

*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman. New York: Viking, 1985, 184pp. ISBN 0-670-80454-1.

Every culture conducts its conversations in various manners such as speech, text, or images, each with its own symbols. In this book, Postman considers the epochal shift he sees in American culture from public conversations dominated by words to those dominated by images. This transition parallels the ascendancy of television as the predominant medium of cultural conversation, and hence the primary mode of public discourse.

He starts with two assumptions: First, the medium of a conversation restricts its scope. Messages transmittable in one medium may not be transmittable in another, at least efficiently. For example, the primitive medium of smoke signals is not suitable for philosophical discourse. Another example is provided by the injunction in the Decalogue forbidding material representations of YHWH. The implicit understanding is that *any* image is insufficient to convey the fulness of the deity and hence amounts to a distortion. Thus, mediums by their inherent nature shape the contours of cultural conversation. These mediums are our “languages” not unlike Galileo’s remark on mathematics as the language of nature. They serve as metaphors for the reality being conveyed. As Northrop Frye once remarked concerning words,

[T]he written word is far more powerful than simply a reminder: it re-creates the past in the present, and gives us not the familiar remembered thing, but the glittering intensity of the summoned-up hallucination. (12-13)

Second, these languages of conversation are a dominant influence in shaping the culture’s intellectual and social histories. Postman believes that every medium has *resonance*, a pervasive influence far outside its original context. Consider for example, the relative veracity we accord a written statement over a verbal statement. Truthfulness, at least our evaluation thereof, is colored by the medium. This situation is not unlike that of classical rhetoric, where truth was a matter of content *and* presentation. Thus, the mediums of conversation partly define the culture’s epistemology and hence its notions of intelligence. In this manner, the metaphors of language manifest themselves as cultural expressions.

Postman notes that America was founded by intellectuals who valued literacy. The printed word had a virtual monopoly on the modes of public discourse throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To these two observations Postman attributes the high literacy rates in the early United States as compared to Europe and an American conversational style that nowadays would be considered literary. He gives, for example, an excerpt from the Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1854:

Ladies and Gentlemen: I appear before you today for the purpose of discussing the leading political topics which now agitate the public mind. By an arrangement between Mr. Lincoln and myself, we are present here today for the purpose of having a joint discussion, as the representatives of the two great political parties of the State and Union, upon the principles in issue between the parties, and this vast concourse of peoples shows the deep feeling which pervades the public mind in regard to the questions dividing us. (qtd 48-49)

The public nature of these debates suggests that the general populace was comfortable and capable of understanding such complex patterns in discourse. That the debaters also employed historical allusions and rhetorical devices further suggests the audience was sufficiently learned as to appreciate them.

Postman argues that the linear logic inherent to the typographic medium encouraged rationality and order. Throughout the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, “American public discourse, being rooted in the bias of the printed word, was serious, inclined toward rational argument and presentation, and, therefore, made up of meaningful content” (52). This was the “Age of Exposition” which he claims has been usurped by an “Age of Show Business” of which television is its chief medium.

The transition was ushered by technological advances on two fronts: the invention of the telegraph and advancements in image production and display, starting from the early history of photography. Telegraphy brought an onslaught of fragmented, decontextualized information; the many facts served as “headlines” but without relevance or substance for action, since for Postman, “information derives its importance from the possibilities of action” (68). Photography’s biases are in another direction: it can evoke, but of itself makes no opinions and has no necessary context. Pictures cannot capture the totality of the abstract, invisible, or internal, but serve as stimuli to evoke within us the suggestion towards the abstract, invisible, or internal. The confluence of telegraphy and photography’s biases Postman calls the “peek-a-boo” world.

Television gave the epistemological biases of telegraph and the photograph their most potent expression, raising the interplay of image and instancy to an exquisite and dangerous perfection. (78)

This underscores Postman’s belief that any technology which serves as a communicative medium is a “metaphor waiting to unfold” (84). It bears the biases of the manner of conversation by which it interacts with society. Technological impacts on society may be restricted by imposed regulations, as is the case in countries without freedom of speech, or without a free market system to fuel advertisements, or even without regular electricity; but such is not the case in contemporary America which has experienced numerous waves of technological revolutions. Because all subjects of public interest are in part spoken through television, the public understanding of them will be shaped by the biases of the televised medium. Television has become both *myth* (à la Roland Barthes) as a latent worldview and *culture* because we live and interact with it daily, but do not question it. We talk much about what is *on* television but not of the medium itself. Thus, Postman pleads us to ask, “What is television? What kinds of conversations does it permit? What are the intellectual tendencies it encourages? What sort of culture does it produce?” (84)

Recalling the earlier remarks on the role and biases of typography in early American history, Postman observes that judgment of a text is usually based on truthfulness and clarity of reasoning, but for a television, it is based on the skillful arrangement of images. Indeed, television is not a medium well-suited for extended intellectual discourse or exposition. To watch people expound or think is considered by most to be boring and not visually enticing. It is thus *not* “good” television. His central thesis is that television is not only entertaining, but insinuates that all presentations must be entertaining. “Entertainment is the super-ideology of all

discourse on television” (87). Since television is “culture’s principal mode of knowing about itself . . . how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged” (92). In the manner of Irving Berlin, “There’s No Business but Show Business” (98).

For Postman images have no context except if we are told what we are seeing transpired some time past or if we possess some knowledge (apart from the image) which would allow us to place them in a historical or geographic context. An incoherent series of images thus handicaps our ability to make a reasoned, informed interpretation and contextualization of the information. Viewers struggle (if at all they attempt) to integrate such information into coherent history.

One of the most prominent examples of this phenomena is the television commercial. In contrast to typographic advertisements which must by nature of the medium be coherent and propositional to communicate, television commercials entice via drama and images. Their mantra is to “provide a slogan, a symbol or focus that creates for viewers a comprehensive and compelling image of themselves” (135). Television commercials focus on the character and nature of the consumer, and the product is merely presented as an instant solution to the consumer’s problem or need. It is what Postman calls “instant therapy” (130), and he fears that this pervasive discourse engenders a false expectation that all problems and needs— social, physical, emotional, or psychological— are instantly solvable via the proper application of certain technologies or methodologies. Over time these expectations will become increasingly normative in the culture.

Postman is not concerned with television programs whose overt purpose is to entertain, but rather programs whose purposes are otherwise, but subtly packaged as entertainment by the nature of the televised medium. As a first example, Postman considers the daily news. He observes that television news programs by their desultory nature hinder the formation of coherence and context pivotal to its interpretation and evaluation. In fact, the public has no expectation of coherence and continuity from television. As Robert McNeil wrote, television news strives “to keep everything brief, not to strain the attention of anyone. . .” (qtd 105). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of music and commercials within a news program presents an atmosphere that is often contrary to the seriousness of the news reported. For Postman this fragmented, entertaining presentation causes the viewer to consider the news as trivia— disconnected, irrelevant facts amusingly packaged and voiced by an attractive anchorman. Postman goes so far as to suggest that in an image-focused culture, the veracity of a message may become increasingly associated with the credibility of the speaker, a credibility derived in large part from personal appearance. Since Postman believes that “television is the paradigm for our conception of public information,” the current manner of presentation amounts to *disinformation*, trivia that is both useless and distracting.

A curious corollary is that the Orwellian nightmare of government control on printed matter is hardly a threat in a culture where television rules and defines public discourse. Books are not banned, but displaced by “a medium which presents information in a form that renders it simplistic, nonsubstantive, nonhistorical, and noncontextual; that is to say, information packaged as entertainment” (141).

Ever since the televised Kennedy-Nixon debates, television has been increasingly influential in the political process. In the realm of politics, Postman takes his cue from Reagan’s remark that “Politics is just like show business” (qtd 125). The

concern of show business is appearance. So Postman wonders, “If politics is like show business, then the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to *appear* as if you are, which is another matter altogether” (126). Furthermore, political commercials are advertisements for candidates. In light of the above remarks on television commercials, political commercials do not present the candidate as himself so much as an image of the audience. The commercials focus on projecting a favorable, memorable image of the candidate and not on presenting evidence for the character and beliefs of the candidate. Image is the rule.

Another arena in which Postman examines television’s influence is that of religion, especially as practised by televangelists. His first observation is that not everything is televisable, a corollary of the observation that “not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another” (117). In fact, Postman argues that religion is presented on television in the manner of entertainment. He notes that on such programs the message is not central but rather the preacher, and the goal is to attract the largest audience. The fancy images and displays serve to dazzle rather than to bring into worship so that God is subordinate to the image of the preacher: “Television is, after all, a form of graven imagery far more alluring than a golden calf” (123). For Postman, the main difficulty is that television speaks mainly through concrete images, which are not as conducive to promoting abstractions as typography. Television cannot evoke a sacredness of space and experience, and also has a strong bias towards secularism; both the context of the shows and the context of the medium are secular and often profane.

Perhaps the most insidious examples of the trend towards televised amusements is the plenitude of educational programs on television. Indeed, Postman does not deny that television can be educational, but he fears that the manner by which television educates will become the only legitimate and acceptable manner through which children understand and receive instruction. “Television educates by teaching children to do what television-viewing requires of them” (144). As an example, he considers the possible effects of the popular program “Sesame Street” on children’s attitude towards the traditional classroom:

Whereas a classroom is a place of social interaction, the space in front of a television is a private preserve... Whereas to behave oneself in school means to observe rules of public decorum, television watching requires no such observances, has no concept of public decorum. Whereas in a classroom, fun is never more than a means to an end, on television it is the end in itself. (144)

For Postman, these considerations are tantamount to a curriculum. Television is a curriculum which, contrary to traditional views that learning requires great exertion and self-mastery, identifies teaching with entertainment so that the classroom becomes an arena for amusement. Furthermore, Postman highlights three “commandments” by which educational television programs seem to abide: they should have no pre-requisites, should induce no perplexity, and should avoid exposition. If followed, these “commandments” obviously resist the scope and content of educational television programs, and (of greater fear to Postman) may become inherent to the student’s attitude towards learning. Finally, psychological studies suggest television-based learning is less-effective than traditional typographic methodologies so that an unreserved adoption of television’s role in education would be rash.

Postman is not optimistic about our culture's eventual understanding of television and other communicative mediums, an understanding which is central to avoiding the dangers of their inherent biases. His only reasonable solution, albeit an unlikely one, is that of widespread education through the schools on mass media. Most educational curriculums have yet to address the nature and biases of typography, much less television. A torrent of questions are open:

What is information? Or more precisely, what are information?  
What are its various forms? What conceptions of intelligence, wisdom and learning does each form insist upon? What conceptions does each form neglect or mock? ... Is there a moral bias to each information form? What does it mean to say that there is too much information? How would one know? What redefinitions of important cultural meanings do new sources, speeds, contexts and forms of information require?... How do different forms of information persuade? ... How do different information forms dictate the type of content that is expressed? (160)

The road ahead is long indeed.