Chapter Six

Total Entertainment:
The Rise of the Amusement State

Religions give men a general habit of conducting themselves with a view to eternity; in this respect they are not less useful to happiness in this life than to felicity hereafter, and this is one of their chief political characteristics.

Alexis de Tocqueville

Edward Gibbon recognized how amusement, when raised to a ruling passion, enervated people, rendered them soft and lazy, and made them indifferent to everything but their present condition, and thus easily managed and readily compliant. Copious amusement and opportunities for diversion to the masses enable aspiring tyrants to fasten the chains with less trouble and little interference.

The public games were one of Augustus's tools for completing the destruction of the Roman republic, clearing away the remains of its austere republican virtue, and for the expansion of his dictatorship near the end of the first century B.C.

The people of Rome, viewing with a secret pleasure the humiliation of the aristocracy, demanded only bread and public shows, and were supplied with both by the liberal hand of Augustus.
This is Gibbon's recipe for tyranny—"bread and public shows," the first century analog to junk food and sitcoms. Two ingredients are at work here, Gibbon asserts: envy, which seeks the destruction of almost any form of hierarchy, and amusement, which when it becomes all consuming, makes people into docile, manageable creatures who will vegetate contentedly and leave the ruling elites free to enlarge the scope of whatever programs and enterprises that will gratify their particular appetites and ambitions. Amusement in heavy doses softens us up. Like a narcotic, it incapacitates us and diverts our interests and energies from more serious matters.

In the second half of the twentieth century a confluence of three cultural developments, unique in human history, has brought us to a stage where the prevailing human preoccupation is amusing ourselves. First, compared with our ancestors, we lead relatively work-free lives. We do not have to spend the majority of our waking moments eking out our subsistence. Moreover, the work that nearly all of us actually do is not physically grueling labor.

The growing preoccupation with amusement changes how we think about work and what it means for us. Work itself begins to take on the characteristics of amusement and entertainment. Work in many ways has lost its primacy in relation to consumption. Richard Weaver has written:

that the more a man has to indulge in, the less disposed he is to endure the discipline of toil—that is to say, the less willing he is to produce that which is to be consumed. Labor ceases to be functional in life; it becomes something that is grudgingly traded for that competence, or that superfluity, to which everyone has a 'right'.

Second, cable television and computer technology have given us an infinite capacity for the vicarious experience of the spectacle. We now have at our immediate disposal and at little cost, movies, sports, theater, television shows, and concerts of any sort to cater to every personal inclination. We can amuse ourselves almost everywhere: in our homes, cars, boats, campsites, workplaces. In short, we—including people of even modest means—possess a nearly limitless set
of choices for amusement and diversion, in almost any place we like at any time we choose, that would have been inconceivable a hundred years ago even for the richest and most powerful individuals.

The third, and I think the most important reason, has to do with the nature of personalism and its war on traditional institutions and the primacy of self-discovery. Traditional institutions such as the church and family offer their members a vision of reality and a connectedness to a larger objectively defined order that gives meaning to their lives. What life is all about, what one's place and destiny in the world are—all of these essential human ends—or purpose-questions—are interpreted through and mediated by the structures and purposes of the institutions themselves. As the spirit of traditional institutions ebbs away imperceptibly and is irretrievably lost, and as these institutions come increasingly to exist in remote, abstract and depersonalized forms, that fixity and connectedness that came from the institutions and their capacity to give meaning and direction to life dissipate. Those ends-or purpose-questions fall heavily and open-ended entirely upon the individual. There is little or no institutional help with these kinds of questions. The questions, as well as the answers, become entirely self-chosen and self-proclaimed—indeed, the utter primacy of self-assertion seems to be inevitable—but to what purposes and effects? It is impossible now, opines Arnold Gehlen,

to identify standards of value valid for everybody, and this is what engenders the inferiority complex—the social role someone plays is no longer unquestionably accepted as valued by some other group.³

Gehlen is just one of many observers of modern life to recognize how relentless is its subjectivity and how it takes a toll on individuals by fragmenting and dissolving the systems of belief that tie people together in communities.

Amusement contributes to that fragmentation. It nurtures our subjectivism. For I alone can say authoritatively what amuses me, what makes me laugh or cry, what will successfully divert me from my cares and anxieties. Amusement has for its main purposes the stimulation of the senses and imagination. It affords
diversion from the oppression of daily routines and cares, and offers excitement. If it does not provide any of these, it fails. Modern man, stripped of the nurturing, interconnected institutions, his belief in a transcendental reality ruptured, still must have something to fill the teleological void that has been left by the death of his gods. Amusement fills the void: it has become an end in itself, an ersatz religion with innumerable enticements and, most importantly, invincible subjectivity.

This conjunction of technical, economic and social developments brings us to a unique historical point: life in the total amusement society. Life unfolds as a quest for fun. Amusement reigns! The quest for amusement unleashed becomes the controlling passion of all of conscious life. Life itself becomes a continuous diversion, a diversion from itself. The art of living has thus become the mastery of the technology of escape. We now have all of the essential ingredients easily at our disposal to make our lives, if we so care, into the ceaseless pursuit of amusement. And many of us do. Watching television alone consumes huge amounts of the average American family’s time—hours per day. Spending the entire evening before the television is routine for many families. With the advance of cable, satellite, and digital technology, the sheer numbers of programs from which to choose—the convenience, the possibilities for the most personalized levels of consumer amusement-satisfaction—are staggering and growing.

Supplementing the programming of the television network is the movie industry. With the advent of VCRs, DVD, and cable television, one can consume movies of all kinds twenty-four hours per day. The possibilities for electronically viewing sports events and spectacles of every conceivable type are enormous and there are countless other sources of diversion and escape.

It is important, though, to make a distinction between being entertained or being amused and amusing one’s self. The latter is active and involves the exertion and even creative engagement of one’s faculties. Important and valuable achievements may emerge from such activities. The former, however, is essentially a passive process: one submits oneself to the experience of a pre-
packaged program that experts design to provide diversion or escape. Passive amusement makes no demands— one simply digests what is placed before him. Much television watching is the perfect model of this kind of passive, inert amusement. “Neither preparation nor study is required to enjoy [it]; [it] lays hold on you in the midst of your prejudice and ignorance.”

Tocqueville wrote this over one hundred and fifty years ago referring to the great appeal of the theater to Americans. But the observation is even more applicable today to television. Neil Postman has pointed out that television viewing is not and never will be a skill or discipline or ability that one develops and refines: no one ever becomes better at watching television the way they do for example with reading, or mathematics or playing a musical instrument or playing a sport.

Watching television requires no skills and develops no skills. That is why there is no such thing as remedial television- watching. That is also why you are not better today at watching television than you were five years ago, or ten.

This is most certainly the case. History is replete with people who have educated and distinguished themselves through the disciplined reading of books and journals and the study of mathematics and technical subjects. It is safe, I believe, to say that no one anywhere has educated or distinguished himself or herself through the watching of television.

The world of television is dominated by celebrities, and it the perfect medium for the easy creation of celebrity-hood. Celebrities dominate electronic amusement. Celebrity-hood is an inexplicable phenomenon—but its qualities generate a powerful, immediate appeal. Celebrity status and novelty go hand-in-hand. To become a celebrity status one must usually defy or resist conventional norms or expectations. The conventional is dull, predictable, boring—not amusing. One who becomes a celebrity can, with virtual immunity, break rules, set trends, stand outside of institutions and treat them with casual indifference or even open contempt.

Celebrities play by their own “personal” rules. Until recently, the last thirty years or so, there was least a tentative balance between the “dangerous”
attractiveness of the ways of celebrities for the middle class and the personal
destructiveness that the non-conformity could bring. The "life-style" of the
celebrity class was a life of daring, rule-breaking, libidinal adventure in invidious
contrast to the middle classes' "slavery" to convention, to safe, conservative
values that usually had some religious basis. We could look enviously at the some
of the movie stars of mid-century like Errol Flynn, Lana Turner, or Robert
Mitchum, the social rebels who broke the rules and defied the conventions and
seemed to have lots of fun doing it. But for the most part the middle class did not
emulate them—there were unhappy consequences that often followed. There was
still a set of forces—the religious, moral principles and norms—that competed
effectively against the enticements of a celebrity antinomianism and held us more
or less in tow, that is, helped us stay married, loyal to our spouses, watchful over
our children, out of jail, sober and solvent.

The sixties greatly assisted in dismantling these constraining and
conserving forces. The dilution of traditional religion and the descent into
paganism and barbarism—the latter symbolized by the shirtless, tattooed,
drunken, obscenity-spewing rock musician "entertaining" our young and
impressionable daughters and sons—assisted our immersion into a complete
amusement society that is always "celebrating" something.

One cannot begin to fathom how amusement functions in our society
without considering how intricately is its connection to the lives of the amusement
provider, i.e., celebrities. The ersatz religion of amusement offers many and
varied rites of adulation, practices, and ceremonies that pay homage to its own
gods, ones that are often glitzy and beautiful. The fascination and absorption with
celebrities seem to have plunged us into the recrudescence of an almost primitive
pagan polytheism, a world where flawed inferior deities flit capriciously about
and generally foul things up. Most of their free time seems to be spent having
affairs, getting divorced, arrested or addicted. These activities are assiduously
tracked by the professional gossips in the media and are a major source of
amusement.
Celebrity-hood embraces people with varying degrees of permanence and for reasons that often have nothing to do with talent or ability. At the apex of celebrity-hood are the movie and television stars and the professional athletes. They are beautiful and athletic. Their names and faces are everywhere. They are the objects of intense scrutiny with an “industry” that caters to the seemingly powerful need to engage in the widespread rituals of “celebrity worship.”

Parasite celebrities, impresarios like Barbara Walters and Larry King, generously assist celebrity worship with electronic forums, and the “personal” interviews through which the celebrity “reveals” himself or herself to members of the television audience. The interviews themselves resemble a strange variation of the stereotyped contemporary therapist-patient encounter. The therapist-interviewer gently and empathetically, but persistently, urges the celebrity-patient to talk about those secret inner feelings and to make an insightful self-interpretation of those feelings and the experiences that gave rise to them. But the real therapeutic beneficiaries of these celebrity interviews conducted on television are, of course, the members of the audience, eagerly but passively awaiting the epiphany. The interview’s purpose is to provide an opportunity for all of us to peer into the psyche of a celebrity—a revelation with a therapeutic-voyeuristic thrust. This is the source of the appeal to millions of people. There is great irony with this. The draw of such exchanges for the audience derives from the “talent” of the interviewer to create a casual, informal, relaxed setting in which a personal and supposedly moving human exchange takes place—an achievement of warm and friendly if scripted intimacy, in front of millions of strangers. This exchange often will turn on the discussion of matters deeply intimate or private to the celebrity. Here at play in the center of the amusement industry is of all things, the “honesty” Rousseau invented—tell all about yourself to everyone. The therapist-interviewer and celebrity-patient both, of course, know that they are, respectively, asking and answering the questions with the outside world looking on. The celebrity interview, with all of its contrived spontaneity, phony intimacy, and self-revelation manufactured for maximum effect, thus has turned out to be one of our
popular electronic-rites of celebrity worship, a uniquely modern television genre of mass amusement via celebrity adulation—one that adroitly combines television theatrics with light trappings of psycho-therapy.

Amusement as a dominating influence in our daily routines is a new phenomenon—four or five decades in the making. For hours, people sit and stare, often ingesting chips, popcorn, candy and soda pop—not by coincidence sold in ample packages at the video store—and mentally digest the formulaic productions churned out by the amusement industry. The American plague of obesity—obesity rates have doubled in the last thirty years—comes in part with inordinate television watching, given the physical passivity and gluttony that accompanies it.

Obesity grows at alarming rates. But its intrusion is so completely understandable. Rampant obesity is the physical consequence of a remarkably new dimension of our amusement ethos—“amusement eating.” Amusement eating does not take place around the ceremony of traditional meals that sustain social relationships and nourish the body. One engages in amusement eating neither to alleviate hunger nor to assist with social connections: it is amusement in its own right, pursued to combat boredom. Amusement eating often accompanies escapist activities like television and movie watching. The “snack food” aisle at most supermarkets purposely segregates the popular amusement foods, such as chips, candy, cheezos, pretzels, soda pop, etc., conveniently packaged food that is high in empty calories. Even the portions are larger—Coca-Cola many years ago was vended in six and a half ounce bottles. Amusement food tends to make people fat rather than healthy. We eat anywhere as we now seek amusement everywhere—in cars, at work, in the classroom, among many other places. The traditional social constraints surrounding eating have diminished just as other social constraints have yield to self-pursuing personalism. The actual activity of eating has come to resemble the instinctual-biological behavior of animals. We simply “graze” whenever we encounter food.

Out of amusement eating, like amusement in general, arises a curious symbiosis. Amusement naturally pushes us toward excess: fun is good, the more
the better—who is to make “value judgments” about what limits should be imposed? But the excess puts us into debilitated straits from which we frequently need to be rescued. Amusement begets therapy. The amused need the therapists; the therapists help the amused. Dieting is the therapeutic antidote to amusement eating.

Amusement eating, naturally, creates the need to diet. The diet industry is an enterprise into which Americans feed millions of dollars—the weight loss industry, made up of clinics and treatment centers, programs, counseling—necessary to contend with obesity. Amusement eaters, as one might expect, are not disciplined in their ingestion of food. Because amusement in general is good—the more the better—amusement eating therefore must be good. It turns out in fact to be irresistible for many. Amusement eaters need others to help them try to reduce the acquired bulk, to engage in self-exploration in order to “understand” why they overeat. Whenever Oprah achieves one of her major “slimming” feats, millions of her viewers learn even more about her personal battle with obesity and all of its psychological underpinnings. This understanding is, of course, self-understanding, another facet of personalism with its concentration on the subjective self. The therapy to overcome obesity can itself become a peculiar form of amusement and diversion. In the Kingdom of Amusement, one kind of diversion can be conquered only by another kind.

Grotesque ironies flow out of the mix of amusement eating and television watching. Americans indulge themselves daily for hours contemplating the svelte, beautiful celebrities on television, during which they ingest the amusement food made irresistible by the slick television commercials, steadily making their way to obesity and unwieldy corpulence. The imagery that captures and exalts the glamour, sexuality, and beauty that is so much the allure of television for the viewers serves in the end to magnify their own grossness—amusement that holds the seeds of self-loathing. Yet, for those turned fat by amusement eating, television, the origin and stimulus for so much of the consumption, becomes the prime purveyor of weight loss programs, fad diets and exercise equipment.
Network television programming is formulaic and hopelessly stultifying—sit-coms, dramas, news, soap operas and game shows. Movies come in homogenized, pre-sorted categories—romantic comedy, action film, horror film, martial arts and some others. They are predictable and designed to be so. The romantic comedies make us “feel good”—that is how they promoted. Action movies fabricate vicarious excitement for imaginary escape from a heavily regulated, meaningless world. All the genres are predictable. They evoke the kinds of moods and feelings we want—wherever and whenever we want them. The underlying themes and even the ideology are standard: the films not only entertain but also purvey the latest pieties of the elite. In submitting to the usual fair of programmed amusement, the minds, like the sitting, food-ingesting bodies they are connected with, have little work to do or effort to exert—in it goes; out it goes, most of it quickly forgotten because it is all pretty much the same. Everything is fine and no complaints start dropping as long as the stimulation patterns hold up to standard expectations and the satisfaction levels are high.

One of the most remarkable, late-twentieth-century stories of disappearing self-restraint that is directly related to the ascendance of amusement is the complete normalization in our society of gambling. Until the last twenty-five years or so, outside of a few amusement “sin” capitals such as Las Vegas and Atlantic City, gambling was illegal almost everywhere in the country. Beginning about three decades ago—with a heavy assist along the way from the 1988 Indian Gaming Regulatory Act—gambling in some form has been legalized in all of the fifty states except for Utah and Hawaii. Gaming, as it is now called, is a multi-billion dollar industry. This kind of money makes it a dead serious source of amusement. The states do not merely permit gambling, but also often run and aggressively promote it—especially lotteries. The standard defense of State-sponsored vice is that the revenues support public goods like education. The hypocrisy and absurdity of this rationalization is outrageous and laughable, another official piece of propaganda produced by the amusement state that no one even pretends to believe anymore. It simply has become a cliché that has been
reflexively parroted long enough so that no one will bother to consider its obvious falsity. Even in states like Mississippi, where there still remain some residues of conservative religious sentiment and practice, gambling has become legal and flourishes.

This phenomenon is a turnabout of an astonishing nature, considering the long-standing, widespread, strongly disapproving moral and social attitudes toward gambling. Our Puritan tradition helped to carry us for a long time in resisting the allure of games of chance, but no longer. The onslaught of pro-gambling legalization and the aggressive marketing of it to the middle class as harmless amusement—an easy sell, it turns out—has given an explicit, formal ratification to what is the social reality of a virtual collapse of another long standing norm of self-restraint.

Americans regarded gambling for generations as a dangerous, seductive vice, another possible moral sinkhole into which the weak of character, especially, were in perennial danger of tumbling. Much of its associations were with the underworld, with loan sharks, alcoholics, hoodlums and prostitutes. Its attraction was mainly for people who disdained middle class habits and virtues, people who did not like to work, who wanted to get something for nothing.

The social and religious attitudes toward gambling of the past were highly censorious. The enticement of gambling like that of sex is mysterious, dangerous and forbidding. The urge for both seems to be aroused by powerful, irrational impulses and, one might be inclined to argue, should, in some ways, be attended by strong counter-valing norms which discourage the activity and deter individuals if possible from destroying themselves from the excesses. The opponents of legalized gambling point to the statistics which spell out how this vice chews large holes through peoples' lives: how much of a moral toll gambling takes upon people, especially the poor, how devastating it is on families, its ruination of countless lives, its close linkages with many other vices and with organized crime and prostitution.

But in a society in which amusement has risen to the supreme value, no
one should be surprised that gambling, with its enormous potential for amusement, for exhilaration and for stimulation, has almost overnight become a large cog in the national amusement machine. Gambling is now "gaming"—another life-style expanding act of de-stigmatization that enables the proponents of legalized gambling to rid it of some of the unwholesome associations that have long been in place. "Gaming" is a linguistic nod in the direction of the normalization of gambling, a clever euphemism that works by happy, positive associations. Gambling is just a game like any other game (softball, golf, pinochle, croquet), and games, everyone knows, are good and healthy and wholesome, and most importantly, amusing and fun. Why should our moralistic preconceptions of the past inhibit the pursuit of a good time?

A melancholy irony of the late-twentieth-century rush to normalize gambling is the resulting predictable symbiosis: an escalation of debilitating self-indulgent conduct rationalized as self-fulfillment; a demand for therapists to tend to the debilitated. Gaming spawns one more class of addict-victims who have become, through their own indulgence, incapable of managing their own lives and acting responsibly, and who require the talking fix, replete with support groups, counseling, and heavy doses of "recovery" argot—"people who need people." The comparisons with amusement eating are obvious. Compulsive gamblers compose yet another collection of psychically wounded clientele for the mental health industry to attend to, another plot on its map of professional expansion, one more medical "disability" for which "reasonable accommodation" under ADA will be thrashed out in the courts. The American Psychiatric Association declares that compulsive gambling is an illness—another disease by physician ukase—and regards it "... as an addiction to gambling akin to alcoholism or drug addiction." 8

The primacy of amusement in contemporary society marks an important reversal of affairs, a departure from an order where we entertained ourselves in order to divert ourselves from work: now we work to pursue amusement. A key element of that change has been the erosion of the traditional practice of delayed gratification. What we have now shaken off—its remnants were in place fifty
years ago—are the confines that delayed gratification imposed upon us. Max Weber noted the important connection between certain views of work and certain religious ideas. Religious ideas and ideals oriented people toward thinking about work and its place in their lives in a particular way. Deferral is natural because for a person who believes that he participates in a divine plan, his efforts go beyond immediate material objects. The practice of deferral is what contributes, over the long course, to his spiritual well-being. It is ethical because it does not digress from what is truly important, valuable and right, and helps to keep him on course. Work develops character, that is, is assists in developing certain habits and dispositions that are good for the person and good for the community.

How foreign this is to the amusement mentality that is locked into the immediate present. Tocqueville, a century and a half ago wrote that,

When men once have allowed themselves to think no more of what is to befall them after life, they readily lapse into that complete and brutal indifference to futurity which is but too conformable to some propensities of mankind.9

Each successive moment, each unfolding event, is an opportunity for or source of fresh stimulation, a new piece of pleasure, a unique adventure. Deferral makes sense only as part of a strategy to maximize pleasure. You take as much as you can while you can. Such an approach exhausts, to a great extent, the future. This is Tocqueville’s point.

As soon as they have lost the habit of placing their chief hopes upon remote events, they naturally seek to gratify without delay their smallest desires; and no sooner do they despair of living forever, than they are disposed to act as if they were to exist but for a single day.10

You use up your time, which is what the personalist, who is preoccupied with self-actualization, would urge.

Americans save far less than they did forty or fifty years ago. Why? Their orientation is toward the present: there are more opportunities for amusement and there is more encouragement to pursue it. The past reminds us of our commitments and obligations. The past has the potential to become a constraint
on our future conduct, and, with its potential linkages of obligation, may prevent us from doing what we would enjoy in the present. By permanently lodging ourselves in the present, we can slip out of annoying obligations and dodge constraints with their linkages to the past. If we conduct our lives as if they are supposed to be enjoyed for just the present moment, it is much easier to lie or distort or mislead, and with fewer unhappy consequences. No one will remember our obligations and thus they will not bind us. Words can easily come to mean something quite different today than they did yesterday or they will tomorrow, and that should not bother or trouble us very much because yesterday is not relevant to our current interests. Past inconsistencies need not embarrass us, nor must we even account for them. We need not ask to be forgiven for past wrong. The past simply is not important.

II

The devaluation of the past has helped destroy what was at mid-century a tenaciously held distinction between high and low culture. Certain objects of art, literature, philosophy and religion, we generally agreed, were more intrinsically valuable, more worthy of admiration, contemplation and study than others. The works of Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Beethoven contained elements, supposedly, of wisdom or understanding or beauty or some other treasured universal aspect of reality with an enduring value. To be “educated” one was, with the assistance of the initiated, to make a contemplative encounter with these sources, and absorb their uplifting qualities. To these great works, we ascribed a life transforming power. To be seriously and permanently affected by such contact was the real mark, the indelible signature, as it were, of high culture and serious education. The popular, ephemeral stuff was lowbrow and for the vulgar, the masses.

The distinction between low and high culture in large part long rested upon a perception and understanding of an enduring value of certain things persisting across time—some aspects or objects of human concern, “higher” things, that were part of an order of reality that transcended the experience of the
immediate. All was not ephemera! Earlier civilized orders had always made these important distinctions: for medieval Christianity, God was eternal and transcendent; for the Enlightenment and modern man there was the discovery of an objective order of truth and justice, or beauty that symbolized these values and represented some locus of permanence that we, immersed in the flux, could identify and use to fix our course.

Christianity is a religion of the book. Its permanence, its truths had actually been written down. Sacred texts revealed them to us and thus constituted a real, enduring fixture of moral truth. How can such a notion be sustained in today’s hyper-modern world that is enthralled with revolutionary change? Not only is the notion of revelation wholly indigestible to people who live in a world where the ultimate epistemological authority is modern science, but the notion of authority surrounding a privileged interpretation, or an ecclesiastical hierarchy that might interpret a revealed text is nearly impossible now for anyone to believe. Also, the advent of electronic publication and the emergence of electronic books have changed our basic notion of what a “text” really is—something unstable and ephemeral, purposely created for endless alterations.

A hierarchy of values has to be incomprehensible to a person who operates in a relativized moral world. This is particularly the case with the young, now coming out of a third generation since the Second World War, where television saturates life and is the fundamental media for its interpretation. As television tightens its grip on all aspects of our culture, the value of the past becomes its usefulness in bolstering current ideological trends, or in functioning as one more specialized venue of amusement. The past becomes a source of material to be used for the production of nostalgia—cheaply purchased emotion. The proliferation of “oldies” radio stations in the 1980s was a commercial response to a vast nostalgia market enabling the graying, and now more affluent, baby boomers to groove away in the eternal present of the Beach Boys, the Beatles and the Supremes. Only what immediately stimulates is important—any hierarchies of value and meaning can make no sense.
If the culture measures everything by its capacity to produce pleasure and amusement—Now!—then there can be no such thing as high and low culture; high or low relative to what? There is not even any conceivable way to argue for it because the basis for making comparisons becomes what appeals to the stimulation-craving self. Bentham was right: pushpin is every bit as good as poetry; MTV equals Mozart. They are equal in value because they are equal as competitors in the amusement industry, each appealing to a different market niche. There can be no arguable distinction in worth or value between the plays of Shakespeare and the sit-coms of prime time television. A hierarchy of value only exists if it is located and established within a differentiated chain of being. Axiology recapitulates ontology: the structure and order of what we value reflects the way we comprehend the structure of reality.

The changes in the humanities side of college and university curricula over the last thirty or forty years further illustrate this point. The canon of great works of literature, philosophy, and history, among others, is under attack. European males, mostly, produced the canon. It is thus highly exclusive—few women, few minorities. It is argued that those at the colleges and universities who are subjected to it and who are not male or of European origin are in effect culturally disenfranchised. The contributions of their poets, philosophers, scientists, and literati were ignored, a process in itself that is inherently racist and sexist. The exclusiveness of the canon merely increases the alienation and feelings of powerlessness.

In the 1960s, the New Left radicals charged that the traditional curriculum was “irrelevant”—the Puritan Milton could not compete with the revolutionary Che. In the 1990s the postmodernists charged that the traditional curriculum failed to be “inclusive”—Milton was, like the rest of the members of the canon, white, male and dead, but worst of all, Puritan. In both cases, the consequence is a complete descent into immediacy and ephemera. No objects of knowledge or study can transcend any moment in time, or exist as a permanent source of value or truth. A relevant curriculum expresses current political or social anxieties; the
traditional canon was defective because it supposedly did not apply to contemporary concerns. Inclusiveness is important because the honor or esteem associated with being an object of study in a university curriculum, like other social goods, must be distributed equally—to every group must go an equal share or at least some portion judged sufficient to extinguish any possibilities for invidious comparisons. The production of self-esteem is a driving consideration.

The university curriculum defines what the university values. When gender and racial sensitivity are the most pressing moral imperatives, as they are now, the dominance of the curriculum by works of white males is an intolerable affront. The long exalted cultural stature of white males as enduring sources of wisdom is another piece of the Eurocentric fraud that the postmodernists can, with the application of the tools of social critique, show to be simply a reflection of their political dominance. Their works, however, remain as objects of study but primarily for purposes of inflicting condign moral deflation. The postmodernists unmask these men as propagators of virulent ideologies, apologists of oppression, cultural symbols of white male hegemony. Aristotle was a sexist. Jefferson was a slave owner. Mark Twain was a racist. Their exalted place in the canon is amounts to an accident, an arbitrary arrangement of social power. Once the power is stripped away nothing of value or permanence remains. The canon itself exists merely as an artifact of cultural imperialism, one more strategy of domination to be exposed.

The deflation of these fraudulent "greats" throws them into the great democratic mixing bowl of popular culture. Comic books, sit-coms and rock music take their rightful place as objects of cerebration along with Shakespeare, John Donne and J. S. Bach. The curriculum, thoroughly democratized, no longer possesses an underlying hierarchy of value. It is driven by fads and particular political agendas. The curriculum of the typical university increasingly seems to have the character of a shopping mall, a haven of consumer choice. The courses are absorbing for the moment as our fancies strike us but easy to forget and of little effect, another cooption of our institutions by amusement.
The practice of delayed gratification took root in religious aspirations, particularly those of our Calvinist and Puritan ancestors. Puritanism, with all the harsh imagery it conjures up of repression of natural impulses and severity of manners, represents the horrifying ultimate in delayed gratification, which is why the accusation of being "puritanical" is such a stinging insult in a society in which any reservation about restraint in the pursuit of amusement, the expansion of the "real" self, or the gratification of impulse is hardly conceivable. For the Puritan, human existence was a travail, a hard preparation for an eternity with God, and an arduous journey through a life long minefield of moral trials and fleshly temptations. The old hymn, "Work, for the Night is Coming" captures the religious ethos of a former time when work was regarded as part of a moral preparation for a spiritual attainment, when amusement was not an overriding preoccupation. In a pre-modern world of material scarcity, this was a particularly important disposition to inculcate for survival purposes.

In a society where work is central to survival, one resorts to amusement to obtain rest and diversion sufficient to return to work refreshed. Amusement must always remain subordinate to work. One relaxes in order to work and to be productive, which is more than simply one's job, but also includes one's obligations, all of those things that fit together in creating purposes for living. Amusement, however, is always immediate, a complete end in itself. When it is a lesser part of life, when it is subsumed under larger purposes, it remains useful as a diversion from work and the stress and fatigue that work brings.

The traditional subordination of leisure to work, however, is yet another instance of hierarchy that has become loathsome to a personalist. Work as a higher sphere imposes more rigorous standards of conduct, more extensive norms, greater formal structure than leisure and is more demanding and constraining. A work-oriented society necessitates role differentiations, requires unique levels of subordination and special sets of obligations. Failure or poor performance carries sanctions. Young people usually must be gently coerced into the culture of work. It is not always, and cannot always, be joyous, interesting and expressive of self.
Sometimes it is boring and tedious.

Perhaps one way to see just how profound the difference is between an amusement-oriented society and a work-oriented society is to consider the contrasting perspectives on time in each and what the implications are of those perspectives.

"The now," what is immediate to experience, is most important where the quest for amusement prevails. One can arouse the past only through the agency of memory, but memory is oddly selective, less intense, less stimulating than the direct, open, intense experience of the present. The future or anything more than the near future is difficult to entertain with the intensity and vivacity of the present. When we think about the perception of time in this emotive way, it is apparent why an amusement-oriented society such as ours is also so completely absorbed with youth. The young tend to live in the present moment, yet with a sense of timelessness.

In a work-oriented society people acutely feel the passage of time. Work itself is measured and compensated in relation to discrete units of time—hourly wage, days of vacation, annual salary, retirement at age sixty-five are common examples. The present becomes the least important part of the temporal spectrum for those who are work-oriented. The past remains important and relevant. It carries with it memory, experience, training, learning—valuable preparation for executing the tasks immediately at hand. The past contains the evidence that points to potential success in the future. The future presents for us all the objects of planning and organizing and the realization of achievement. We work for the future, often the very distant future. We want our children and their children to be better and to be better off than we were. We want to leave the world a better place than when we entered it. In a work-oriented society, we venerate and respect the elderly and we honor age rather than youth because it embodies experience, wisdom and hard won achievement.

In a youth-oriented, amusement-driven society it is hard to imagine how anything or anyone could be venerated since you can only venerate what is of
deep and permanent value. In order for that to happen there must be a sense that there are things that exist of a permanent enduring value.

Amusement, when elevated to the highest pursuit, becomes incompatible with decision-making, governing and choice-making, activities that are done best by individuals who have accumulated experience and have been able to learn from it. Why? Amusement focuses primarily on the visual, the emotions, and upon a particular experience occurring right now. It defies the rules that confine and regulate it. Those for whom the pursuit of amusement is dominant in their lives are naturally suspicious of authority, particularly the authority that age, hierarchy, or tradition represents. Such authority appears arbitrary and unnecessary. Here again is personalism at work exemplified in the impulses to evade constraint and the subjectivity and ultimate skepticism of, and resentment for, authority. In an amusement-oriented society, youth is prized because youth embodies and employs all of those qualities that intensify the enjoyment of the present such as physical beauty and physical strength, and intense sexuality. Death does not exist for the a-temporal world of youth because death is the ultimate sign of our temporal existence, and the chief reminder that the time of our youth is short and our existence brief and vulnerable.

Work in the modern world also often puts one into a complex organizational hierarchy. Bosses exist. They regularly assign tasks to subordinates, give orders or directions, and evaluate the performance of others and dispense compensation. To step into the world of work is to enter a definite, explicit order of inequality reflected in differentiated levels of skill, experience, training and abilities. Anyone who works in an organization must confront and endure the various power relationships, formal and informal, that establish and define the levels and extent of subordination. As it is in any power relationship, there is always potential for abuse—some get more than they deserve, others less; some get promoted when they should get fired and vice versa. The bosses sometimes are idiots.

Traditional norms of self-restraint have crumbled away. Values have
become increasingly subjective (more personal and less interpersonal). Thus there are fewer informal and mutually self-regulatory means available to us in the workplace that are useful in helping to guide conduct, maintain civil relationships and promote basic standards of decency. The regulation of the workplace has by necessity become more subject to the formal, technical and highly complex processes of litigation. Legal and bureaucratic regulation now governs the workplace. This expansion of formal regulation further increases our dependency upon both legal-bureaucratic experts as well as the technologists of psycho-social techniques, whom we need to deal with the deficits of self-esteem and to interpret a social reality full of impersonal conflict and ideological dissonance.

The reign of amusement achieves the personalist ideal of unfettered self-expression and freedom from constraint. The personalist fiercely resists the subordination of leisure to work, just as he resents subordination and inequality of any kind. Any subordination reflects hierarchy and presupposes the existence of some objective state of affairs that justifies the unequal relationship, and hence an objective judgment that attributes a greater good to a certain kind of activity or state of affairs. This is an affront to the subjectivity of the personalist who affirms the perfect equality and equivalence of all moral and aesthetic choices. The personalist will passionately defend for public consumption almost anything, no matter how offensive, crude, vulgar or tasteless. Why? Because the banning of anything means that the disapproval behind the banning appeals to authority and lays claim to a norm with objective validity. Photographic depictions of sodomy or a porno flick like "Debbie Does Dallas" are for the personalist just as much works of art, deserving protection as such, as the productions of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. The personal, subjective act of self-expression is far more important than the content of what is expressed—the exposure of self is something on which the personalist puts the highest premium, a harkening back to the exhibitionism of Rousseau.

Amusement relentlessly expands and imperceptibly absorbs work. The passion for amusement grows. And as that cluster of personal experiences and
dispositions that emanate from the state of being amused become more important—having fun, being relaxed, being uninhibited—the way we conduct ourselves at work is becoming much the same as when we amuse ourselves—casual, informal, relaxed, and personal. In the workplace this is obvious in the manner of dress, the style, and content of conversation. Banks, for example, were once formal work places. One now finds the tellers wearing shorts and tee-shirts, chewing gum and listening to their favorite radio station, and exchanging personal anecdotes and reflections among themselves while they conduct business. The atmosphere may have been directly transported out of a teenager’s bedroom. This creeping informality reflects both a more ready compliance with the demands of comfort and a reluctance to subordinate personal and private inclinations to norms that rely upon distinctions between private and public spaces and conduct. Again, the movement is for the expansion of personal space and against an imposition of a hierarchy of any kind of values. This tendency toward the casual seems to be to make “being at work” indistinguishable from “being at home” where we can listen to our favorite music, wear whatever we want, be free and open in our conversation and the idiom in which it is expressed, and exert for our convenience a much less rigorous discipline over our feelings, expressions and actions. Why must we be anything, ever and anywhere, but our real and genuine selves? Personalism has set itself toward the extinction of social formality.

The increased informality pushes inexorably on with the modern process of social leveling, best symbolized perhaps by the growth of public nakedness. Clothing, like other social conventions, should be shed at will, so the personalist argues. We cease to observe differentiations of conduct in the different roles we play because we believe that there are no defensible or compelling differentiations of value, no expectations or requirements that formal differences should be in place or be observed or enforced. It has become harder to defend things like prescriptions for dress (how does one defend a dress code?) and limitations on public behavior. No longer do we respect these differentiations because there is no differentiated value structure in place to support them.
Amusement is ephemeral by nature. What is interesting, captivating and stimulating today quickly turns stale. "Who Wants Yesterday’s papers; Who wants yesterday’s Girl?" a memorable line from a 1960s popular song of the Rolling Stones conveys this notion well. News, sex, love, whatever you are engaged in, if it is not current, then toss it away. Amusement, when it achieves its purpose, produces novelty, immediacy and stimulation. Ephemera, which is the business of the amusement industry to produce, exists and reproduces itself, paradoxically, in a unending production of words and images that occupy us constantly and take up time that might otherwise be used for thinking or even rest. In this never ending stream of words and images discontinuity prevails—the quest for diversion rules.

Modern life is beset with inflation. Inflation permeates the activity of business, education, and government. In the offices, schools and universities alone verbiage proliferates—managerial, educational and technical jargon, memos, position papers, reports, executive summaries, e-mail, list-serves and web pages. The meetings, seminars, retreats, workshops, conferences and clinics multiply, which in turn augment the gushing torrents of information in the form of minutes, proceedings, news-letters, articles, strategic plans, mission, vision and goal statements. The spiraling multiplicity of it, its sheer magnitude and the incapacity of any individual to read, comprehend and remember more than a tiny fraction of it, is a depressing indication of the relative worthlessness and insignificance of any particular piece of it. More is said. Less of it has meaning. Little of it is interesting. None of it endures. This production of valueless cant takes place at many levels of our daily experience. Ordinary conversation has imperceptibly changed under inflationary pressure. Consider how greatly cell phones have inflated conversation and, with the instruction of personal conversations into public arenas, further eroded the formality of public spaces. Inflation, as historian John Lukacs has observed, devalues everything it touches, not just money.

Contemporary conversation has been transformed by this inflation of
words. This transformation reflects a massive, collective devaluation at the core of language. The devaluation of the words becomes obvious when you listen to people trying to express themselves. This is particularly the case with young people who are saturated from an early age by the vacuous language of advertising and psycho-babble emitted from television. They regularly converse in a vague, emotive idiom whose lexicon bulges with meaningless "filler" and "pause" words and phrases that pad the sentences. Here is segment from a conversation I recently overheard of two students as I walked across a university campus. This "style" of conversation, I would venture, is not untypical of the way young people often talk today. I have italicized the words that neither add content to the message nor have any grammatical function.

You know, I think before you like spaz out you should really like, wait and see if Shawn like calls tonight or whatever. Well...yesterday, he was like, you know, really super-pissed at me, and all I really did was like, you know, ask him about his stupid test that he like didn't even study for. He like totally blew up at me...and I was just like...uhh...oh wow, Shawn, I'm not going to take this shit from you anymore! I mean, I was, like, really...Oh God, you know...I mean like I don't really need this at all. I have just been like totally freaked out by this.

The ever present "like"s and "you know"s are key contributors to word inflation. They have no grammatical or communicative function. These words simply string out the sentences, erase silence, and make each word worth less and each sentence less meaningful, expressive or informative. These "filler" words also reveal the relentless creeping of subjectivity into our mentality. Such "filler" words build into conversation an almost automatic, reflexive hesitancy and indirection of expression. And that is what one would expect from a self-oriented, subjectivized mentality that disdains moral or aesthetic "judgmental" declarations. One often notices a lack of confidence in making precise affirmations. Affirmations must be hedged in words that deflect their force or meaning. The superfluous and ubiquitous "like" almost always appears just before or after the verb—it's effect as a filler word is to soften the action or deflate the power of the verb and, in a way,
to infuse the expression with passivity, hesitation or uncertainty. The “likes,” “you knows” and “whatevers” are devices that enable the speaker to beg for interpretation: they are weak and nervous verbal gestures that betray the uncertainty and confusion of modern life. One can thus emit many words, occupy time and engage the attention of others without really saying much or affirming anything.

The constantly resorted-to toilet words (“pissed-off” and “shit”) also numb and degrade the conversation. The bloated and scatological patois that passes for the informal conversion often heard today is torpid and inarticulate—precise meaning, subtle distinctions and tonal nuances are rarely attempted, much less understood. This we owe, I would speculate, to the reign of amusement, to the immersion by so many in the visual, action world of television and the movies where exposure to constant movement and a relentless bombardment of stimulating images reduces the actual importance or significance of words. We see the concomitant diminution of whatever interests there might be in developing the subtleties of the written and spoken language. Norms that stress the importance of precision and the logical relations of words simply have no application or value. The great proliferation of scatological and obscene language in movies and on television shows how much language has become devalued.

At the colleges and universities postmodern scholars produce an explosion of indecipherable chatter, often government subsidized. Publication in academia establishes credentials and with the publication somewhere of virtually every thought that has ripened in some professorial brain, no matter how half-baked, insipid or stupid, academic credentials have proliferated. And like anything else inflated—the inflated grades given out for example—they are diminished in value and mean less. An “A” in a course means less and tells us less about the student who received it today than one who received it fifty years ago. Career advancement—promotion, tenure, grants, reduced teaching loads, etc.—revolves around a sophisticated game where one says something in print and then finds someone else in the club to weigh in with descriptors like “revolutionary,”
“ground breaking,” “monumental,” “a towering achievement” or other such superlatives, so overworked and over-applied that they do not mean anything. Not surprising then is that so much churned out of the verbal mills turns out to be sterile, jargon-ridden and dreadfully dull. Here is the Dean of Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, attempting to clarify the dense prose of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

To come to recognize, not within but on the horizon of the Heideggerian paths, and yet in them, that the sense of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified (even if it was always dissimulated within the epoch) but already, in a truly unheard of sense, a determined signifying trace, is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, all is not to be thought at one go; entity and being, ontic and ontological “ontico-ontological,” are, in an original style, derivative with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call differance, regard to difference; an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring.13

Trying to decipher swollen, contorted sentences like this is what one must do in order to make it through almost every paragraph of this entire opus, a desolate expanse of over 300 pages. The following might be one of the more lucid passages of the work, where Derrida attempts to unpack the meaning of his “science of writing,” grammatology.

On what conditions is a grammatology possible? Its fundamental condition is certainly the undoing [sollicitation] of logocentrism. But this condition of possibility turns into a condition of impossibility. In fact it risks destroying the concept of science as well. Graphematics or grammatography ought no longer to be presented as sciences; their goal should be exorbitant differance when compared to grammatical knowledge.14

To determine whether substance or insight inhabits these pronouncements requires greater hermeneutical skills than I offer. Given the ultra-skeptical, subjectivist thrust of Derrida’s writing and the doubt it attempts to shed on the possibilities for knowing anything, slogging through the bogs of such bleak, unreadable prose hardly seems worth the effort. However, Derrida has been
prolific, and his books fill a large portion of the ‘D’ s in the college bookstores. Moreover, he has spawned scores of emulators—less original, equally dense and, believe it or not, even more unreadable. Many teach in literature departments, gender studies programs, theology, and other disciplines most suitable for ideological conquest, the region of academe where the manipulation of rebarbative and impenetrable jargon is what is encouraged and rewarded.

The publishing enterprise in academe in some ways resembles a “pyramid scheme,” at least in many of the humanities disciplines. Presiding over this empire of literary criticism, social critique, and philosophical deconstruction is an aristocracy of luminaries like Derrida and Michel Foucault. They disgorge an effluvia of books and articles of adversarial ideology and invective. Their many epigones trickle the “wisdom” down to the less gifted. These postmodernists reside at the top of the academic heap, occupy chairs at the best universities, and shine as the stars of social critique. A few even achieve genuine celebrity status. Jean Paul Sartre, though not a member of the professoriate, was one of the best examples of a celebrity intellectual. He may have been the first real “hip” intellectual—certainly the first philosopher to dispense his wisdom in a Playboy magazine interview. Sartre cast the post-World War II mold for avant-garde intellectuals. Many lesser talents followed the intellectual trends he set. The evils of capitalism he piously denounced, especially the crass American incarnations of it. He sneered at everything bourgeois, and duly slobbered praise over any left-wing bully, including Castro, who could manage a successful coup and murder or exile the middle class dolts he so much despised. As the avatar of radical chic, Sartre could boast of the possession of a celebrity-intellectual mistress, the equally au courant enemy of anything and everything bourgeois and capitalist, Simone de Beauvoir. For all of her vanguard feminism and excoriating of patriarchy, she long and dutifully endured the relentless womanizing that helped feed Sartre’s colossal vanity and egotism and otherwise functioned as his lifelong doormat.

The intellectual stars look down upon the second tier theorists and social-critique specialists who toil away at the mills of intellectual resentment. Much of
the argumentation that specialists of the lower tier produce is interpretation of the
lucubration of the first tier manufactures. This kind of writing with its
impenetrable jargon and near complete opacity is generated deliberately, and not
for entirely theoretical reasons. Someone must be available and willing to read the
unreadable books and articles and proclaim in all of the official organs of
publication their revolutionary significance. Interpreters must be on hand to
unpack the dense meanings and disclose truths which always threaten to
decompose into something different. The demand for specialized interpretation
and reinterpretation of this unstable reality means stable employment for
ideologues. These people make up an industry of prolific scribblers who,
ironically, seem to despise writing. Much of the prose is untainted by common
sense and untouched by the facts of the world: it is self contained, that is, it is
produced by and for the club members, the jargon wielders, and primarily serves
their interest by providing excuses for trips to conferences to read papers,
securing tenure, promotion, lighter teaching loads and grants. Much of it would be
unintelligible and of no interest to even the most intelligent person from the
outside. Here is an example from the lower tiers. From the Feminist Review,
author Pippa Brush makes a contribution to the advance of gender studies in her
article “Metaphors of Inscription: Discipline, Plasticity and the Rhetoric of
Choice.” Even the title is so opaque that only the initiated few would have any
idea of what it was about, much less care to read it.

The body becomes malleable and alterable, its surface inscribed
with gender, appropriate behavior, standards of—for example—
femininity, etc. The constitution of the body comes to rest in its
inscription; the body becomes the text which is written upon it. In
‘Nietzsche, genealogy, history’ Foucault refers to the search for an
origin: ‘The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss, the point where
the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse, the site of a
fleeting articulation that discourse has obscured and finally lost.’... To
expose the body which has been imprinted, to reach the origin,
the text of palimpsest, is the task of genealogy. This process must
assume the pre-existence of a body before the text: the body/origin
on which these inscriptions have taken place, the pre-inscriptive
body.\textsuperscript{15}
This is how one emulates the French post modern masters. Tedious, indecipherable and hopelessly dull, it lurches along with all of the obligatory references to Foucault, Derrida, Lacan or some other over-quoted post modern critic. It is written for the initiates, the club insiders who manipulate the jargon and conduct their revolutionary rituals of mutual admiration. Whatever any of it may mean, the writing has not made it clear. Verbal smog of this sort abounds in academic publication, particularly in the Humanities where the norms of exacting evidence, rigorous argumentation and proof have been in decline for decades.

Alan Sokal, a physicist, in the late 1990s created an academic scandal when he composed a jargon-ridden, nonsensical spoof, a deliberate parody of post-modern writing in which he argued for the relativistic, culturally determined nature of natural science. He submitted it to the editors of a post modern journal of cultural criticism, *Social Text* and they published it as a serious scholarly article, eager to have a physicist in their ranks announcing the relativism of science. After the article appeared in print, Sokal publicly announced the hoax. Imagine the embarrassment to the editors who, through this incident, revealed their arrogance and ignorance and exposed their journal for what it really was—an academic joke. Sokal’s hoax helped to disclose the fact that at least some of what passes for serious philosophical and social thought in the post modern annals of deconstruction is heavily driven by ideological impulses mostly of a left-wing, Marxist kind, that are hostile to traditional institutions and impervious to logic and facts.

What is to be made of the solemn activity of these professional social critics and theorists? These labors might be thought of as a special genre of amusement—humor from the adversarial class—an activity that is itself a sophisticated form of diversion from the constraints of reality. This rarefied amusement of social critique derives from the exhilaration that comes from exercising one’s moralistic, destructive capacities—*Revolution for the Hell of It*—again, the ghost of Abbie Hoffman. When the society that you live in is rotten and unredeemable, and you happen to be one of the “morally superior,” then you can
act any way you choose.

It is difficult to view the university any longer as a community, in any real sense of the term, of scholars who are bound by intellectual norms and scholarly traditions. The modern university still remains as the chief source of advance in science, technology in medicine—but as an institution with a mission of acculturation? What ideals does it uphold? What culture does it strengthen? It has become a theater for the airing of grievances and the acting out of personalist hostilities. Who could say with any confidence what the early twenty-first century American university is about and what it is supposed to stand for. The adversarial class expresses its nihilism in interminable ideological quarrels, heretical disputes and power struggles, intellectual hobbyism, or careerism. The production of arcana that is supposed to amount to a social critique of our modern society helps to fill up time and provide diversion and amusement or to occupy an institutional void, to serve a bureaucratic requirement—something to make someone feel good or useful, as if they are doing something that really matters. The promotion and adulation of revolutionary change has become so predictable and commonplace that revolution itself has become a dull, predictable and insipid affair.

Journalism in America has succumbed to amusement. News and entertainment increasingly blur and mingle. Actors commonly are political advocates: politicians increasingly make appearances on entertainment programs and do commercials. A former U.S. Senate Majority Leader and Presidential candidate shills for Viagra; a former Vice-President and Presidential candidate hosts Saturday Night Live. The network news anchormen like Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings have transmogrified into celebrities in their own right, personalities who perform for audiences and reap the rewards of celebrityhood—fame, popularity, phenomenal salaries and uncritical adulation.

The reading of newspapers continues to decline, particularly among the young, and newspapers themselves in their format and content reflect the dominance of the electronic media. The news, for the most part, comes in electronic format with a heavy visual impact. The marketing and editorial
machines of the vast amusement syndicates manufacture and "package" the presentation of current events in an amusement format to accommodate the short attention spans. The electronic news expands second hand experience and mediates firsthand experience. Thus, one watches on television someone else, for example, play baseball or tennis or perform in a beauty pageant and listens to professional announcers comment upon, explain and interpret the spectacle for the observer. The interpretation overshadows the event itself. The observer encounters a highly sophisticated and complex process of mediation which includes not only the expertise and skill of the commentators, but the massive, complex technology behind the presentation as well. Professional mediators impose an elaborate, sophisticated set of interpretive categories upon whole realms of experience—politics, art, religion, sports, etc.—and with great skill purvey those interpretations for public consumption. This is done, as Arnold Gehlen notes, by the "vast imposing processes arising from the economic, social and political superstructures."\(^{16}\)

The organs of the information industry shape much of our secondhand experience. The watching of television—sit-coms, dramas, sports contests, news, all of it—engulfs us in second hand experience. The amusement syndicates filter facts, emotions and events through their ideological apparatus and present them so as to makes us feel, think and act in certain ways. Advertising is the obvious case in point since its purpose is to get us to buy things. The news we watch requires extremely sophisticated mediation. The media professionals interpret all the facts beginning, of course, with the selection of what events are to count as newsworthy. Ultimately the purpose is to get us to think in a certain way about the mediated events we experience.

News, like everything else on television, is a consumer product. Consumption of the "news"-product is simply a measure of those who watch. The "price" the consumer pays is his time and the irritation of enduring the commercials. The news runs from the "soft," celebrity-oriented, anecdotal human interest stories, to the "hard" news of federal deficits, Supreme Court decisions,
and international crises. Friendly “personalities” read the news and compete, like their pure-amusement colleagues in sit-com- and talk-show-land, for audience market share. Thirty years ago the three major television networks presented so-called national news once or twice a day for half an hour. Now, news programming is available anytime. We can have news whenever we desire. Entire television cable networks devote themselves to it.

Schools subject our children to a customized version of the news—Channel One—justified because it keeps them “informed” of current events. But what they see on Channel One is much the same of what they see at home. Channel One, whether one thinks it promotes education or not, is more television, more pre-packaged visual stimulation designed by professional marketers. It will make only a feather-light demand upon active or critical capacities or occupy a student’s attention for more than a few minutes.

Television mediates more than print journalism because it requires more selectivity in the presentation due to constraints of time, and because narration accompanies the visual presentation. Channel One is nothing more than amusement for a young captive audience. The news presenters are themselves young people. The ultimate aim is to acculturate our youth, to expand the viewing habits of the home and keep children and teenagers immersed in television. Channel One has insinuated itself into the classroom and serves further to entrench the cultural dominance of television, the medium through which the major events of our lives are interpreted.

The “news” must amuse. This is obvious from the way the media present major events, like elections, disasters and wars. The twenty-four hour television coverage by CNN of the Persian Gulf War in 1991 included an endless succession of briefings, news conferences, expert analysis, commentators, reporters, participants and "reactions" from everyone, no matter how banal, redundant or foolish, and even comments from small children about their impressions and thoughts about the war. How much of this was valuable information or insightful observation? Little of it stayed in the memory. Almost everything that could be
said about the event from anyone who could stand or sit upright before a video camera—no matter how trivial, pointless or stupid—was said and transmitted by the television networks for someone else to contemplate momentarily and then immediately forget because there was no reason or need for anyone to have said it or for anyone to have known it in the first place. This television rendition of the Gulf War was a grotesque and telling example of a vast enterprise of words and images that are manufactured entirely for the purposes of filling up large blocks of our precious life-substance, time. The presentation had few purposes other than to amuse, and yet even for that purpose there was so much inflation of material and thus, like any inflated commodity, it becomes worth less and less.

The news is another "viewing" choice among a wide range of diversions that the electronic media offer. As with the other programs, its essential purpose is to fill up time slots for the revenue produced by the advertising. The character of the programming has always been voyeuristic and sensationalist, a permutation of the prurience of the sit-coms. Like those sit-coms the material is equally ephemeral, forgotten as soon as it is over—nothing to remember from one day to the next.

Material for television news at the "local" level is six-alarm fires, multiple murders, and variant forms or ordinary human catastrophes—the driving force is voyeurism. The stories are often billed as "news you need to know." No one explains why you need to know it. Not knowing it has absolutely no effect on your life. The lead story will usually be a local tragedy, often a killing. Quickly you are at the scene following the movement of the bodies into the ambulance, ensconced in rubber bags. Police and onlookers mill about, and with luck, the "Action Ten" News Team camera crew grabs a few close-ups of family or friends, horror struck and in anguish ready to be prompted by the plucky, usually young, "reporter" who extracts a sobbing sentence or two. A clue may be coaxed from the stoic policemen on the scene. With the "inside" revelations imparted you are instantly transported back to the studio for a two-minute discussion with some local "expert" on the trauma of impotence or to glean the latest wisdom
compressed into ninety seconds about teen pregnancy. The significance and value of any of these topics that fill in the short time slots between commercials, topics that are supposed to be so important to you as to take up your precious time, you can assess by a simple test: try to remember a day or two after the five o’clock or ten o’clock broadcast what it was about. It is above all forgettable, ephemera, dispensed to fill that allotment of time you sit in front of the box. It is in its essence *amusement*, nothing more. Local television reporting is defined by a ludicrous orientation towards on-the-scene intrusive, voyeuristic presentation of personal tragedy. The effect is ambiguous—banal, pollyannaish chit-chat interspersed with reports on such incongruously juxtaposed events as a mass murder at the local Burger King and a jump rope contest for charity by some fourth-graders at the Catholic grade school.

At the national level the format is the same. The “journalists” are more polished, better dressed and usually better looking. The stories are bigger and more titillating, or more pathetic. A major flood or hurricane provides more grief-stricken people to pan on the cameras. An airline wreck affords video clips with more rubber body bags. An emerging sex scandal in the Federal government may snare a congressman or now and then, a President. These, in turn, provide copious material for the late-night talk-show comedians.

The presentation of the news is more explicit and graphic than it ever used to be—more explicit discussion about sex and violence, more visuals of corpses and scenes of carnage and destruction. The greater explicitness is the natural result of the underlying amusement character of the news. In order for programs to draw viewers they must exert a constant escalation of raw, sexually explicit programming: yesterday’s shock becomes tomorrow’s yawn. The limits must thus always be exceeded, barriers of taste broken down. Seldom, however, is any event or issue pursued in any long term fashion—both the medium and the advertising-driven mode of television make a careful, balanced and thoughtful presentation and interpretation of any event almost impossible. What was presented with such fanfare today quickly slips into oblivion tomorrow.
Grief in an electronic format is uniquely entertaining. Tragedies make up the major news items both for the local and the national networks. Tragedies offer rich imagery, and provide emotional opportunities—grief-stricken people on video cameras makes for easy viewer empathy and can cheaply arouse the intense emotions of the observers munching on their Happy Meals. A couple of sniffles and a tear or two across the six o’clock hour for those stricken families of the airplane-wreck victims or the third world refugees and then it’s off to hours of sitcoms, sports, or an action movie on HBO. “Grief amusement” also enables the experts in the therapeutic industry to integrate further into the amusement industry. They take advantage of the opportunities to explore with the viewers the emotional and psychological rewards of grief amusement events. In the aftermaths of major tragedies, the news-amusement purveyors test their emoting skills and then move into the therapeutic enterprise of exploring and interpreting our emotions: interviews with the relatives and friends of victims of tragedies enable them to share their intimate feelings and thoughts with millions of strangers, then the follow up with maudlin commentary. Thus, for the low cost of sitting through a few commercials, themselves designed to amuse, the experience can be briefly entertaining for the viewers and of commercial value to the producers.

When one moves from the news to more obvious and explicit amusement of television, we have the unique phenomenon of the celebrity talk show. These shows feature a host-celebrity (parasite celebrity) whose fame is entirely based on the amusement that interviewing and kibbutzing with current celebrities produces. They sit and talk casually, mostly about themselves, what they do and think. Chit-chat, jokes, and mental offal flows out into viewer-land, bounces onto the rubes on the couches and slides onto the floor along with the potato chip crumbs. These shows help feed an appetite for minutiae in the lives of celebrities that is nearly limitless—what they think, who they sleep with, their latest arrests, their most recent addictions, their current crusades, what they wear, eat, drink, all of it important because millions of people are listening to it. A huge electronic and
paper publishing industry is devoted to providing the craving public with all the
details of their highly disordered lives. They dominate the talk shows. They are
everywhere and their influence is enormous.

Talk shows for the voyeur are now common. They explicitly present every
facet of human perversity and invent new ones. One can only expect a continuous
escalation in the levels of r awness and vulgarity as the shock at every new step
becomes routine. The celebrity, late-night talk shows are decades old, but in
recent years, since the norms for presenting and discussing sexual matters on the
public airways have collapsed, we now have a new type of amusement:
individuals from the dregs are recruited and brought into television studios, and in
front of live audiences where they are encouraged to discuss in lurid detail their
sexual excesses and to brag about their perversions. To what effect? The forms of
debasement must be constantly expanded to shock and stimulate the voyeur, in
order, ultimately, to keep the viewer coming back. Moreover, the debasement
occurs during the day when the parents are at work and many children are home
watching and absorbing what they see, immersed in an exploitative, debased
presentation of human sexuality. Human perversity and degradation is the
substance of diversion, of this kind of "amusement" offered daily to millions of
Americans.

The outlook of personalism has made its aggressive assent, and where the
technology of electronic communication is so sophisticated and productive, it is
no surprise that amusement has come to be the ruling passion of the late-
twentieth-century American soul. The unfettered pursuit of amusement follows
naturally from a near religious-like embrace of a conception of self and a notion
of how that self equates its exploration, affirmation and expansion with moral
achievement. Personalism "celebrates" the subjective, resists traditional forms of
authority, and eschews objective standards of conduct. Personalism, as we have
seen with two notable 1960s purveyors and practitioners of it, Carl Rogers the
psychotherapist and Abbie Hoffman the student radical, makes the emotive,
"authentic" self the ultimate arbiter of value. "No other person's ideas, and none
of my own ideas, are as authoritative as my own experience,” says Rogers; “I am the Revolution,” proclaims Hoffman.

Such is the subjective ethos in which we are now immersed. The adoption of an outlook which turns inward and affirms the absolute centrality of self in the moral universe brings in its wake a dissolution of moral communities. This dissolution must open a moral-social void. An individual has nowhere to go to find meaning and certitude other than into the recesses of his own self; and the self, ironically, in our sophisticated modern setting is always an anxious, unstable center of uncertainty, contracting, expanding and endlessly mutating, forever incomplete. In the aftermath of this dissolution, the arts of amusement help to fill the moral-social void. The modern, electronic varieties of amusement, with their great technical power, relatively low cost, and cultural pervasiveness are particularly suitable forces to take up full occupation of the modern, liberated self. For in amusement are all of the possibilities for recreation in the most literal sense of recreating of one’s self. As it has come to be increasingly viewed as a therapeutic object, the self requires an enrichment of experience and a freeing from the guilt-and shame-inducing constraints. The Amusement Behemoth, fully unleashed in our time, is now engaged in sweeping aside those constraints.
Chapter Six: Endnotes