistency* that promises to give an edge to the fighters for survival and dreamers of success.

The cult of celebrities is made to the measure of that inconsistency. Notoriety replaced fame, and the dazzling moment of being in the limelight (which, by their very nature, go on and off and cannot be kept on long for fear of overheating) replaced the steady glow of public esteem. If not that long ago an instant commercial success was suspect since it was seen as 'a sign of compromise with the time and the power of money', today, as Pierre Bourdieu¹² suggests, 'the market is increasingly accepted as a source of legitimation'. Unlike the famous people of yore, celebrities are short-lived, and the brevity of their ascent chimes well with a life lived as a string of new beginnings. Joining the cult of celebrity is unlike enlisting in a cause — it does not require entering long-term commitments and so does not mortgage the future.



Just like all other headline items, idols explode into attention only to fall shortly afterwards into oblivion (though they may be re-cycled in staged come-backs and on anniversary occasions). Idols, though, have their moments of glory, and in that they stand out from the gray mass of 'ordinary' men and women who are daily offered as examples to ponder and to learn from in countless 'chat-shows' specializing in public confessions.

What idolatry loses in durability, it gains in intensity. Idolatry condenses the emotions otherwise dispersed and spread over long spans of time. Again, there is a resonance between the momentary condensation of affects and another remarkable feature of contemporary living: the high value placed on the intensity of experience at the expense of its durability. The standard by which the value of experience is measured tends to be its excitement-generating capacity, not its durable traces. In a society which has cancelled the early-modern injunction to delay gratification, 'immortality' is also of little value unless it is the 'experience' of eternity fit for instant consumption. Like other seductive cultural offers, it must be fit for 'maximal impact and instant obsolescence', promptly clearing the way for as-yet-untried-and-hopefully-more-exciting *Erlebnisse*.

If the orthodox authorities are still around they need to compete with celebrities in the limelight on terms which seldom work in their favour, and certainly strip them of the privilege they once enjoyed. The humdrum, dull and altogether un-spectacular business of traditional politics is ill fit to strike the eye among the crowd of competitors, and if it succeeds, it won't be likely to attract many watchers, let alone hold their attention for as long as it takes to see the business through. TV quizzes daily reiterate the message that the date of the third wedding of a pop star or a footballer's scoring a hat trick count for as much as who won the last war or the year in which women gained electoral rights. As the perceptive Czech writer Ivan Klima¹³ put it pithily, Footballers, hockey players, tennis players, basketball players, guitarists, singers, film actors,

television presenters and top models. Occasionally — and only symbolically — they are joined by some writer, painter, scholar, Nobel prizewinner (is there anyone who remembers their names a year later?), or princess — until she too is forgotten. There is nothing quite so transient as entertainment and physical beauty, and the idols that symbolize them are equally ephemeral.

Klima concludes that 'more than anything else, the idols of today symbolize the futility of human strivings and the certainty of extinction without trace'. What he fails to mention, though, is that the cavalcade of celebrities is far too colourful and too rapidly moving to allow a moment of reflection on the futility of strivings and the certainty of extinction. The silencing or exclusion of reflection is the most important of the many services that the cavalcade of celebrities renders to most of us, seeking in the speed of change a remedy against the insecurity of the present and the uncertainty of the future. As Ralph Waldo Emerson mused a century and a half ago, 'In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed'. What he did not and could not adumbrate then is that a century and a half later skating would become more common than walking and that it would be suicidal to go out without skates.

Event vs. Policy

François Brune, the author of *Médiatiquement correct: 265 maximes de notre temps*¹⁴, quotes a slogan used in the last decade by a French network RTL: 'Information is like coffee: good when hot and strong'. To live up to this credo, the media recycle the world as a succession of events. It does not matter in what order events follow one another: the World Cup may be followed by the death of Diana which would be followed by Bill Clinton's erotic idiosyncrasies which would be followed by the shuttle bombing of Serbia followed by the flood in Mozambique.



The order could be easily reversed or reshuffled; the order does not truly matter since no causal connection or logic is implied. On the contrary, the haphazard character and randomness of succession conveys the unwieldy contingency of the world — *quod erat demonstrandum*. What does matter, and matters a lot, is that each event is strong enough to capture the headlines but each disappears from the headlines before it gets cold. 'The factual grid of events has become the sole approach to the world', Brune observes¹⁵. The world is on the move, or at least this is what our experience tells every one of us, and so the quick succession of 'points of public interest' creates the impression we all badly need: that we are, indeed, *au courant* with the change, that we catch up with the steadily accelerating reality.

This is not, though, the sole importance of the event. 'The event', Brune points out, 'constitutes the citizens as a public'. Let me comment that this is a new kind of public, blatantly unlike the sort of public which John Stuart Mill in unison with other protagonists of modern democracy praised as the stronghold or greenhouse, or both, of popular sovereignty. The public brought into being (and soon dismantled) by the 'event in public view' is a congregation of spectators, not actors. That 'belonging' which is conjured up by the simultaneity of watching and commonality of focus commits nothing except the attention. The members of the congregation of spectators do not need to follow the spectacle by action; most certainly, no one asks them or expects them to take decisions what sort of action ought to be undertaken (except the instant polls which pretend to do just that while asking questions of an essentially aesthetic nature — testing the viewers' appreciation of the spectacle). Events serve to demonstrate that the 'public stage' is for viewing and enjoyment, not for acting.

The congregation of viewers is one more 'peg community': a community formed by the act of hanging individual concerns on a common 'peg' — be it a one-day hero or a one-day villain, big catastrophe or exceptionally joyous exploit. Just

like the overcoats in the theatre cloakroom, so the concerns are hung on the peg only for the duration of the spectacle, remaining the whole time the private property of their rightful individual owners. Peg communities bear many of the marks of the 'real stuff' — they thus offer the *experience* of belonging, of that quality of life which communities are deemed to deliver and for which they are coveted. They lack, however, the traits which define the 'real stuff': durability, a life expectancy which is longer than that of any of its members, and being (in Emile Durkheim's famous expression) 'a whole greater than the sum of its parts'. Since the 'real stuff' is prominent in today's world mostly by its absence or relentless disintegration, 'peg communities' are the second best choice: *experience* of community, however short-lived it may be, is the sole surrogate for what is desired to be experienced. However, since 'peg communities' are by their nature short-lived and have but a feeble grip on their 'members', each one of them leaves in its wake a void which cries out to be filled. Here again the endemic mortality of events helps: once cut into thin slices of episodes, life needs many and varied attention-drawing events to cover up the absence of logic and continuity.

We may say that as consumers of events, we all suffer from bulimia. We may also say that for bulimia sufferers, events (or spectacles, the form in which events reach attention once processed by the media) are an ideal food. Bulimia sufferers need to quickly get rid of the food they ingest in order to make room for more ingestion — it is not the quelling of hunger, but the act of voracious filling up which they crave and which prompts the doctors to define their form of eating as a 'disorder': events/spectacles are tailor-made for this purpose. They are aimed at immediate consumption and similarly speedy excretion, they are expected to be swallowed without chewing, they are not meant to be digested.



They vacate attention as soon as they enter it, well before they stand the chance of being assimilated and turned into a part of the consuming organism. One should perhaps correct the RTL slogan: that coffee which information imitates is not just hot and strong, but also *instant*.

In all these respects, events stand in implacable opposition to policies. It was policies which used to perform the integrating function now taken over by events/spectacles. It was policies that originated and gave rise to communities of like-minded people. But they did it differently, and their products differed accordingly.

The possibility of integration through policy would be unthinkable if not for the assumption of the collective ability to control, indeed to shape the future, and if not for the concept of the future that emerges out of consistent and doggedly pursued action, rather than descending out of the blue following the random play of essentially unpredictable forces. If the art of life in 'liquid' modernity is mostly about swimming safely in tidal waves which cannot be tamed, the ambition of 'solid' modernity was to reforge transience into durability, randomness into regularity, contingency into routine and chaos into order. It wanted to make the human world transparent and predictable and believed that this could be done.

Such assumptions are held no more. They command little credibility when voiced. As Pierre Bourdieu¹⁶ stated emphatically, those who deplore the cynicism which, as they believe, marks men and women of our time, should not fail to refer it to the economic and social contradictions which favour it: [C]apacity to project into the future... is the condition of all rational action... a reasonable ambition to transform the present in reference to a projected future, a minimum of hold on the present is required.

The point is, though, that very few of us nowadays can trust that singly or severally, or even collectively, we have enough grip on the present to dare the thought, let alone a resolution, to transform the future. But to have a 'policy' and even more to pursue it steadfastly, makes sense only in so far as

we believe that the future is 'shapeable', that there are ways and means to do it, and that agencies powerful enough to tackle the task effectively either exist or can be constructed. There is little evidence to substantiate this belief. The agencies which in the past boasted the ability to change the world for the better (most prominent among them the nation-states' governments, those acknowledged carriers and guardians of the sovereignty of action), reply to the demands of change with the increasingly sacrosanct and no longer questioned TINA formula (There Is No Alternative). They call for 'more flexibility' and more obedience to the 'market forces', implying that we will all gain from *less* regulation, *less* control, *less* command over conditions of the life we share. The big question which defies orthodox political action today is not 'what is to be done', but 'who can and will do it' — whatever there might need to be done.

In our rapidly globalizing world, agencies are no match for dependencies. 'Globalization' means today no more (but no less either) than globality of our dependencies: no locality is free any longer to proceed with its own agenda without reckoning with the elusive and recondite 'global finances' and 'global markets', while everything done locally may have global effects, anticipated or not. In other respects, though, globalization made little progress. Most certainly, political institutions inherited from two centuries of modern democracy did not follow the economy into global space. The result, as Manuel Castell put it, is a world in which power flows in the uncontrolled and under-institutionalized *global* space, while *politics* stays as *local* as before. The first is beyond the reach of the second. The emergent 'global system' is strikingly and dangerously one-dimensional, and such systems are notoriously unbalanced and unequilibrated.

We could console ourselves, following the present-day Panglossians, that after all we live in the time of transformation and any transformation must have its share of imbalances and 'lags'. We may aver, even believe, that the mismatch between globality of economy and territoriality of politics is a temporary phenomenon, an effect of a 'political



lag' which soon is bound to be repaired. This, indeed, is a consoling belief — the snag is that there are arguments, valid both empirically and analytically, which detract from its credibility. It could be argued that globalization of economic power is itself the major cause of the local fragmentation of politics and orthodox political agencies: that once emancipated from the obtrusive control of political institutions, the economic forces would use all their power (and enormous power they wield) to prevent the 'locals' from regaining that control, singly or in collusion. It could even be argued that far from being a temporary malfunction in the course of an on-going transformation, the present combination of global economy with local politics is the portent of things to come: that globality of economy and locality of politics are, in fact, the 'systemic prerequisites' of the new and peculiar, curiously lopsided arrangement of world affairs.

Whatever be the case may be, the brute fact is that the continuing (and widening) gap between economic power and political agencies goes on spawning that 'précarité' which is everywhere today. And another fact is that as long as there are few if any signs of bridging that gap, the fluidity of life-settings, the fragmentariness and episodicity of the life-pursuits that follows flexibility with all that requires, and consequently the anxieties and traumas which saturate individual lives-of-choices are unlikely to subside and will, in all probability, intensify. It is to those anxieties and traumas that contemporary men and women try to respond in their life politics. And it is to the measure and in the likeness of such strategies that 'the message which are the media' is made. Fears and dreams fed by the daily efforts to find 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' and the world 'as seen on TV' wink at each other and give sense to each other and vouch for each other's credibility. Whoever asks 'what can we do about the media?' must ask 'what is to be done about the world in which these media operate?' The one cannot be answered unless a realistic answer to the other is found.

Notes

1. Jacques ATTALI, *Dictionnaire du XXIe siècle*. Paris, Favard, 1998, p. 218.
2. Jean BAUDRILLARD, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Transl. by P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman, New York, *Sémiotexte* 1983, pp. 1-13. Simulacrum is 'a map that precedes the territory', 'that engenders the territory'. While 'feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality intact', simulation 'threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real and imaginary'... It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology)'.
3. Bruno LATOUR, *Petite réflexion sur le culte des dieux Faitiches*. Paris, Synthélabo 1996, p. 16. The word 'fetisj' was coined by the Portugese missionaries appalled by the sight of clay or wooden objects to whom the natives of Guinea ascribed divine potency. They reproached the heathen for failing to see the difference: 'Vous ne pouvez pas à la fois dire que vous avez fabriqué vos fétiches at qui'ils sont de vrais divinités, il vous faut choisir, c'est l'un ou bien s'est l'autre'. Simulacrum is neither *l'un* nor *l'autre*, neither the real thing nor its man-made model: or it is both.
4. Pierre BOURDIEU, *Sur la télévision*. Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 1996, pp. 30-31.
5. Simon HOGGART, 'Beethoven Blair pounds kettle drums for Britain' in *The Guardian* of 29 March 2000, p. 2.
6. Nick LEE, 'Three complex subjectivities: Borges, Sterne, Montaigne', a paper presented at ESRC seminar, January 2000 (MS).
7. Richard SENNETT, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York, W.W. Norton, 1998, pp. 62-63.



8. Alain EHRENBURG, *L'individu incertain*. Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1995, chap. 4.
9. Ulrich BECK, *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*. Transl. by M. Ritter. London, Sage, 1992, pp. 133-137.
10. Anthony GIDDENS, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge, Polity, 1992, pp. 197-8.
11. *The Corrosion of Character*. p. 22.
12. *Sur la télévision*. p. 28.
13. Ivan KLIMA, *Between Security and Insecurity*. Transl. by G. Turner. London, Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 44.
14. Paris, Paris-Méditerranée, 1998.
15. François BRUNE, 'De la soumission dans les têtes' in *Le Monde diplomatique*, April 2000, p. 20.
16. Pierre BOURDIEU, 'La précarité est aujourd'hui partout' in *Contre-feux*. Paris, Raisons d'Agir, 1998, pp. 98, 97.