

Amusing Ourselves to Death

by Neil Postman



Neil Postman (1931-2003) was educated at the State University of New York in Fredonia and Columbia University. In 1971, he founded a graduate program in media ecology at NYU and eventually chaired the Department of Culture and Communication. Postman was a prolific—and sometimes controversial—writer in the fields of language and media theory. “Amusing Ourselves to Death” is a speech Postman presented at the 1984 Frankfurt Germany Book Fair and later published in Et cetera.



Chancellor Kohl, Lord Mayor Wallmann, Mr. Christiansen, Ladies and Gentlemen:

In accepting the honor of delivering this address, I am obliged to say something about the theme of this year’s Book Fair, which, as you know, is Orwell in the year 2000. I trust you will not think me grossly disrespectful if what I say is that the choice of this theme is a mistake. To be precise, it is half of a mistake. There is no doubt that Orwell’s prophecies and parables have application of roughly half the governments of the world. If, for example, one were to read both *1984* and *Animal Farm*, and then for good measure, Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*, one would have a fairly accurate blueprint of the machinery of thought-control as it presently operates in scores of countries, some of them not far distant from where we are meeting.

But the fact is that so far as the Western democracies are concerned, Orwell missed the mark almost completely. This obvious point has provided many civil libertarians with a false sense of pride and accomplishment. They were keeping their eye on *1984*. And when the year came and the prophecy didn’t, they sang songs of praise for themselves and then countries. And they do still. The roots of liberal democracy have not been torn asunder. Wherever else the terror has happened, we, in the West, have not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

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

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive people. Huxley feared we would become a trivial people, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, freedom lovers who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny have “failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.” In Orwell’s book, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell thought we would be marched single-file and manacled into oblivion. Huxley thought we would dance ourselves there, with an idiot smile on our face.

In America, Orwell’s prophecies are of small relevance but Huxley’s are well underway toward being realized. I speak to you of America not only because I know its situation better than any other but also because America is engaged in the world’s most ambitious experiment to accommodate itself to the technological distractions made possible by the electric plug. This is an experiment that began slowly and modestly in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of the telegraph, and has now, in the latter half of the twentieth, reached a perverse maturity in America’s consuming love affair with television. As nowhere else in the world, Americans have moved far and fast in bringing to a close the age of the slow-moving printed word, and have granted to television sovereignty over all of their institutions. By ushering in the age of television, America has given the world the clearest available glimpse of the Huxleyan future, 2000.

To anyone who is unfamiliar with this vast shift in American’s symbolic ecology, I offer a few examples. According to the 1983 Nielsen Report on Television, ninety-eight percent of all American homes have a television set. Fifty-one percent have two or more television sets. Seventy-five percent have color television sets. The average household has its television sets on approximately seven hours a day. The average American child watches 5000 hours of television before he or she ever gets to school; about 16,000 hours by high school’s end. The only activity that occupies more of an American youth’s time than TV-viewing is sleeping. Americans who have reached the age of forty will have seen over one million television commercials, and can expect to see another million before their first retirement check arrives.

Television in America, it would appear, is the *soma* of Huxley’s *Brave New World*. But let me hasten to say that America’s immersion in television is not to be taken as an attempt by a malevolent government or an avaricious corporate state to employ the age-old trick of distracting the masses with circuses. The problem is more serious than that, and far from being age-old. The problem is not that TV presents the masses with entertaining subject matter, but that television presents all subject matter as entertaining. What is dangerous about television is not its junk. Every culture can absorb a fair amount of junk, and, in any case, we do not judge a culture by its junk but by how it conducts its serious public business. What is happening in America is that television is transforming all serious public business into junk.

As our politics, our news, our religion, our education, and our commerce are less and less given expression in the form of printed words or even oratory, they are rapidly being reshaped and staged to suit the requirements of television. And because television is a visual medium; because it does its talking in pictures, not words; because its images are in color and are most

pleasurably apprehended when they are fast-moving and dynamic; because television demands an immediate and emotional response; because television is nothing at all like a pamphlet, a newspaper, or a book; because of all this and more, all discourse on television must take the form of an entertainment. Television has little tolerance for arguments, hypotheses, reasons, explanations, or any of the instruments of abstract, expository thought. What television mostly demands is a performing art. Thinking is not a performing art. Showing is. And so what can be shown rather than what can be thought becomes the stuff of our public consciousness. In all arenas of public business, the image now replaces the words as the basic unit of discourse. As a consequence, television makes the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas obsolete. It creates a new metaphor: the marketplace of images.

Should you need a precise example of what this means, then consider the following: In America, circa 1984, a fat person cannot be elected to high political office. With your indulgence, I shall repeat this, because it captures the sense of the great Huxleyan transformation now taking place: In America, a fat person cannot be elected to a high political office. A fat person makes an unpleasant image on television, and such an image easily overwhelms whatever profundities may issue forth from its mouth. If you have not heard any interesting ideas from American political leaders, it is not, I assure you, that they have none. It is because ideas are irrelevant to political success. In the Age of Television, people do not so much agree or disagree with politicians as they like or dislike them, for the image is not susceptible to verification or refutation, only to acceptance or rejection. In 1984, politics in America is not the Federalist Papers. It is not the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. It is not even Roosevelt's fireside chats. Politics is good looks and amiability. It is fast-moving imagery. A quick tempo, a good show, celebrities. Because of this it is even possible that some day a Hollywood movie actor may become President of the United States.

What is true of politics is equally true of news, which is transmitted to Americans through the device widely known as a "TV news show." Our newscasters, sometimes referred to as "talking hair-dos," comprise the handsomest class of people in America. Their shows are always introduced and concluded with music. While on camera, they talk to each other with chatty informality. Each of the stories they tell us rarely occupies more than forty-five seconds of our time. And in all cases, coherence and continuity are sacrificed in favor of visual interest. A TV news show is only marginally concerned with public information. What is important is its tempo, the celebrity of its performers, the pleasant familiarity of its ambience. A TV news show is precisely what its name implies: A show is an entertainment, a world of artifice, carefully staged to produce a particular series of effects so that the audience is left laughing or crying or stupefied. And that is why each evening at the conclusion of a news show, the newscaster invites us to "join" him or her tomorrow. One would think that thirty minutes of fragmented images of disorder and sorrow would provide enough anxiety for a month of sleepless nights. Not so. We join them tomorrow because we know a good show when we see one.

And that is exactly why so many Americans now prefer to get their religious instruction from television rather than church. Church is apt to provide congregants with a serious and austere experience; in any case, not a very amusing one. But television makes religion *fun*. Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, and Robert Schuller are only among the more entertaining of a coven of preachers who do religion regularly on television. Surrounded by singers, celebrities, floral displays, sparkling fountains, exotic locales, and exceedingly handsome people, these evangelists

offer a religion that is as simplistic and theatrical as any Las Vegas stage show. No dogma, terminology, logic, ritual, doctrines, or traditions are called upon to burden the minds of viewers, who are required to respond only to the image of the preacher, to whom God, Himself, must take second billing. For God does not play well on television. In an imagistic medium God is scarcely present; only the relentless and charismatic image of a messenger who, to gain attention and large audiences, turns theology into a vaudeville act.

Which, of course, is what has been done to education by “Sesame Street,” our highly acclaimed TV show for children. Both its creators and its audiences now accept without qualification the idea that learning and entertainment are indistinguishable, just as businessmen, in spending millions on those mini-entertainments known as commercials, accept the idea that economics is less a science than an adjunct of show business.

This shift in the form and content of public discourse is not only manifested in what is *on* television but also in what is *off* television. As TV moves typography to the edges of our culture and takes its place at the center, the television show becomes our most compelling model and metaphor of all communication. How TV stages the world becomes our idea of how the world is properly to be staged. Our newspapers, increasingly, are designed to give readers the feeling they are watching television. Indeed, America’s newest national daily, *USA Today*, is sold on the streets in receptacles that look like television screens. Our teachers have increased the visual stimulation of their lessons, and strive to make their classrooms even more entertaining than “Sesame Street.” In case you have not heard the news, I fear I must tell you that the Philadelphia public schools have embarked on an experiment in which children will have their curriculum sung to them to the rhythms of rock music. Those ministers who are confined to non-electronic, traditional pulpits are often driven to adopting a show business style to prove, as it were, that one does not have to be serious to be holy. Indeed, some wish to prove that one does not have to be holy at all, as for example, Father John J. O’Connor, who put on a New York Yankees baseball cap in mugging his way through his installation as Archbishop of the Archdiocese of New York. Our universities eagerly award honorary degrees to television and movie stars, some of whom are asked to address the graduates at commencement exercises on subjects about which neither they nor the graduates know anything whatsoever. It is of no matter. In a culture in which one becomes a celebrity by merely appearing on television, the distinction between entertainment and anything else becomes odious.

That is why our politicians eagerly make appearances on non-political television shows. Henry Kissinger joined former President Gerald Ford for an appearance on the hit TV show, “Dynasty.” Speaker of the House of Representatives Tip O’Neill did a cameo role on the comedy show “Cheers.” Consumer advocate Ralph Nader hosted the popular show “Saturday Night Live.” So did George McGovern and the Mayor of New York City, Edward Koch, who also played the role of a prize-fighter manager on a made-for-TV movie, starring James Cagney. Just as the television commercial freed the entrepreneur from concentrating on the quality of his product and, instead, demanded that he concentrate on entertaining the consumer, the format of television frees the politician from the serious confines of the political arena. Political figures may show up anywhere, at anytime, doing anything, without being thought odd, presumptuous, or in any way out of place. I can assure you that no American would be surprised if Geraldine Ferraro¹ showed up in a small role as a Queens housewife in a Francis Coppola film.

In America, all forms of social life strive to be like television shows or are thought to have potential as TV shows. We are now televising our courtroom trials, most recently and notably a rape trial in New Bedford, Massachusetts, which took audiences away from their favorite soap operas for several weeks. We have also discovered that real-life surgery is, if anything, more engrossing than fictional medical shows. In this connection, perhaps the most significant statement made in America, recently, about the state of our culture was inadvertently uttered by Mr. Bernard Schuler, who became an instant celebrity by allowing Dr. Edward Dietrich to perform triple by-pass surgery on him while on television. Mr. Schuler was uncommonly confident about the operation because, he said, “There is no way in hell they are going to lose me on live TV.”

That all the world is a stage is hardly an unfamiliar thought. But that all the world is a TV situation comedy has come as quite a surprise—except to Aldous Huxley. We must, in any case, make no mistake about it. Television is not merely an entertainment medium. It is a philosophy of discourse, every bit as capable of altering a culture as was the printing press. Among other things, the printed word created the modern idea of prose, and invested exposition with unprecedented authority as a means of conducting public affairs. Television disdains exposition, which is serious, sequential, rational, and complex. It offers instead a mode of discourse in which everything is accessible, simplistic, concrete and above all, entertaining. As a result, America is the world’s first culture in jeopardy of amusing itself to death.

And much of the rest of the world appears eager to join us. While America may no longer be loved, American television certainly is. It is estimated that America exports 250,000 hours of TV programming per year, equally divided among Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Even the People’s Republic of China has lately contracted with CBS to assist its people in joining in the fun. Contracts with NBC and ABC are sure to follow. One hopes the Chinese understand that this represents a revolutionary political act. The Gang of Four² is as nothing when compared to the Gang of Three.

I do not say this merely to achieve an effect, for, in concluding, I wish you to understand me to be saying that there are two ways by which the spirit of a culture may be shriveled. In the first—the Orwellian—culture becomes a prison. In the second—the Huxleyan—culture becomes a burlesque. The first way is far easier for us to recognize and to oppose. Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the walls begin to close around us. We are not likely to be indifferent to the voices of the Sakharovs³ and the Timmermans⁴ and the Walesas⁵. We take arms against such a sea of troubles, buttressed by the spirit of Luther, Milton, Bacon, Voltaire, Goethe, and Jefferson. But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture dying of laughter? I fear, ladies and gentlemen, that our philosophers have as yet given us no guidance in this matter.

Notes

1. The Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1984.

2. Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong's second wife), Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan. They were imprisoned, tried, and convicted by the Red Chinese government in 1980 – 1981 for their harsh policies during the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.
3. Dr. Andrei Sakharov (b. 1921), Nobel Prize-winning physicist and Russian dissident.
4. Jacobo Timerman (b. 1923), distinguished Argentinian journalist and dedicated Zionist. He was arrested in 1977 by the military junta then ruling Argentina and imprisoned and tortured.
5. Lech Walesa (b. 1943?), Polish labor leader and founder of the labor union Solidarity.