1 | Supersaturation, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling

On my bedroom wall hangs a print of Vermeer's *The Concert*, painted around 1660. A young woman is playing a spinet. A second woman, probably her maid, holds a letter. A cavalier stands between them, his back to us. A landscape is painted on the raised lid of the spinet, and on the wall hang two paintings, a landscape and *The Procuress*, a work by Baburen, another Dutch artist, depicting a man and two women in a brothel. As in many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, the domestic space is decorated by paintings. In wealthy Holland, many homes, and not only bourgeois ones, featured such renderings of the outer world. These pictures were pleasing, but more: they were proofs of taste and prosperity, amusements and news at once.

Vermeer froze instants, but instants that spoke of the relative constancy of the world in which his subjects lived. If he had painted the same room in the same house an hour, a day, or a month later, the letter in the maid's hand would have been different, and the woman might have been playing a different selection, but the paintings on the far wall would likely have been the same. There might

have been other paintings, etchings, and prints elsewhere in the house, but they would not have changed much from month to month, year to year.

In what was then the richest country in the world, "everyone strives to embellish his house with precious pieces, especially the room toward the street," as one English visitor to Amsterdam wrote in 1640, noting that he had observed paintings in bakeries, butcher's shops, and the workshops of blacksmiths and cobblers. Of course, the number of paintings, etchings, and prints in homes varied considerably. One tailor owned five paintings, for example, while at the high end, a 1665 inventory of a lavish patrician's house in Amsterdam held two maps and thirteen paintings in one grand room, twelve paintings in his widow's bedroom, and seven in the maid's room. Still, compared with today's domestic imagery, the grandest Dutch inventories of that prosperous era were tiny. Even in the better-off households depicted by Vermeer, the visual field inhabited by his figures was relatively scanty and fixed.

Today, Vermeer's equivalent, if he were painting domestic scenes, or shooting a spread for *Vanity Fair*, or directing commercials or movies, would also display his figures against a background of images; and if his work appeared on-screen, there is a good chance that he would mix in a soundtrack as well. Most of the images would be portraits of individuals who have never walked in the door—not in the flesh—and yet are recognized and welcomed, though not like actual persons. They would rapidly segue into others—either because they had been edited into a video montage, or because they appear on pages meant to be leafed through. Today's Vermeer would discover that the private space of the home offers up vastly more impressions of the larger world than was possible in 1660. In seventeenth-century Delft, painters did not knock on the door day and night offering fresh images for sale. Today, though living space has been set apart from working space, as would have been the case

only for the wealthier burghers of Vermeer's time, the outside world has entered the home with a vengeance—in the profusion of media.

The flow of images and sounds through the households of the rich world, and the richer parts of the poor world, seems unremarkable today. Only a visitor from an earlier century or an impoverished country could be startled by the fact that life is now played out against a shimmering multitude of images and sounds, emanating from television, videotapes, videodiscs, video games, VCRs, computer screens, digital displays of all sorts, always in flux, chosen partly at will, partly by whim, supplemented by words, numbers, symbols, phrases, fragments, all passing through screens that in a single minute can display more pictures than a prosperous seventeenth-century Dutch household contained over several lifetimes, portraying in one day more individuals than the Dutch burgher would have beheld in the course of years, and in one week more bits of what we have come to call "information" than all the books in all the households in Vermeer's Delft. And this is not yet to speak of our sonic surroundings: the music, voices, and sound effects from radios, CD players, and turntables. Nor is it to speak of newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and books. Most of the faces we shall ever behold, we shall behold in the form of images.

Because they arrive with sound, at home, in the car, the elevator, or the waiting room, today's images are capable of attracting our attention during much of the day. We may ignore most of them most of the time, take issue with them or shrug them off (or think we are shrugging them off), but we must do the work of dispelling them—and even then, we know we can usher them into our presence whenever we like. Iconic plenitude is the contemporary condition, and it is taken for granted. To grow up in this culture is to grow into an expectation that images and sounds will be there for us on command, and that the stories they compose will be succeeded by still other stories, all bidding for our attention, all striving to make sense, all,

in some sense, *ours*. Raymond Williams, the first analyst to pay attention to the fact that television is not just pictures but flow, and not just flow but drama upon drama, pointed out more than a quarter century ago, long before hundred-channel cable TV and VCRs, that

> we have never as a society acted so much or watched so many others acting. . . . [W]hat is really new . . . is that drama . . . is built into the rhythms of everyday life. In earlier periods drama was important at a festival, in a season, or as a conscious journey to a theater; from honouring Dionysus or Christ to taking in a show. What we have now is drama as habitual experience: more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime.

Around the time Vermeer painted *The Concert*, Blaise Pascal, who worried about the seductive power of distraction among the French royalty, wrote that "near the persons of kings there never fail to be a great number of people who see to it that amusement follows business, and who watch all the time of their leisure to supply them with delights and games, so that there is no blank in it." In this one respect, today almost everyone—even the poor—in the rich countries resembles a king, attended by the courtiers of the media offering a divine right of choice.

MEASURES OF MAGNITUDE

Statistics begin—but barely—to convey the sheer magnitude of this in-touchness, access, exposure, plenitude, glut, however we want to think of it.

In 1999, a television set was on in the average American household more than seven hours a day, a figure that has remained fairly

steady since 1983. According to the measurements of the A. C. Nielsen Company, the standard used by advertisers and the television business itself, the average individual watched television about four hours a day, not counting the time when the set was on but the individual in question was not watching. When Americans were asked to keep diaries of how they spend their time, the time spent actually watching dropped to a still striking three hours a day—probably an undercount. In 1995, of those who watched, the percentage who watched "whatever's on," as opposed to any specific program, was 43 percent, up from 29 percent in 1979. Though cross-national comparisons are elusive because of differences in measurement systems, the numbers in other industrialized nations seem to be comparable—France, for example, averaging three and a half hours per person. One survey of forty-three nations showed the United States ranking third in viewing hours, after Japan and Mexico. None of this counts time spent discussing programs, reading about their stars, or thinking about either.

Overall, wrote one major researcher in 1990, "watching TV is the dominant leisure activity of Americans, consuming 40 percent of the average person's free time as a primary activity [when people give television their undivided attention]. Television takes up more than half of our free time if you count . . . watching TV while doing something else like eating or reading . . . [or] when you have the set on but you aren't paying attention to it." Sex, race, income, age, and marital status make surprisingly little difference in time spent. Neither, at this writing, has the Internet diminished total media use, even if you don't count the Web as part of the media. While Internet users do watch 28 percent less television, they spend more time than nonusers playing video games and listening to the radio and recorded music—obviously a younger crowd. Long-term users (four or more years) say they go on-line for more than two hours a day, and boys and girls alike spend the bulk of their Internet time entertaining themselves with games, hobbies, and the like. In other words, the

Internet redistributes the flow of unlimited media but does not dry it up. When one considers the overlapping and additional hours of exposure to radio, magazines, newspapers, compact discs, movies (available via a range of technologies as well as in theaters), and comic books, as well as the accompanying articles, books, and chats about what's on or was on or is coming up via all these means, it is clear that the media flow into the home—not to mention outside—has swelled into a torrent of immense force and constancy, an accompaniment *to* life that has become a central experience *of* life.

The place of media in the lives of children is worth special attention—not simply because children are uniquely impressionable but because their experience shapes everyone's future; if we today take a media-soaked environment for granted, surely one reason is that we grew up in it and can no longer see how remarkable it is. Here are some findings from a national survey of media conditions among American children aged two through eighteen. The average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.6 tape players, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer. Ninety-nine percent of these children live in homes with one or more TVs, 97 percent with a VCR, 97 percent with a radio, 94 percent with a tape player, 90 percent with a CD player, 70 percent with a video game player, 69 percent with a computer. Eighty-eight percent live in homes with two or more TVs, 60 percent in homes with three or more. Of the 99 percent with a TV, 74 percent have cable or satellite service. And so on, and on, and on.

The uniformity of this picture is no less astounding. A great deal about the lives of children depends on their race, sex, and social class, but access to major media does not. For TV, VCR, and radio ownership, rates do not vary significantly among white, black, and Hispanic children, or between girls and boys. For television and radio, rates do not vary significantly according to the income of the community.

How accessible, then, is the media cavalcade at home? Of children eight to eighteen, 65 percent have a TV in their bedrooms, 86 percent a radio, 81 percent a tape player, 75 percent a CD player. Boys and girls are not significantly different in possessing this bounty, though the relative usages do vary by medium. Researchers also asked children whether the television was "on in their homes even if no one is watching 'most of the time,' 'some of the time,' 'a little of the time,' or 'never.' " Homes in which television is on "most of the time" are termed *constant television households.* By this measure, 42 percent of all American households with children are constant television households. Blacks are more likely than whites or Hispanics to experience TV in their lives: 56 percent of black children live in constant television households (and 69 percent have a TV in their bedrooms, compared to 48 percent of whites). The lower the family education and the median income of the community, the greater the chance that a household is a constant television household.

As for time, the average child spent six hours and thirty-two minutes per day exposed to media of all kinds, of which the time spent reading books and magazines—not counting schoolwork—averaged about forty-five minutes. For ages two to seven, the average for total media was four hours and seventeen minutes; for ages eight to thirteen, eight hours and eight minutes, falling to seven hours and thirty-five minutes for ages fourteen to eighteen. Here, race and social class do count. Black children are most exposed, followed by Hispanics, than whites. At all age levels, the amount of exposure to all media varies inversely with class, from six hours and fifty-nine minutes a day for children in households where the median income for the zip code is under $25,000 to six hours and two minutes for children whose zip code median income is over $40,000. The discrepancy for TV exposure is especially pronounced, ranging from three hours and six minutes a day for children whose zip code incomes are under $25,000 to two hours and twenty-nine minutes for children whose zip code incomes are over $40,000. Still, these

differences are not vast. Given everything that divides the rich from the poor, the professional from the working class—differences in physical and mental health, infant mortality, longevity, safety, vulnerability to crime, prospects for stable employment, and so on—the class differences in media access and use are surprisingly slender. So are the differences between American and western European children, the latter averaging six hours a day total, though in Europe only two and a quarter of those hours are spent with TV.

All such statistics are crude, of course. Most of them register the time that people *say* they spend. They are—thankfully—not checked by total surveillance. Moreover, the meaning of *exposure* is hard to assess, since the concept encompasses rapt attention, vague awareness, oblivious coexistence, and all possible shadings in between. As the images glide by and the voices come and go, how can we assess what goes on in people's heads? Still, the figures do convey some sense of the media saturation with which we live—and so far we have counted only what can be counted at home. These numbers don't take into account the billboards, the TVs at bars and on planes, the Muzak in restaurants and shops, the magazines in the doctor's waiting room, the digital displays at the gas pump and over the urinal, the ads, insignias, and logos whizzing by on the sides of buses and taxis, climbing the walls of buildings, making announcements from caps, bags, T-shirts, and sneakers. To vary our experience, we can pay to watch stories about individuals unfold across larger-than-life-size movie screens, or visit theme parks and troop from image to image, display to display. Whenever we like, on foot or in vehicles, we can convert ourselves into movable nodes of communication, thanks to car radios, tape, CD, and game players, cell phones, beepers, Walkmen, and the latest in "personal communication systems"—and even if we ourselves refrain, we find ourselves drawn willy-nilly into the soundscape that others broadcast around us.

Crucially, who we are is how we live our time—or *spend* it, to use the term that registers its intrinsic scarcity. What we believe, or say

we believe, is less important. We vote for a way of life with our time. And increasingly, when we are not at work or asleep, we are in the media torrent. (Sometimes at work, we are also there, listening to the radio or checking out sports scores, pin-ups, or headlines on the Internet.) Steadily more inhabitants of the wealthy part of the world have the means, incentives, and opportunities to seek private electronic companionship. The more money we have to spend, the more personal space each household member gets. With personal space comes solitude, but this solitude is instantly crowded with images and soundtracks. To a degree that was unthinkable in the seventeenth century, life experience has become an experience in the presence of media.

VIRTUAL PLENITUDE

This is plenitude, but of a restricted sort. Though we may preserve them on videotape or in digital memory, ordinarily the images that come to us on screens are ephemeral traces. (The same goes for soundtracks.) Like the images that precede and succeed them in time, they belong to a perpetually vanishing present streaking by. As a rule, before they vanish, they offer only the most limited sense impressions. They transmit something of the look of things, but they cannot be smelled or tasted. They aren't palpable. They most commonly hang in two dimensions on a more or less flat translucent screen. This screen delivers light, gleams with availability, claims some portion of our attention, but is also apart from us. The screen is bright, brighter than ordinary reality (which is probably why it's so hard to look away), but often, for technical reasons, the picture may be a bit blurred, streaked with extraneous marks, interference patterns, or other reminders that the images are manufactured and transmitted from elsewhere.

Unless we click an off button or smash the screen, the images

stream on, leaving traces in our minds but, despite the interactivity boom, strangely indifferent to us. They collect our attention but do not reciprocate. In the real time of our lives, we choose them and complete them by noticing, hearing, reading, or misreading them; yet they have no need of us. They are with us even if we are not with them. In the case of computer screens, we can alter the images—that is the very point—because they are our creatures. We buy and possess them. On the other hand, they compel a certain attention without reacting to us. They do not comment on our looks, raise no eyebrows at our choice of words or images (unless we have an up-to-date spell-checking program)—and so, to a certain degree, it is they who possess us.

Like flesh-and-blood people, the ones with whom we have "face-time," the virtual personages on-screen have identities and invite our emotions. They include, in the words of one of my students, "people who are sort of familiar and sort of not." At times they are part of the background noise and flow—part of the wallpaper, we say—and at times they loom up as something more. Sometimes we evaluate them as physical beings and moral agents. Often we find them desirable, or enviable, or in some other way they evoke the sentiments, the liking, irritation, or boredom, that flesh-and-blood individuals evoke. Yet an aura of some sort surrounds them. They take up ritual places as heroes, leaders, scapegoats, magical figures, to be admired, envied, loved, or hated; to *matter*. These familiar strangers exist *for us*, damn it. We root for them, yell at them. Fans commonly address letters to actors and confuse them with their characters. An actress on the soap opera *All My Children* once told me that she received fan letters that addressed her by name, complimented her on her performance, only to slide into addressing her character—why did you break up with your boyfriend?

Contact with the never-ending cornucopian flow of these faces, of popular culture itself, a torrent beyond us yet in some way (we think) under our control—this experience is at the core of a way of

life. The familiar stranger is by no means unprecedented in history. People have long imagined a world populated with figures who were not physically at hand and yet seemed somehow present. What has changed, of course, is the magnitude of the flow, the range of characters that enter our world, their omnipresence, the sheer number of stories. Inevitably, today's stories are but prologues or sequels to other stories, true and less true stories, stories that are themselves intermissions, stories without end.

Most of these stories reach us through images that reside with us—though they do so in a peculiar sense we should not be too quick to think we understand. We know, most of the time, that they are not "real," although when they grip us we don't want to tear ourselves away. Real are my family, friends, coworkers. Real is the taste of coffee, or the fly buzzing around the kitchen, or the pounding of my heart after a climb uphill. Real, in other senses, is my job, or cooking, or shopping, or organizing my routines to get to work or procure food. Images, on the other hand, depict or re-present realities but are not themselves realities. We usually know the difference. If an image depicts a place we have visited or reminds us of something that once happened to us, or something we could imagine happening, we call it *realistic*. But that is still not "real." Still less is it, in Umberto Eco's term, *hyperreal*, more real than the real, the product of an "absolute fake," like Hearst's San Simeon or a wax museum. Nor is it Jean Baudrillard's *simulacrum*, a copy of something whose original does not exist, like Disneyland's Main Street. Eco is closer to the truth when he refers to "the frantic desire for the almost real" that thrives, above all, in the United States.

Almost real: we expect a certain fidelity from images, whether fictional or "reality-based." If fictional, we expect them to be plausible, in some way *lifelike*, even if they are fantastic. We recognize them as ghosts, shadows of something substantial. They are auxiliary, virtual. No wonder that, among technophiles, the idea of virtual reality—of digitally delivered sensations that we could mistake for the

actual experience of "being there"—caught on before the technology was devised, for much of our experience is *already* virtual: the sort of derivative yet riveting almost-reality that television has long delivered to us but that, until recently, has been sealed behind the screen. With virtual reality, we have the illusion of stepping inside the screen, not just attending to but being attended to *by* the images inside.

Of course, the viewer is not (ordinarily) naive. She knows that fictional beings will not step out of the screen to thrill her, as in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, nor will the actors recognize her in the flesh, as in Neil LaBute's *Nurse Betty;* nor is she likely to mistake the TV image of a corpse for an actual cadaver. The adult viewer is not the infant who, psychologists assure us, cannot tell the difference between image and reality—who thinks the giraffe depicted on the TV screen is "actually" a few inches tall. But child or adult, we do demand something from our images, even if they are only "almost real." We expect them to heighten life, to intensify and focus it by being better than real, more vivid, more stark, more *something*. We want a burst of feeling, a frisson of commiseration, a flash of delight, a moment of recognition—so *that's* what it's like when your boyfriend sleeps with your sister, when you lose a patient in the emergency room, when you're voted off the *Survivor* island. We depend on these images to imagine the great elsewhere: "realistic" presences that point, say, to the real ruins of the World Trade Center, or fictions that gesture toward a real world where attendants wheel patients into operating rooms and police arrest suspects, or "reality-based" shows indicating that some human beings will eat a rat to win a chance at a million dollars.

All of this is so obvious and fundamental to the way we live now that to call attention to its strangeness seems banal or superfluous. Isn't the omnipresence of media simple and straightforward? But strangely, we have no language to catch precisely the unnerving, downright bizarreness of this world of images, characters, stories,

jingles, sound effects, announcements, cartoons, and logos that engulfs our lives. Even words like *auxiliary*, *virtual*, and *ghostly* are poor approximations for the peculiar stream of images and sounds that winds through everyday life, so steady as to be taken for granted, so fluid as to permit us to believe that we never quite step into the same torrent twice.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE TORRENT

How did the unlimited media come to be taken for granted? Raymond Williams posed the question this way:

> Till the eyes tire, millions of us watch the shadows of shadows and find them substance; watch scenes, situations, actions, exchanges, crises. The slice of life, once a project of naturalist drama, is now a voluntary, habitual, internal rhythm; the flow of action and acting, of representation and performance, raised to a new convention, that of a basic need. . . . What is it, we have to ask, in us and in our contemporaries, that draws us repeatedly to these hundreds and thousands of simulated actions?

A good deal about the media torrent's force, its appeal, even its inescapability, remains mysterious. Respect for that mystery is not a bad place to start. We should not be too quick to say that media omnipresence is the product of runaway technology, or the quest for profits, or a drive to "escape"; or that the hunger for sensations is built into human nature or, to the contrary, is strictly a product of "late capitalism." Pat explanations blind us to the enormity of the media flow itself.

To a child growing up immersed in the culture of images, it appears the most natural thing in the world. It appears, in fact, to *be*

nature. Expecting images and sounds to appear on command (or even when uncommanded and unwanted) feels as normal as expecting the sun to rise. Because it's so easy to change channels, scan for stations, surf, graze, click, go to another source of images and sounds, you assume that if you don't like what you see or hear, you can find something better (or make your own image or soundscape). No wonder each wave of technosurprises seems somehow unsurprising—the screen hanging above an airplane seat, the car that receives e-mail and plays CDs, the watch with Internet access, the digital movie camera that switches on and off at the command of a voice. Indeed, today's inescapable hype about a brave new interconnected world has a plausible ring because a significant and growing proportion of Americans and others are already wired, or wirelessed, into numberless circuits, networks, loops of connection with images and sounds available on call. We feel about our image and sound machines as Marcel Proust once did about the telephone, "a supernatural instrument before whose miracles we used to stand amazed, and which we now employ without giving it a thought, to summon our tailor or to order an ice cream." We feel—we have no doubt—that we have the right to be addressed by our media, the right to enjoy them, the right to admit faces of our choice into our living rooms and to enter into worlds without number, to flow with them. We may not have the right to possess the beautiful faces and bodies we see there, the fortunes, celebrity, or power dangled before us, clamoring for our attention, but we have the right to want them. If we are let down, we have the right, almost the duty, to click and dip elsewhere at will.

It's easy to see how individuals grow up expecting their lives to be accompanied by image plenitude, flow, and choice. But for society as a whole, how did this blessing come to pass? Media saturation is not a gift of the gods nor of the unprovoked genius (or wickedness, or frivolity) of technological wizards. The Edisons, Marconis, Sarnoffs, De Forests, and Gateses devised and organized the media that Marshall McLuhan has called "extensions of man," but humanity

came first with its hungers and competencies. Nor are our desires the unwelcome products of vast corporations, determined to stuff human time with their commodities: with products that people would be so eager to purchase, on which they would become so dependent, that they would grant their time in exchange for money to bring these commodities home. It *is* that, but it is not only that. We know that Eminem's latest CD and *The Sopranos* are human creations, but it's easy to lose sight of the fact that the media flow itself is no less human in its origins, the product of millions of people who, having been molded by a mechanical way of life, have devised a seemingly endless number of ways to relieve the strains of that way of life by mechanical means.

Unlimited media result from a fusion of economic expansion and individual desire, prepared for over centuries, and nowhere more fully realized than in the United States. The pleasures of acquisition in seventeenth-century Delft led to the pleasures of consumption in twenty-first-century New York. In both, individuals matter, and therefore so do depictions of individuals. In both, individuals clothe themselves with adornments and disguises. In both, individuals claim rights—the big difference being that once exclusive rights have been expanded, including the right to think and feel as you like, and over time, the right to love, marry, move, work, sell, buy, vote, and otherwise act as you please. One thing that ever-growing numbers have the right to buy today is access to images at all hours and in extraordinary assortments, offering, at low cost except in time, a provisional combination of pleasure and some sense of mastery. People who were already interested in images and sounds won the time to consume them. An industrial apparatus arose to produce them cheaply and in profusion. The desire for pleasing windows on the world—and windows through which to escape the world—is nothing new, but only in modern society has it become possible for majorities to cultivate and live that desire, unwilling to accept anything less. Now, the

desire for play, the desire for routine, the desire for diversion, the desire for orientation, the desire for representation, the desire to feel, the desire to flee from feeling—all these human desires in their complexity and contradiction are indulged in the vast circus maximus, our cultural jamboree of jamborees.

Although the media stream is modern, it draws on ancient springs. To feel accompanied by others not physically present is hardly unprecedented. We have a profound capacity to harbor images of actual or imaginary others who are not materially at hand—to remember or speculate about what they looked like, wonder what they are doing, imagine what they might think, anticipate what they might do, take part in unspoken dialogues with them. The fashioning of replicas extends across at least thirty thousand years of human history. Throughout this time people have lived, through images and simulations, "with" gods, saints, demons, kings and queens, heroes of fleet foot and sword, absent relations, clan members, friends, and enemies. The painting of a reindeer on the wall of a cave in the south of France, or the portrait of a dead ancestor in Egypt, or a cross on the wall, or the replica of a saint in the stained glass of a chapel, each opens a portal to an imagined world, beckoning us to cross a gap between the image *here* and what is, or was, or might be *there*.

None of that is new, nor is the manufacture and wide diffusion of popular culture. Poetry and song migrated across medieval Europe hand to hand, mouth to ear to mouth. Broadsheets circulated. From the second half of the fifteenth century on, Gutenberg's movable type made possible mass-printed Bibles and a flood of instructional as well as scurrilous literature. Even where literacy was rare, books were regularly read aloud. (In a scene at an inn from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, published in 1605, farmworkers listen attentively to a reading of books found in a trunk.) In eighteenth-century England, the uplift and piety of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, which went

through 160 editions by 1792, was supplemented by the upstart novel, that thrilling tale of individual action, which the high-minded of the time regarded as shockingly lowbrow. From then on, reading spread, especially at home alone and silently—that is, in secret. So did the imagination of what it might be like to be, or act like, somebody else: Robinson Crusoe, Moll Flanders, Tom Jones. What sociologist David Riesman called "the stream of print" in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries opened up space for sympathy, helping to undermine theocracy and slavery. Whatever the censorious efforts of pastors and parents, Riesman wrote, "Almost always there is an underground of a more picaresque sort in which the growing boy, if not his sister, can take some refuge."

But even in Europe's most democratic outpost, America, the influx of reading matter into the household was retarded by the cost of books and the limits of literacy. The immense library of Thomas Jefferson was neither shared nor matched by his slaves or nearby tenant farmers. Still, sitting by his fire in the Kentucky wilderness, in the latter years of the eighteenth century, Daniel Boone read *Gulliver's Travels*—scarcely the popular image of the rough-tough wilderness man. The illiterate Rocky Mountain scout Jim Bridger could recite long passages from Shakespeare, which he learned by hiring someone to read the plays to him. "There is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare," Alexis de Tocqueville found on his trip through the United States in 1831–32. There were already extraordinary bursts of best-sellerdom: in a population far less literate than today's, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 300,000 copies within a year of its 1852 publication, one copy apiece for roughly 1.3 percent of the population, the equivalent of 3.6 million copies today—and then eventually ten times as many by the outbreak of the Civil War. At least in the United States, growing numbers of ordinary people had access to the "refuge" of print—and these were seldom books defending the ruling

elites. As Riesman pointed out, the Bible was "the great reading-hour storehouse," and it was "not one book but many, with an inexhaustible variety of messages." Slaves reading Exodus rehearsed their own freedom. Print has long sheltered those with the urge to run away, for as contemporary housewives continue to discover even while reading romance novels, "to be alone with a book is to be alone in a new way."

In the course of the nineteenth century, long before television, stories and images entered the typical household in ever-accelerating numbers. In 1865, according to literary historian Richard Ohmann, there was probably one copy of a monthly magazine for every ten Americans; in 1905, three copies for every four Americans—an increase of more than sevenfold. As for the rest of popular culture—the carnival of theater, opera, public lectures, and other live performances—its major constraint was not literacy but cost. The declining price of commercial entertainment was crucial. Sociologist Richard Butsch has calculated that in the United States of the late 1860s, about 36 million theater tickets were sold annually (about one ticket per capita, but in a population 75 percent of which was rural, and where, as Butsch writes, "the five largest markets, New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and San Francisco, accounted for more than half the total national box office receipts"). Compare this with the 4 billion tickets sold per year at the peak of moviegoing in the late 1940s (about twenty-seven tickets per person, roughly one purchase every two weeks). Compare that, in turn, with the nightly TV audience at any given moment of 102.5 million people age two and up, or almost 40 percent of the U.S. population, in the year 2001.

Cost-cutting goes a long way to explain this transformation. According to Butsch's computations, the costs of the *cheapest* tickets for the most popular types of performance at various times were as follows (with an update):

	Cost for laborer as proportion of daily wage
18th century (theater)	More than a full day's wage
Early 19th century (theater)	1/3
1840s–50s (minstrel show)	A little less than 1/3 (25¢)
1870 (minstrel, variety shows)	1/6 (still 25¢)
1880s (melodrama, vaudeville)	1/13 (10¢)
1910 (nickelodeon)	1/40 (5¢)
1920 (movie theater)	less than 1/40 (10¢)
1960s (television)	1/360 (amortizing cost of $200 black-and-white set)
1998 (cable television)	1/100 (amortizing cost of $300 color set plus basic cable)

In other words, the cost of a day of television in the 1960s was 11 percent of the cost of a nickelodeon visit fifty years earlier, and a small fraction of 1 percent of the cost of a visit to a colonial theater. Since the 1960s, the cost of a television set alone declined further in relation to (stagnant) wages, but cable bumped up the cost of the whole package.

Obviously, more popular culture can circulate partly because costs have come down precipitously. But declining cost turns out to be a more complex affair than the crisp formula "cost declines, therefore usage increases" suggests. Declining cost, growing demand, and improved technology looped into one another. Costs came down in part because technology improved, but technology improved, in part, because demand grew, or could be anticipated to grow, something producers factored in when investing in new technologies and expanding their production lines. Demand is partly a function of price, but price is a function of desire as well as of technological possibilities and the amount of time available to potential consumers. Time unencumbered by work swelled. So did money to fill time with convenient amusements.

As a consequence of the cost-demand-technology loop, popular

culture is no longer a matter of the Bible and Shakespeare at home, a play once a year, or a movie every two weeks, supplemented by a magazine and a newspaper. The scale of availability has multiplied a hundredfold. An experience once reserved for exceptional occasions has become an everyday matter as continuous as—or more continuous than—one likes. But more time and lower cost are not sufficient to explain why people today spend roughly half their waking hours around and among these manufactured presences. A hunger has become part of us. Just as we gravitate toward food even when we're full or mealtimes are still far off, we're drawn toward the screen or the speaker not only when it is right over there in the living room and we have time on our hands but when we are with children, mates, coworkers, friends, lovers, and strangers, or the screen is in another room. The culture of unlimited media takes up a place in our imagination. Its language and gestures become ours, even when smuggled into our own conversation within quotation marks ("Hel*lo*?" "Dyn-o-mite!" "Just do it!"). A bizarre event reminds us of the uncanny 1950s series *The Twilight Zone*, whereupon the *dee*-dee-*dee*-dah theme will pop into the mind. We choose among our cultural furnishings but unless ensconced in a cave deep in some remote canyon, we do not choose whether to choose any more than a young man growing up in a hunter-gatherer culture chooses to hunt, or a woman to gather. These are the ways of our tribe.

DISTRACTIONS, DRUGS, AND FETISHES

The urge to grasp the totality of the media has been with us even longer than most modern media. During the centuries when popular culture had not yet grown torrential, many critics already nonetheless argued that images and performances diverted people from more constructive pursuits. Many pointed accusing fingers at the sirens of "distraction," the better to convince people to plug their ears. Some

thought popular culture a distraction from a piety that ought to have been directed toward God or Church. Some saw popular culture as a pacifying circus that offered the masses some psychic compensation for their sufferings without detracting from the authorities' power. Even defenders of today's media barrage generally agree that it amounts to distraction from the burdens of industrialized life—though, unlike the critics, they celebrate it precisely for that reason, as a valuable, even a necessary remedy. Distraction cannot by itself account for the unlimited flow of today's media. But the concept deserves some exploration.

Distraction is one of those terms—like *freedom*, *responsibility*, and *alienation*—that requires an object to make sense. The question is, distraction from what? Mortality? God? Pain? Subjugation? Changing the world? More than one, or all, of the above? (The German Marxist critic Siegfried Kracauer, for instance, suggested in 1930: "The flight of images is the flight from revolution and death.") Your answer to the question *Distraction from what?* reveals what you value.

Distraction from mortality and distraction from God are the historical starting points for this line of thought. The Old Testament God condemned "graven images." St. Paul and St. Augustine added their own supplementary condemnations. But Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and Augustinian devotee, was the most pungent distraction critic of early modern times. In his *Pensées* of 1657–58, Pascal declared that gambling, hunting, and womanizing were but feeble—and ultimately futile—efforts to divert ourselves from the inescapable fact of human mortality. "The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries." For diversion was habit-forming. Seeking excitement, we might foolishly imagine that "the possession of the objects of [our] quest would make [us] really happy," and thereby miss the only possible path to salvation—Christian devotion.

The religious strand of suspicion continues to this day. Pentacostalists disapprove of dancing, and other fundamentalists deplore

televised sex. Partisans of various creeds despise "degenerate art." But over the last century and a half, secular critique and analysis have come to the fore. During the heyday of social theory, the period between 1848 and 1918 when industry, cities, bureaucracies, commerce, nationalism, and empire were booming, the media flow was, by today's standards, only a rivulet. Nonetheless, some of the great social thinkers of Europe and the United States explored and tried to explain the nature of modern diversion. The founders of sociology elaborated concepts that help us understand the origins of our way of life and of the vast machinery society has devised to feed our equally vast appetite for wish fulfillment. Karl Marx called this way of life capitalism; Max Weber, rationalization; Georg Simmel, the least known but for our purposes the most helpful, intellectualism.

Marx died in 1883, four years before the first gramophone patent and twelve years before the first motion picture. Never having heard recorded music or gone to the movies, he still understood that capitalism required popular distraction. The great upender of the nineteenth century, Marx in 1843 turned Pascal on his head. For this militant atheist, religion was not what diversion diverted *from*; it was diversion itself. As the Bolivian peasant chewed coca leaves to overcome the exhaustion of a wretched life, so did the worker in a capitalist society turn to religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people . . . the *illusory* happiness of men." Religion was mass distraction, the result of imagining man's own powers projected beyond himself into God. But according to Marx, the objects that human beings produced for the market also acquired a magical—indeed, an illusory and distracting—aspect. They became, in a sense, religious artifacts.

By 1867, in *Capital*, Marx had come to identify a new form of popular irrationality that he called "the fetishism of commodities." Commodities, he wrote, were "transcendent," "mystical," "mysterious," and "fantastic" in that they acquired a value not inherent in

their physical nature. Through the mysteries of the market, people assigned value to goods that they could live without. But Marx did not anticipate that capitalism, thanks to its ongoing productive success, would serve up such an abundance of transcendent mysteries with which people could compensate themselves for their sacrifices. Marx was transfixed by production, not consumption. For him, workers were wage slaves barely able to dream of becoming distracted consumers. They were condemned to growing impoverishment, not declining hours of work and increasing amounts of disposable income. He did not anticipate that the magic loaded into commodities at the production end might rub off on people at the consumption end—so much so as to create a new, enveloping way of life brimming with satisfactions.

Obsessed by the exploitative nature of production, Marx tended to think of consumption strictly as an auxiliary process that accomplished two purposes: it circulated goods and replenished the laborer's powers. It was not a fundamental, useful human act. He missed the way in which commodities didn't just "confront" people with "alien" powers in an externalized face-off but entered into people, "spoke" to them, linked them to one another, cultivated their satisfactions, and in certain ways satisfied them. As an image or sound enters the mind, one may feel oneself, at least for a moment, going to meet it, welcoming it, even melting into it—overcoming confrontation with gratification. For Marx, such satisfaction was only a distraction from the "real conditions of life." But what are those "real conditions"?

Marx was right that markets work mysteriously, that there is magic in the way a compact disc, say, comes to be "worth" two hours of a janitor's labor or the same as a six-pack of premium beer. An act of culture produces this equation. But he underestimated the amount of magic in the world. What is going on when I walk into a music store and hold a CD in my hand? I approach not only a shiny metallic object in a plastic case whose manufacturing costs are

a few cents but an aura of pleasure and a trail of resonance derived perhaps from the reputation of the band whose music it contains or from my experience of having heard a song at a party, on the radio, or downloaded onto my computer. The object of advertising is to intensify this resonance and link it with my own good feelings past and prospective. My armchair, in this sense, "produces" not only the sensation against my back and backside but a sense of comfort I may associate with my childhood. Nike sneakers produce not only a certain spongy sensation against my soles but (at least until I get into the gym) my dream of soaring like Michael Jordan.

When my friends and I shoot baskets, we aren't just compensating ourselves for what the alienation of labor has cost us; we are also forming a social relation for the purpose of play. We invest in the game some of our human powers. Why isn't our game just as real as our labor? For that matter, why isn't watching a game on TV as real and central as the labors we perform on the job?

Marx, imprisoned in the utilitarian attitude he condemned, was in this respect not radical enough. He didn't take seriously the fact that we were all children once, and all children play. They simulate and observe others simulating. Children are fascinated by mirrors and grow up impressed by games of cognition and recognition, cartoonish representations, performances in masks and disguises. Developmental psychologists point out that play has utility, increasing competencies, offering lessons in how to win and lose—but play is also gratuitous. People play "for fun," because it pleases them. Adults surrender much, but never all, of their playfulness. They do not simply put away childish things. Things promise pleasure—and not only things bought and kept for oneself. Gifts, too, are expressions of feeling, of affection, or love, or duty. Things are more than things; they are containers for love and self-love.

CALCULATION AND FEELING

In conventional usage, the media deliver an information flow. The term *information* goes with thought, cognition, knowledge. It sounds as hard (and objective and masculine) as *emotion* sounds soft (and subjective and feminine). Many commentators today think of the mind as an "information processor"; business likes to talk about IT, information technology. But what if we tease apart the notion of information? We see into our current situation more deeply if we consider information as something that happens within a human setting, something that people approach, seek, develop, employ, avoid, circulate, and resist. We do live in an "information society," but no less, if less famously, it is *a society of feeling and sensation*, toward the furtherance of which information is sometimes useful.

Marx starts with people required to live by their labor; the key modern social institution is the factory. In the standard sequence of sociological founding fathers, Marx's great successor is Max Weber (1864–1920), for whom people are required to live in power relations, and moderns, in particular, are under severe pressure to "rationalize" their social relations—to give reasons for their conduct, to think instrumentally, to calculate means toward ends. They, we, must surrender to abstract "rational-legal" rules installed by unforgiving bureaucracies. We may protest by seeking leaders tinged with grace, gifted with what Weber called "charisma," but charisma too becomes routinized in the end, and we are doomed to enclosure in the "iron cage" of modern rationality. It's easy enough to imagine why Weber's disenchanted moderns would turn to entertainment for relief, a sort of reenchantment, even though Weber did not take up the subject in particular.

For a deeper understanding of the wellsprings of the all-engulfing spectacle, we must turn to Weber's German-Jewish contemporary Georg Simmel (1858–1918), the first great modern analyst of what

we take today as everyday experience. Simmel thought the decisive force in people's lives is "the power and the rhythm of emotions." Desire precedes rationality, chronologically in the life of the individual but also logically, in the evolution of human conduct and institutions. The human condition begins with dependencies that are emotional (the need for love and support) as well as physical (the need for nourishment and warmth). "For man, who is always striving, never satisfied, always becoming, love is the true human condition." From the moment of birth, to live is to be and feel connected. Our cognitive and intellectual faculties rest upon foundations of feeling. The emotional linkages of childhood persist and develop in ways that make all social relations finally emotional relations, compounded of desires, satisfactions, frustrations, attachments, and antagonisms.

For Simmel, the framework in which man strives for love and connection is not so much, as with Marx, capitalist production but the money economy. "Man is a 'purposive' animal," Simmel writes. He develops goals and exercises his will to attain them through making and using tools, and increasingly through money, a means that develops psychologically into an end. People treat other people, as well as things, in a utilitarian fashion, and money is "the most extreme example of a means becoming an end." People now organize their lives to make money. They think calculatingly and categorically. They abstract calculation from sentiment. They develop the mental faculties to "size up" people, things, and situations reliably and quickly. Thus (and perhaps Simmel exaggerates the point) "money is responsible for impersonal relations between people."

The metropolis, Simmel maintains, is the most concentrated locale of the money economy, and it is here, above all, that mental life becomes "essentially intellectualistic." In the epochal movement of humanity from the village to the city, emotions were sidelined. The residents of populous cities like Berlin and Strasbourg, where Simmel lived, were required to tame their passions in favor of "calculating exactness" as a style of life. What will your trade be? For

whom will you work and whom will you hire? What will you buy, where will you sell, and at what prices? Of whom will you make use? All-consuming, incessant calculation, in turn, required defenses against the assault and battery of a life in which everyone was judged according to whether he or she appeared usable, and people routinely, casually treated both persons and things with formality and "an unrelenting hardness."

Moreover, money "reduces the highest as well as the lowest values equally" to a single standard, putting them "on the same level." Money, therefore, is a school for cynicism. (In our own time, the standard of monetary worth gives us expressions like "She's a dime a dozen," "He's a loser," "You get what you pay for," and "I feel like a million bucks.") Moreover, besieged by the variety of strangers and things, people frantically categorize, cultivating an "intellectualistic quality . . . a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis." The modern city dweller must acquire "a relentless matter-of-factness," a "blasé outlook," a kind of "reserve with its overtone of concealed aversion." The German and French languages share a word to express this sort of cultivated indifference: in German, *egal*, in French, *égal*. They mean "equal," but with a shrug or a somewhat depressed implication not found in English: "It doesn't matter"; "I don't care"; "It's all the same to me" (in French, expressed in the all-purpose phrase "*ça m'est égal*").

For Simmel, "cynicism and a blasé attitude" are the direct results of "the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money." Within the metropolis, there are special "nurseries of cynicism . . . places with huge turnovers," like stock exchanges, where money constantly changes hands. "The more money becomes the sole center of interest," Simmel writes, "the more one discovers that honor and conviction, talent and virtue, beauty and salvation of the soul, are exchanged against money, and so the more a mocking and frivolous attitude will develop in relation to these higher values that are for sale for the same kind of value as groceries, and that also

command a 'market price.' " Cynicism is the subjective expression of a marketplace for values.

Cynicism can be enlivening, offering a momentary lift, a superior knowingness, but its dark side emerges in dismissals like "show me something I haven't seen," "been there, done that," and "*so* over." At an extreme, as Simmel writes, the blasé person "has completely lost the feeling for value differences. He experiences all things as being of an equally dull and grey hue, as not worth getting excited about." Simmel is writing in 1900, before the media torrent, but he anticipates our world with his startling observation that the growth of the blasé attitude produces a paradoxical result—a culture of sensation. The cynic is content with his inner state, but the blasé person is not. Hence the latter's craving "for excitement, for extreme impressions, for the greatest speed in its change." Satisfying that craving may bring relief, but only temporarily. The more excitements, the worse. "The modern preference for 'stimulation' as such in impressions, relations and information" follows, in other words, Simmel maintains, from "the increasingly blasé attitude through which natural excitement increasingly disappears. This search for stimuli originates in the money economy with the fading of all specific values into a mere mediating value. We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure."

So emerges the modern individual, a role player who is also a part-time adventurer and stimulus seeker, trying frenetically to find himself by abandoning himself. This paradoxical individual is primed for unlimited media.

The money economy is not the only source of impersonal social relations. Our ordinary encounters with large numbers of unfamiliar people also drive us to calculate each other's usefulness. The members of traditional or primitive economies were dependent on small numbers of people. Modern man, Simmel argues, has many more needs. "Not only is the extent of our needs considerably wider," he

writes, "but even the elementary necessities that we have in common with all other human beings (food, clothing and shelter) can be satisfied only with the help of a much more complex organization and many more hands. Not only does specialization of our activities itself require an infinitely extended range of other producers with whom we exchange products," but many of our actions require increasing amounts "of preparatory work, additional help and semi-finished products." Once upon a time, we knew the people we met at the market by name and face. "In contrast, consider how many 'delivery men' alone we are dependent upon in a money economy!" As they are functionally indistinguishable, so are they interchangeable. "We grow indifferent to them in their particularity."

Simmel is writing at the dawn of the twentieth century. Already, the calculating individual has split into parts corresponding to distinct roles (worker, parent, shopper), and he experiences most other people in equally stylized roles (coworker, shopkeeper, boss). Under the sway of calculating individualism, people must mask themselves in their roles—must appear *as* their roles—in order to be recognized by others. Yet the role never seeps into all of a person's interior crevices. The mask never melts utterly into the face. Instead, we live elaborate inner lives—which, ironically, we crave all the more intensely because of the constraints under which we operate in our outer lives. We *play* roles but *are not* the roles. Some part of us is always backstage.

For Simmel, the real person, hovering behind the strutting and fretting of everyday metropolitan life, is the one who feels. Feeling is the way a person gets personal. This obvious principle, he believes, has been disguised by "rationalistic platitudes that are entirely unpsychological." Foremost among these historic misunderstandings is that of Descartes, who, starting his chain of reasoning with reasons, proceeds, reason by reason, to the famous conclusion that he exists because he thinks.

Here, then, is the grand paradox that Simmel's thinking leads to:

a society of calculation is inhabited by people who need to feel to distract themselves from precisely the rational discipline on which their practical lives rely. The calculation and reserve demanded by the money economy stimulate, by way of compensation, emotional needs and a craving for excitement and sensation. Thus does the upsurge of marketplace thinking in the eighteenth century call up its opposite, romanticism, which urges us to heed the inner voice of feeling. Real life takes place in *deep* feeling, *authentic* feeling, feeling that must be protected from social impositions, feeling that was born free and longs to go native. The idea spreads that the individual *is*, above all, his or her feelings.

Feeling too vigorously expressed, however, presents a management problem. Feeling too much, or expressing it too freely, would interfere with work and duty. (You do not want to give in to grief or, having fallen in love, go about walking on air while running a lathe or balancing the books.) Romanticism must be domesticated, made to fit into the niches of life. Emotions must be contained, reserved for convenient times when they may be expressed without risk to workaday life. Emotions must refresh, not drain or disrupt. They must be disposable and, if not free, at least low-cost. We are on our way here into the society of nonstop popular culture that induces limited-liability feelings on demand—feelings that do not bind and sensations that feel like, and pass for, feelings. A society consecrated to self-interest ends up placing a premium on finding life *interesting*.

What I am arguing, following Simmel, is not that human beings suddenly began to feel, but that, in recent centuries, they came to experience, and crave, particular kinds of feelings—disposable ones. It seems that, in much of the West in the seventeenth century and accelerating thereafter, feelings became associated ever more closely with the sense of an internal, subjective life set apart from the external world. By the end of the eighteenth century, the English language was teeming with new terms to describe feelings felt to be happening

in here, within the person. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as philologist Owen Barfield pointed out, terms like *apathy*, *chagrin*, *diffidence*, *ennui*, and *homesickness* emerged, along with the phrase *the feelings*, while other terms for mental states, such as *agitation*, *constraint*, *disappointment*, *embarrassment*, and *excitement*, were relocated from the outer to the inner world. To these nouns for states of feeling were added adjectives that describe external phenomena "purely by the *effects* which they produce on human beings." Barfield's examples include *affecting*, *amusing*, *boring*, *charming*, *diverting*, *entertaining*, *enthralling*, *entrancing*, *exciting*, *fascinating*, *interesting*, and *pathetic* in its modern sense. As Barfield put it: "When a Roman spoke of events as *auspicious* or *sinister*, or when some natural object was said in the Middle Ages to be *baleful*, or *benign*, or *malign* . . . the activity was felt to emanate from the object itself. When we speak of an object or an event as *amusing*, on the contrary, we know that the process indicated by the word *amuse* takes place within ourselves."

So modernity, the age of calculation, produced a culture devoted to sentiment. Increasingly, the self-fashioning man or woman needed instructions in what to feel and how to express it. Philosophers wrote of "moral sentiments," sympathy foremost among them. Novels, indulging the taste for private feeling, were schools for sentiment. So were popular eighteenth-century British manuals advocating the arts of impression management. Feeling was plentiful but had to be disguised in public, lest (for example) laughing aloud damage one's ability to produce calculated impressions, or excessive enthusiasm jeopardize a woman's ability to protect herself. Middle-class strivers wished to cultivate self-control to improve their social standing and marriageability. Lord Chesterfield's volume of letters to his son on the arts of self-management, published posthumously in 1775, was a best-seller not only in England but in America. Novels conveyed not only advice about what to feel but the direct experience of feelings themselves: sympathy, surprise, recognition, satisfaction, pity, dread,

and suspense; along with aesthetic pleasures in phrasing, wit, poignancy, and so on. One read, in other words, in order to feel.

By the nineteenth century, some of the main contours of present-day popular culture were evident. Entertainments like the novel filtered down from the middle class to the popular majority. It was in the United States, where the money economy and democracy developed together, that Simmel's observations about calculation and feeling prove most apropos. Usable, everyday distraction required surges of feeling and high-intensity stimuli that would be generally accessible but at the same time transitory. By the early 1830s, when Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States—long before Times Square or Hollywood, before vaudeville or Al Jolson, Michael Jackson or Arnold Schwarzenegger, *USA Today* or the Internet—American culture was already sensational, emotional, melodramatic, and informal. Long before the remote control device, call waiting, cruise control, the car radio scan option, or the Apple mouse, before electricity, let alone the humble on-off switch, the United States was consecrated to comfort and convenience. Tocqueville accordingly wrote: "Democratic nations cultivate the arts that serve to render life easy in preference to those whose object is to adorn it." Artists in aristocratic societies perfected their craft while following established traditions, but in democracies, "What is generally sought in the productions of mind is easy pleasure and information without labor." What results, he added, are "many imperfect commodities" that "substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought. . . . Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. Authors will aim at rapidity of execution more than at perfection of detail. . . . There will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity. . . . The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste."

Amusements encourage people to feel in a heightened way, to revel in familiar feelings, but also to experiment with unaccustomed

ones in order to feel like somebody else without risk. The efficient production of sentiment—this has long been the essence of democratic artistry. Popular artists have the knack. Lesser ones test the waters and try to catch the wave of the moment. All of them do market research, listening for laughs and cries, looking into their audience as if into a mirror while working out their next steps. Groucho Marx wrote of his famous scoot: "I was just kidding around one day and started to walk funny. The audience liked it, so I kept it in. I would try a line and leave it in too if it got a laugh. If it didn't, I'd take it out and put in another. Pretty soon I had a character." Later, fearful that making movies insulated in a Hollywood studio had cost them their knack, the Marx brothers took a theatrical version of *A Day at the Races* out on the road. According to their publicist, Groucho's classic line "That's the most nauseating proposition I ever had" came after he had tried out *obnoxious, revolting, disgusting, offensive, repulsive, disagreeable,* and *distasteful.* "The last two of these words never got more than titters," according to the publicist. "The others elicited various degrees of ha-has. But *nauseating* drew roars. I asked Groucho why that was so. 'I don't know. I really don't care. I only know the audiences told us it was funny.' "

Tocqueville's traditional artist would have been able to say exactly why he did what he did—it was what his masters did. He belonged to a guild. His inspiration blew in from the past, not from the crowd before him. Tocqueville's democratic artist, by contrast, transmuted the popular hunger for feeling into a living manual for artwork. Cultural industries would mass-produce the results, and from a multitude of such products generate a popular culture that, given money enough and time, would come to suffuse everyday life. Thus is there a continuous upsurge from the ever-larger printings of ever more novels in the eighteenth century, to the penny press, circuses, minstrel and Wild West shows in the nineteenth, through to the Viacoms, Disneys, NBCs, and SONYs of today.

THE RISE OF THE PANOPLY

The consumption of images and sounds was an extension of the burgeoning consumption of goods. In modern society, according to Georg Simmel, a sensitive person (one senses he is describing himself) "will be overpowered and feel disorientated" by the immense spectacle of commodities. But indeed "precisely this wealth and colorfulness of over-hastened impressions is appropriate to overexcited and exhausted nerves' need for stimulation. It seems as if the modern person wishes to compensate for the one-sidedness and uniformity of what he produces within the division of labor by the increasing crowding together of heterogeneous impressions, by the increasingly hasty and colourful change in emotions."

In other words, notes Simmel's contemporary interpreter, sociologist David Frisby, "the tedium of the production process is compensated for by the artificial stimulation and amusement of consumption." One must add, since Simmel was preoccupied with the lives of men, that women at home were far less likely to be subjected to "the tedium of . . . production," but they had their own tedium to contend with.

Although present for the development of the motion picture, Simmel did not write much about images as such, except in the form of fashion, which he brilliantly understood as a declaration of both individuality and class distinction, of freedom and membership at one and the same time. Writing in 1904, he described fashion as a means "to combine . . . the tendency toward social equalization [i.e., *I look like selected others*] with the desire for individual differentiation and change [i.e., *I present to the world my unique self*]." A century ago, Simmel already grasped that fashion seized popular consciousness partly because "major, permanent, unquestioned convictions increasingly lose their force. In this way, the fleeting and changeable elements of life gain that much more free space. The break with the

past . . . increasingly concentrates consciousness upon the present. This emphasis upon the present is clearly, at the same time, an emphasis upon change."

University trendhoppers have let themselves be convinced by French philosopher-historian Michel Foucault, with his brilliantly paranoid imagination, that the defining institution of the European nineteenth century was the Panopticon, a never-built prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in order to impose total surveillance on every waking and sleeping moment of a prisoner's life. But Simmel was more perceptive. The heart of modernity was not the Panopticon but the panoply of appearances that emerged in everyday life. He might have deployed this concept to look at the spectacle of images that already filled public spaces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the posters and billboards conspicuously adorning the walls and vacant lots of great cities, the imagistic advertisements, the shop windows with their mannequins, the fabulous electrified signs and department store displays, the multiple sources of light and shades of color, the halftones and lithographs swarming through newspapers and magazines, all meant to be quickly superseded by new, often gaudier, and more elaborate versions. Not to mention the street noises of horses, wagons, cars, children playing, musicians, and hawkers all crowding into earshot with announcements of their existence, purpose, and worth.

This sensory uproar was by no means new. A century earlier, in 1805–6, William Wordsworth heard London's "thickening hubbub" and was struck, even shocked, by the sight and sound of "pleasure whirl[ing] about incessantly," by street shows and the city's display of images, which, while composed without "subtlest craft," helped overcome human "weakness":

> Here files of ballads dangle from dead walls;
> Advertisements, of giant-size, from high
> Press forward, in all colours. . . .

Wordsworth was perhaps the first modern poet to react viscerally to the posting of sign upon sign, the clamoring profusion of

> those sights that ape
> The absolute presence of reality. . . .
> . . . imitations, fondly made in plain
> Confession of man's weakness and his loves.

By Simmel's time, the clamoring confusion of posters had become a commonplace. The street shows were in decline, but the city at night had become a spectacle unto itself, for the streets were now electrified with the lamps and signs, the bright displays that promised what Theodore Dreiser called "artificial fires of merriment, the rush of profit-seeking trade, and pleasure-selling amusements," all inspiring "the soul of the toiler" to declare, " 'I shall soon be free. . . . The theatre, the halls, the parties, the ways of rest and the paths of song—these are mine in the night.' "

This vivid commotion of illuminations, images, and sounds was, in today's e-business jargon, a "push technology." The images entered into your perceptual field whether you wanted them around or not—powered, in a sense, by your own legs. Traditional signs offered useful information (repair your shoes here, buy your pork there), but the gaudier, more colossal electric displays heightened the sensational impact without adding information. To come into contact with them, you did not have to be a flâneur, Charles Baudelaire's "passionate spectator," the strolling man-about-town freed from the burdens of routine, no slave to clocks, blessed with all the time in the world to devote to the spectacle of the city. Working women and men too welcomed their strolls through the alluring streets, coming upon transitory and fragmentary surprises. The cascading images incessantly invited people to feel sensations that might not be safe or convenient in the face of flesh-and-blood human beings, who might require reciprocal relationships. Unlike palpable

human beings, images offered stimuli without making demands. Strangely impersonal, displayed indifferently for everyone who might cross their path, they required nothing much—a momentary notice, a whiff of mood, a passing fancy. They stimulated sensation but required no commitment. Encountering the profusion of signs, each clamoring for attention amid the clutter of other signs, big-city dwellers learned to take for granted the gap between the present image (the cigarette with its smoke ring) and the absent, though intimated, reality (the pleasure of filled lungs).

Writers and artists were sometimes impressed, sometimes appalled by the new concentrations of dazzle, like New York's Times Square and the center of Paris, where neon lights were first put to large-scale use. The giddy illuminations of night life sometimes jarred intellectuals, who were prone to experience the panoramic spectacle, at least at times, as a loud, attention-seizing alternative to an idealized contemplative stillness. Critics of capitalist society saw the spectacle of neon, billboards, and night-lit monuments as tricky "compensations" for the burdens of exploitation—as Siegfried Kracauer put it with romantic overkill, "façades of light . . . to banish the dread of the night. . . . a flashing protest against the darkness of our existence, a protest of the thirst for life." Such critiques did not find much resonance in a bedazzled populace. The city's hearts of brightness were staggering crowd-pleasers.

The entrepreneurs who erected these thrilling displays certainly hoped to enchant those multitudes with delirious distractions. When the lights and marquees were lit, one editorial booster wrote in 1904, Broadway was "a continuous vaudeville that is worth many times the 'price of admission'—especially as no admission price is asked." O. J. Gude—an early "broker of commercial light" who first called Broadway "the Great White Way," invented the permanent signboard, and installed the first giant electric signs in Times Square—referred to his productions in 1912 as a "phantasmagoria of . . . lights and electric

signs." In the same year, an advertising journal that took its name, *Signs of the Times*, with a certain ironic amusement, from millennial zealots, declared: "Electrical advertising is a *picture* medium. Moreover, it is a *color* medium; still, again, electrical advertising is a medium of motion, of action, *of life, of light*, of compulsory attraction."

It was indeed in hopes of "compulsory attraction" that entrepreneurs of the public spectacle in New York City erected such imposing displays as a forty-five-foot-long electric Heinz pickle at Madison Square in 1900 and an illuminated Roman chariot race seventy-two feet high and nine hundred feet wide on top of a Broadway hotel in 1910. But the hope that any installation would become a "compulsory attraction" was routinely disappointed. Amid a clutter of signs, each beckoning in its own electric way, a particular sign might stimulate a shiver of enchantment, a tickle of pleasure, or a recoil of annoyance or bewilderment—a little burst of feeling—followed by a fleeting afterglow before fading, leaving, if the advertiser was lucky, a fitful remembrance of feeling touched by a trace of an image. Once the sensation passed, however, the passerby would resume his passage through the city in a state of readiness—or blaséness.

At times, there were purposive collective spectacles, too: demonstrations, parades, and, in revolutionary times, riots, and the placards, leaflets, effigies, torches, papier-mâché figures that accompanied them. As much as time permitted, men and women asserted the right to set their mood and stepped out—to saloon, club, dance hall, arcade, circus, amusement park, burlesque house, nickelodeon, vaudeville show, or "legitimate" theater.

And the public panoply had its private equivalents. By the late nineteenth century, family photographs reposed on shelves, mantels, and pianos, and not only in the homes of the prosperous. As the family shrank to nuclear scale, photographs extended it in time and space, ushering absent members into the intimate world of the here and now—once more, with feeling. Homes turned into private

shrines of visual icons. Magic became domestic; one composed one's own personal spectacle.

Increasingly there were also images from beyond the family circle, the descendants of the paintings, maps, prints, and engravings of Vermeer's Dutch burghers, alongside crosses and flags, depictions of the Messiah, saints, heroes, and ancestors. Augmenting these were the images and texts delivered to the house at regular intervals: the newspapers, magazines, catalogs, sheet (and later recorded) music, and books, their numbers rising throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If income permitted, one "took" a periodical, a regular and familiar package of image and text that one liked because one approved of its formula, trusting the packagers to deliver approximately the right look, thoughts, and feelings, approving their taste, sharing their interests and curiosities, and through their formulas gaining low-risk access to a bountiful world. As during a walk down a familiar street, there might be surprises, too. Breaking with the imperatives of the time clock, one gambled—at low stakes. What would one find in this issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*? What adventure would beckon in this month's *National Geographic*? The novelty was finite; the material was new but not *too* new. The magazine would always be a limited liability experience. If it didn't pan out this month, one could await the next issue or subscribe to another publication with a more appealing package.

Newspapers and most magazines promised firm information, usable facts, and, at the most exalted level, knowledge, a state of comprehension. But the wonder of communications was that the carriers of information did not simply transmit facts or ideology. They occasioned a human experience—a sense of connection to the world. In a complex society, dispersed individuals had to be aware of what was going on outside their immediate milieux, in order to coordinate their activities. Thus they craved information. But this information was not pure; it arrived certified by celebrities, jostling with gossip, and, above all, accompanied by emotions. To learn what was going

on elsewhere entailed some sort of mental excitement: the *wow!* of salaciousness, the *aha!* of mastery, the *click* of understanding, the *what?* of astonishment.

So not only were the factual media informative; they were diverting. The first mass newspapers, the penny press of the 1830s, as Neal Gabler has pointed out, had their origins in a working-class entertainment tradition that was already thriving.

> For a constituency being conditioned by trashy crime pamphlets, gory novels and overwrought melodramas, news was simply the most exciting, most entertaining content a paper could offer, especially when it was skewed, as it invariably was in the penny press, to the most sensational stories. In fact, one might even say that the masters of the penny press *invented* the concept of news because it was the best way to sell their papers in an entertainment environment.

Cultivating the human interest story, newspapers could be sensational yet newsy, realistic yet emotion-inspiring, vividly personal yet general in their import. They were diversions that didn't strictly divert. Or rather, they distracted readers from their immediate environs by refusing to distract them from some larger world. They cultivated curiosity, and curiosity corralled facts. Thanks to such means of delivery, the spirit of information rode high.

The money economy was accompanied by an all-embracing swirl of modernity: investments, capital flows, migrations, turnovers of taste, style, fashion, and opinion. What Simmel called "the modern soul that is so much more unstable" had a high psychic metabolism. Endlessly it regenerated boredom. "A faint sense of tension and vague longing," a "secret restlessness," a "helpless urgency" that "originates in the bustle and excitement of modern life"—all this, Simmel wrote, "impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities." Even at

home, the dislodged soul needed constant replenishment, a ceaseless, streaming importation of content to play with, reflect upon, or learn from. A taste for the new ran deep, as did the economic payoff, for superficiality, replaceability, and the itch to keep up with the Joneses were good for production.

Excitements and analgesics multiplied. Modern people, led by Americans, came to expect the comfort and convenience of home access. The standard array of sensation machines grew. What could more reliably cater to the volatile spirit, delivering riffs and squirts of emotion, instructions, and pleasures? New communication technologies spurred hungers by provisionally satisfying them, but as Marx had anticipated, no sooner had old needs been satisfied than new ones opened up. Entrepreneurs continually searched for the next household delivery system to feed unappeasable hungers.

For brevity's sake, I am compressing a tangled history, downplaying national differences, and exaggerating the uniformity of a process that proceeded—is still proceeding—in fits and starts. Still, the main direction has been clear enough. After newspapers and magazines came commercial radio. As costs fell, technologies that had at first been the province of the rich drifted into the middle class and then, within surprisingly few years, crossed over to the majority. With television and its auxiliaries, what had been an exclusive right to luxuriate passed into a general right to connect—and with cable, the right to connect to a channel of your own liking, the majority be damned.

The thirst for images, for music, for reverberations from the world of public affairs could be satisfied as fast as mail could be delivered and vacuum tubes warmed up. But availability did not quench the thirst for images and sounds. To the contrary: the more technologies, the more images and sounds they could carry, the greater the thirst—and the desire to please one's private self. Boredom was a crime against plenitude. Who could say, "Stop, I have enough"? Technology came to the aid of fragmented tastes. Media

conglomerates spun out multiple channels for distinct demographic niches. Why not establish your own mood, create your personalized top ten from the ever-expanding menu of entertainment and information that flows through the living room? Why stop at the living room? Why not pipe the bounty into the bedroom? Yet always there is the threat of tedium and the persistent shrug. A century after Georg Simmel wrote about "nurseries of cynicism," we find them in the household, where the bountiful screen offers access indiscriminately to an episode of fictional domestic anguish, a tennis match, a sports utility vehicle driving over a mountain, a soccer score, a salad preparation, an animal cartoon, a futurist dystopia, a murder headline, a joke, a poker-faced policeman, a nude, a hurricane victim shivering in the cold, a jewelry advertisement . . .

In George Orwell's classic *1984*, Big Brother was the ultimate coercive broadcaster, the sole controller of propaganda. But Big Brother had no chance against niche media and personal choice. In the West, at least, he was no more than a hollow bogeyman. In the widening torrent available to all-consuming humanity, you rode your own current. Why not revel in the pursuit of such happiness? Why fear engulfment?

NOMADICITY

Increasingly, you could carry your private current anywhere. The home entertainment center was, after all, a luxury for which you had to confine yourself. Images and manufactured sounds came home but you had to be home to greet them. So why not render your private amusements portable? Why not, like Pascal's well-served if pitiable monarch, have it all wherever and whenever you like?

Self-sufficiency, that most tempting and expansive of modern motifs, feels like a sort of liberation—until it becomes banal and we have need of the next liberation. People gravitate toward portability and miniaturization—each a kind of freedom—in everyday life. The

mountaineer's backpack evolved into the hippie traveler's aluminum-framed pack, which in turn evolved into the contemporary frameless version, which in turn gave rise to the utilitarian but waistline-disturbing fanny pack, the bulky monster sticking out horizontally, and the trim designer variety that is, in effect, a purse that leaves the hands free. Portable nourishment is another sign of the nomadic thrust toward self-sufficiency: the Hershey bar (1894), the ice-cream cone (1904), Life Savers (1913), trail mix (1970s), the portable water bottle (1990s). The tendency has been toward performing as many functions as possible in the course of one's movements—"multitasking"—so that as we move, new accessories become mandatory. The indented tray inside the glove compartment and the cup holder next to the front seat have become standard equipment.

Not only must material provisions be available on demand; so must sustenance for the senses, not least the ears. After the portable battery-powered radio, the car radio, and the transistorized radio, the logic of individualism pointed toward that exemplary little machine for musical transport, Sony's Walkman. The theme is well enunciated in a London billboard of 2001 that does not even bother to indicate any particular product: "Give today a soundtrack."

The Walkman story shows how the convenience of a single powerful man could generate a marketing triumph. Before a transoceanic flight in 1979, Sony chairman Masaru Ibuka asked company engineers to create a stereo music player so he could hear classical favorites of his choice. Airlines already provided passengers with earphones and canned musical loops, but Ibuka did not want anyone overriding his personal taste, so Sony engineers connected headphones to an advanced tape recorder for him. Ibuka was delighted with the results, and his partner Akio Morita realized that this jury-rigged contraption might have sales potential among teenagers, who were already accustomed to carrying portable radios. The Walkman was born. What had begun as a toy for Ibuka was promptly sold to consumers less accustomed to indulging their personal whims.

Supply proceeded to trigger demand. By the end of 1998, without much advertising, Sony had sold almost 250 million Walkmen worldwide, not to mention the Discmen and all the specialized spinoff players for joggers, swimmers, and skiers.

Throughout the twentieth century, supply and demand looped together in an unceasing Möbius strip, technology always increasing the radius of contact: the pay phone, car radio, battery-powered radio, transistor radio, remote-accessible answering machine, fax machine, car phone, laptop computer, Walkman, airplane and train phone, portable CD player, beeper, mobile phone, Palm Pilot, Internet access, PCD, GPD, and so on ad acronym. Once "interactivity" by machine became feasible, the hallmark of so many communication inventions was *nomadicity*, which, according to the Internet pioneer who coined the term, "means that wherever and whenever we move around, the underlying system always knows who we are, where we are, and what services we need." Actually, not *we* so much as *I*, for more and more often the contemporary nomad travels alone, detribalized—or rather, in the company of that curious modern tribe each of whose members seeks to travel alone while being technologically connected to others. Equipped for accessibility, he may encroach upon the right of others to control their own private space: the battery-powered boom box blaring music or narrating a ball game (even the one taking place before one's eyes in the stadium itself); the cell phone trilling during the play or the concert; the caller shouting into his phone on the train, in the restaurant, at the park, or on the street.

Charles Baudelaire once lamented: "They left one right out of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen: the right to leave." Now, for hours each day, the right to leave is secure, though doubtless not in the way Baudelaire had in mind. In fact, the right to leave has merged with the right to be *somewhere else*. For a growing proportion of the population, and for a growing number of hours per day, you can, after a fashion, break the limits of space, choosing from your private menu of activities, amusements, and contacts. You are

not exactly alone, because you are with others, their music, their games, their voices. Commuting or washing the floors, you are a movable node, never wholly abandoned. Even in extremis—but who could have imagined such extremity?—your voice can reach out to a loved one from the inferno of the World Trade Center about to collapse or the cabin of a hijacked plane. The horrific emergencies of September 11, 2001, put to extraordinary ends what have become the ordinary means to overcome distance.

How shall we understand the appeal of these ordinary means? Consider the humdrum experience of waiting for a bus, which Jean-Paul Sartre took as a metaphor for modern alienation. Sartre called this ordinary condition *serialization*, by which he meant losing one's individuality and being reduced to a function—waiting. The immobilized man on line cannot pursue his own ends because he has lost control of his time in favor of the bus company's schedule, the pileup of fellow travelers, the traffic that has delayed the bus. He is the creature of a routine that demands self-suppression. Now imagine this man on line equipped with a personal stereo. His ears project him, at least partially, elsewhere—or rather, elsewhere enters him, corporeal, immediate, intimate. He stands in the line but leaves it behind for a chosen communion. He blocks out unwanted contact. Now he is, paradoxically, an individual because he has company—music, familiar music at that. He feels little spurts of emotion. Music rubs up against him, gets inside him. He nods along with the beat. Against the pressures of work and environment—even against his own unpleasant obsessions—he has a compensation: he has enveloped himself in a sort of mobile bubble. He has—to quote from Walkmanned Londoners interviewed in one study—"shut everything out" and "squashed thoughts." The music, turned up loud enough to drown out ambient noise, "takes over his senses." "It's like living in a movie." Availing himself of "a life-support machine," he has taken charge of his mood.

Now imagine this man still in line or trapped in some other

serialized reality—in an elevator, on the train, or stuck in a traffic jam—and equip him with escape implements in the form of today's proliferating mobile equipment: the cellular phone, the Game Boy, the personal communication system with text messaging and Internet access, feeding him sports scores and stock quotes, eventually cartoons, jokes, slot machines, card games, and pornographic images, asking him at all hours: "Where would you like to go?" Take charge of your mood! Possessing an "arsenal of mobile technology," he comes to feel that he has the right to them. He is, to some degree, shielded from urban fear.

Some admirers of our present-day electronic efflorescence are carried away with promises of the technological sublime. One recent enthusiast heralds *techgnosis*. But nomadic access raised to the level of gods and angels rings sublimely ridiculous. Usually, the very point of dot-communion is banality. Through the most mundane act of e-mailing about the weather or instant-messaging a "buddy" about nothing at all except that you're stuck in a boring lecture, or that you exist and affirm the other's existence ("Whassup?" "Not much"), or phoning your loved one from the air to report that your plane is late or from the street to report that you are just now emerging from the subway, you have, in a sense, spun off a filament of yourself to conduct your business, secure your network, greet your friend, discharge your duty, arrange your pleasure. Intellectuals may scoff, but it is this relatively trivial mercy that most people in a consumerist culture seek much of the time.

But the freedom to be even incidentally connected is not uncomplicated. It goes with being incidentally accessible, which amounts to being on call and interruptible everywhere by your boss, your nurse, your patient, your anxious parent, your client, your stockbroker, your baby-sitter, as well as your friend whose voice, even electronically, you welcome even if you have just seen each other face-to-face. Friendship makes intrusion welcome—perhaps that is part of its definition—and nomadicity, no question, is a boon to

certain kinds of friendship. In a suburb where nothing seems to happen, *something* can happen—again and again. You can send along jokes, photos, shopping recommendations, references smart and dumb. It was probably America Online's "buddy lists" for instant messaging that made that huge Internet portal so popular.

Wireless handheld devices with Internet access carry the instantaneous buddy principle out into public space. Having been launched in Japan with considerable success, they are galloping through the United States and Europe. Sony's mobile Internet device, no doubt to be called Webman, is set to go into American circulation shortly. "We believe that the mobile terminal will be a very . . . strategic product for Sony," the company's president, Kunitake Ando, told the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. "Just like we created a Walkman culture, we'll have a sort of mobile culture," he said, adding that sooner or later Sony was planning to pipe on-line music and even movies through a new generation of mobile phones. Such prognostications may be hype, but Sony's have a way of turning out accurate.

At this writing, though, the principle of instantaneous access is most firmly at work with nomad-friendly mobile phones. In the year 2000, 53 percent of Americans owned mobile phones, up from 24 percent in 1995. So did 63 percent of British adults, about as many as in Japan though not so many as in Italy, Sweden, and Finland. Their diffusion rate is tremendous, comparable to television's, exceeding that of telephones, radios, and VCRs, and more visible in public, of course, than any of those.

The mobile phone radically transforms the soundscape. Like the servant's bell, its chime or ditty is a summons, but also a claim that you have the right to conduct your business willy-nilly wherever you are, whether you're a day-trader in New York or a Hong Kong youngster chatting away in a subway car (that city has wired its tunnels). Private practices open out into public spaces. So if the Webbed-up, wired, or wirelessed nomad rarely gets to relish

full-bodied freedom, there is still the pleasure of knowing one is wanted *right now*.

The new technonomadicity comes with this paradox: the fully-equipped nomad, seeking freedom of access at will, becomes freely accessible to other people's wills. The sender also receives. The potential for being intruded upon spurs technological fixes; with caller ID, for example, you can block calls from old boyfriends, or screen calls to see who wants contact, or defer contact by dumping a call into voicemail. As in a military arms race, the dialectic of offense and defense ratchets up. There is a second paradox: those who hope to control their moods when they go out in public find themselves invaded by alien noises. In theaters, concerts, conferences, parks, and churches, the trill of the cell phone is not an angelic visitation. The commons explodes with private signals. Again, the defense also improves. Theaters announce, before the curtain goes up, that ringers should be turned off—with uneven success. Devices to block mobile phones are already being marketed to restaurants and theater owners.

So communication comes at a price—not just the monetary price, which falls year after year; not just the invasion of solitude; no, the third inevitable price of nomadicity is surveillance. This is not just the risk of being overheard in a public place. After all, the mobile phoner who wishes to preserve privacy in the face of proximity can still do so, for the new devices amplify the lowered human voice with wondrous fidelity. But cellular conversations are peculiarly capable of being intercepted, not only by public agencies but by interested private parties, whether by accident or deliberately.

Still, the new nomad, intent on living out a dream of personal power, seems willing to pay the price. The omnicommunicative utopia appeals to a centuries-old passion to control one's circumstances without renouncing social bonds. This is the version of freedom that drives the civilization that American (but not only American)

enterprise and power carry to the ends of the earth. It is an omnivorous freedom, freedom to behold, to seek distraction, to seek distraction *from* distraction (in T. S. Eliot's words), to enjoy one's rootlessness, to relish the evanescent. But as the Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen once wrote, "Where do all these highways go now that we are free?"

SOUNDTRACKING

The new nomad may not have bargained on finding himself so frequently prey to interruption. Not only does his cell phone trill when he may not find it so welcome, but the common world is increasingly soundtracked. Whatever the rhetoric of networked individualism, individuals are not the only communicators in public. Institutions routinely use sound to orchestrate a collective mood, to "brand" space, exploiting the fact that we can choose not to see far more easily than we can choose not to hear. Looking away from a screen may be psychologically difficult, but it can be done: you crane your head or simply walk away. But the ear is less discriminating than the eye. Human beings lack earlids. Your head need not be cocked toward a sound source for the sound to command your attention.

Most of the soundscape is not summoned up by junior Nietzsches just as they like. It is administered. Now, imposed sound is not necessarily noxious. When the community at large caters the soundsurround, few people within earshot experience it as an imposition. Performers at fairs, on street corners or subway station platforms, festivals in public parks, brass bands in parades, street dances, even boom boxes on beaches or stoops—these are, in varying degrees, felt to be "expressions of the community." Living in a heavily Appalachian neighborhood in Chicago in the mid-1960s, I could follow the same country-western song down the block as it wafted out of window after window, all the apartments tuned to the same radio station.

But increasingly, our desire for diversion is appropriated, packaged, and radiated back at us by an organization that has figured out how to dovetail our desire with its desire to profit from the pleasure principle. Access to the popular ear is purchased. The capacity to make oneself heard—in other words, the capacity to interrupt—becomes a dimension of social power. Mall shops and restaurants get to entertain—or exercise sonic power over—everyone within earshot. Moods have monetary value. Organizing moods is good business. And so, in Milan Kundera's words, "The acoustic image of ecstasy has become the everyday decor of our lassitude." Bathed in the "trivialized ecstasy" of public soundtracks, we are prompted to feel as the music commands us to feel.

Industry was the first institution to be soundtracked. In 1937, industrial psychologists in Great Britain proposed (in a report to the British Industrial Health Research Board titled *Fatigue and Boredom in Repetitive Work*) that music had charms to soothe the savage worker at his repetitive job when he might otherwise be absent, or going home early, or goofing off, or otherwise heeding an unorchestrated drummer. During World War II, the BBC heightened productivity in arms factories with radio programs like *Music While You Work*. Americans were not far behind, piping music into war plants and shipyards beginning in 1942. Mood management tested in war proved no less useful in peace. Convinced that the methods of sonic satisfaction had proved themselves, private industry began to avail itself of the output of the Muzak Corporation. "By 1946," according to communications scholars Simon C. Jones and Thomas G. Schumacher, "Muzak was installed in the workplaces of most major American firms, with separate programs for offices and factories." Muzak researchers went beyond the canning of comforting strains; they developed the principle of "stimulus progression," having found that a staged sequence of tunes, gradually boosting tempo, rhythm, and orchestra size on a scale from 1 ("slow and

mellow") to 5 ("bright and upbeat"), boosted productivity. Psychological lifts could be scientifically programmed. However tedious the work, the music was smooth, for the original recordings had been cleansed of any lurches of rhythm or melody. This was domesticated music, laced with "a hint of nostalgia and fantasy but contained within a rational, orderly structure," its "stylistic regularity and harmonic simplicity" suggesting a "secure, private, domestic world that signifies the comfort and security of home." If you could not be coaxed to "whistle while you work," the sound system would do the whistling for you.

If music to work by, why not music to shop by or wait by? In the 1950s, the Muzak Corporation began to orchestrate for retail establishments, aiming to induce a buying mood. Muzak filled supermarkets with languorous rhythms, meant to relax shoppers and coax them into spending more time in the aisles. Other sequences built up the rhythms, the volume inching up, producing psychic tension—to be relieved by pulling something off the shelves. By the 1980s, scarcely a public space lacked a soundtrack: shops, malls, airports, airplanes, cruise ships, stadiums, hospitals, restaurants, doctors' and dentists' offices, gyms, banks, hotel lobbies, theme parks, elevators, bathrooms, waiting rooms of all kinds. An airliner now signaled arrival, contact with the mother-pod, by locking into its soundtrack. Airports spawned the musical subgenre of "ambient sound," known derisively as "elevator music," and half mocked, half indulged in the contemporary postmodernist manner by the droll Brian Eno in a series of records called "Music for Airports."

Meanwhile, shops catering to the young led a shift to so-called foreground music—sounds promoting an upbeat atmosphere in an age when electrified music is normal, and normally loud. Muzak and other corporations now bounce signals off extraterrestrial satellites to beam "storecasting" music to particular "consumption environments" for distinct demographic groups, even programmed for specific times of day. At clothing and restaurant chains, malls, and (of course) music stores catering to a youthful clientele, the sound pulsates loudest, often accompanied by music video screens. Even the network news has its theme songs, broadcasting a sense of urgency along with reliability. Restaurants that "skew" older, as the marketers say, are partial to the relaxed piano tinkles of the Windham Hill label, which are to the more rarefied palettes of upscale baby boomers what Mantovani's cloying strings were to their down-market aunts and uncles. But the auditory wraparound is not always popular with customers, let alone staff. A New York Pottery Barn employee tells me he winces at the pounding of the soundtrack operating nonstop in his department. Still, it must not be an automatic irritant that at many a metropolitan restaurant or bar catering to younger-than-forty clientele the acoustics are managed so as to amplify the roar and enforce the sense that this is where things are happening. (At the same time, *buzz* has become the commonplace term for public repute.) Meanwhile, other restaurants market themselves to the middle-aged by installing acoustic baffles, turning down the ambient sound to make conversation more discernible to ears that have lost acuity, the process often speeded along by years of attending concerts in front of gigantic speakers. To every niche, a sound.

In Europe, as in the United States, wraparound sound has become a normal accompaniment to everyday life. The Beatles' "Let It Be" resounds from a Swissair flight. At a Thai restaurant in Berlin, the soundtrack features "Over the Rainbow." Evidently, many people prefer mood music, however unsubtle, to what would otherwise be their own private improvisations. At worst, they are indifferent. "Perhaps," as J. Bottum writes, "it was Hollywood that taught us to expect life to come with background music, a constant melodic commentary on the movie of our lives." The Muzak Corporation and its imitators are thoughtful enough to provide variety, so that it never seems that Big Brother or the Wizard of Noise is in charge. So, passing through the world, modern individuals hear a corporate-produced pastiche. We hear it, in Bottum's words, "in snippets, as we cross from

one stereo zone to another—the radio suddenly blaring out as the car starts up, the jukebox suddenly cut off as the door to the diner closes. . . . We've all been damned to a perpetual quarter-final round of *Name That Tune.*"

Yet the private resists the public in this realm as well, fighting technology with technology. Wired, nomadic individuals play defense against institutional auditory control, drowning out the public soundtrack with their own Walkman or Discman, and while it would be silly to see them as heroes of a sonic class struggle, fighting back against the capitalist appropriation of the soundscape, the headphones surely do screen out unwelcome noise by substituting a personal soundtrack. In fact, they protect not only from Muzak and woofer-heavy hip-hop car stereos passing by but from miscellaneous motors, truck, bus, airplane, and motorcycle engines, honking horns, cracked mufflers, sirens, chain saws, and pneumatic drills—not to mention the steady drones, rumbles, whirrs, and hums emitted by fluorescent lights, refrigerators, heaters, computers, fans, air conditioners, microwave ovens, dial tones, and the rest of the apparatus of everyday electrified life. In an age of scattered urban din, the rhythmic pulsation of hip-hop may be, for its partisans, the loud intrusion that erases the minor rackets. The upbeat, tweeter-heavy, violin-drenched soundtrack may be electricity's shelter—against electricity itself.

PAYING, AND PAYING FOR, ATTENTION

A teenager in a Berkeley theater, chatting amiably with her friend during the movie, growls at a complaining patron: "What's the matter, man? It's only a movie!" At a multiplex in Greenwich Village, a woman on her cell phone during the trailer insists, "I want to see this movie just as much as you do!" No matter that theaters run "Please let us know if anything interferes with your enjoyment of this show" announcements along with the popcorn and soft drink

promotions before the feature. In recent years, I've heard a baby cry at a classical concert (and the usher refuse to tell the mother to tend to her child outside). I've heard mobile phones go off in the middle of plays, though signs urge customers to turn off their phones, beepers, and other electronic equipment, and announcements to that effect are made. I've heard phones trill in seminar rooms, lecture halls, libraries and in the otherwise hushed galleries of museums. Public life is a place where private transactions go on—this is the assumption. Private life in public converges with public life in private. For growing numbers of people, the world is a multiplex, chock-full of electronics: an arcade of amusements.

It is easy to cast a rosy glow over the sacrosanctness of private space, yet even spaces that are literally sanctified are seldom places of unswerving attention. I once attended a Christmas Eve mass in Florence and, standing in the back, was startled to hear the fairly continuous rumble of Italians gossiping. During much of theatrical history, audiences have chatted, yelled, and otherwise expressed themselves as vigorously as they dared. Although Shakespeare's Elizabethan audiences were probably attentive—at least judging from the fact that the most frequent complaints about disturbing noises during performances refer to nutcracking—antebellum Americans were not. The folks in the balcony frequently made their displeasure known by pelting both the actors and the fancy people below with pennies, rotten fruit, eggs, apples, nuts, and gingerbread. In 1832, the English traveler Frances Trollope observed at a theater in Cincinnati "coatless men with their sleeves rolled up, incessantly spitting, reeking 'of onions and whiskey.' " She enjoyed the Shakespeare but abhorred the "perpetual" noises. Crowds often demanded instant encores and chimed in to recite long stretches of dialogue they had committed to memory. A New York journalist found the cheers and jeers of theater crowds a "merry and riotous chorus," adding that "compared with the performances in the audience, the ranting and bellowing and spasmodic galvanism of the actors on the stage are quite tame

and commonplace." A French reporter attending a Shakespeare performance in California in 1851 noted that "the more [the spectators] like a play, the louder they whistle, and when a San Francisco audience bursts into shrill whistles and savage yells, you may be sure they are in raptures of joy." On occasion, members of the audience jumped onto the stage to examine the props. In Albany, a canal boatman screamed at Iago, "You damned lying scoundrel, I would like to get hold of you after the show and wring your infernal neck!"

Intellectuals cherish the act of attention, believing that attention is not something that happens to you but something you undertake. You contemplate, or immerse yourself and experience a sort of communion, whether with nature or a work of art. You actively *attend* to it. In this spirit, even the humble movie theater ought to be a sort of sacralized space for connection and concentration, not an amplified jukebox with up-tempo music and Hollywood trivia quizzes to fill the time before trailers.

The art historian Jonathan Crary maintains that the act of attention acquired fresh importance and virtue toward the end of the nineteenth century. It was then that what had been more or less a common culture broke in half. The great temples of culture—the opera, the symphony, the grand museums—insisted on decorum so that the act of spiritual elevation could take place uninterrupted. Elevated people wanted attention to be paid; indeed, you demonstrated your elevation *by* paying attention. The working classes moved to vaudeville, burlesque, dance halls, pool halls, and later nickelodeons. Their neighborhood movie theaters were more raucous than those of the middle class. As the high arts demanded sustained attention, psychologists began to treat inattention as a flaw. Attention was associated with willpower, craft, and love. Without attention, "the bringing of the consciousness to a focus in some special direction," warned a British psychologist in 1886, "meaningless reverie will take the place of coherent thought." A German psychologist wrote in 1893

that without the capacity for attention, "consciousness would be at the mercy of external impressions . . . thinking would be made impossible by the noisiness of our surroundings." Modern distraction, then, so frequently decried, "was *not* a disruption of stable or 'natural' kinds of sustained" perception but "an *effect*, and in many cases a constituent element, of the many attempts" to make people pay attention. People were not naturally attentive but became so. Amid the everyday buzz of what William James called "the stream of consciousness," attention was an interlude of concentration seized from an everyday life of "permanent low-level attentiveness," itself a reaction to the "relentless colonization of 'free' or leisure time."

Intellectuals, who love to cultivate attention and do it for a living, have long been indignant about intrusions upon their solitude and communion. If it wasn't the locomotive piercing the silence of the bucolic idyll, it was the menace of urban chaos: the turmoil of horse-drawn carriages, the mud, the excrement of horses, not to mention the neon, the flamboyant designs and banner headlines, the intrusive photos and garish posters of the yellow press, which in 1890 occasioned the first legal defense of the right to privacy. What the clutter of advertising did to the urban scene, billboards did to the surrounding countryside. Already more than a century ago, we were on our way to the contemporary sense of supersaturation—the overflow that seems to pour out of an overfilled atmosphere of signs and signals, generating grumpy reactions to "information overload."

But for all the refinement of their reactions, intellectuals have been paying attention, though not necessarily as the cultural industry intends. And attention is precisely the commodity that advertisers buy. "Eyeballs" and "impressions" are what the proprietors of media sell—what all the television and radio stations, billboard owners, and Internet sites market to advertisers. No space today is safe. Ads are placed on the backs of airplane seats, at eyeball height over urinals, on the backs of stall doors in women's bathrooms. In 2000, ABC

installed motion-sensitive talking ads in a thousand public urinals in New York and Los Angeles to promote a new sitcom. Anyone with a screen or a surface wants to rent it out—the side of a bus or a gas pump, the top and sides of a taxi, even its hubcaps.

And today, you need not step out of doors to be poked and prodded by corporate sales bureaus, for there are the push technologies of phone solicitations, now frequently mechanized to improve the efficiency of the callers. (Answer the phone at your peril between 6 and 7 P.M., but no time is safe.) The stars of ABC's fall 2000 season called random numbers to leave messages about the new shows on answering machines. There are the banner and pop-up ads on the Internet, increasingly wiggly and obtrusive—though users have learned to ignore even these, occasioning trouble for Internet finance. There are ads on rented videos, on sports scoreboards and sports equipment, and—in the form of product placement—in movies and TV shows. My New York University identification card carries an advertisement from AT&T. This is not to mention the theme songs and jingles that aim to attach themselves to everyday consciousness like replicable viruses.

In fact, the ironic challenge for all cultural entrepreneurs, all advertisers, studios, movie and music distributors, publishing companies, newspapers, magazines, toy companies, television networks, Internet providers, and so on is to "break through the clutter." But of course the clutter is not a force of nature; it is an artifact of the frenzy of competition. The clutter consists of nothing but the sum of all prior attempts to break through the clutter. So the clutter of images and manufactured sounds is the engine that drives ads into hitherto virgin spaces.

Where is the commercial presence *not* taken for granted? Eight million students in the United States and Canada attend schools whose administrations accept free TV sets from Channel One on the condition that the students watch its daily news broadcasts, complete with youth-targeted commercials. A company called YouthStream

posts advertisement boards in 7,200 high school locker rooms, reaching (according to the company's promotions) some 70 percent of American high school students. Company hype about the merits of public advertising to children is extravagant. Consider, for example, this rapturous promise from Mike Searles, former president of Kids-R-Us, a children's clothing chain: "If you own this child at an early age, you can own this child for years to come. Companies are saying, 'Hey, I want to own the kid younger and younger.' "

Branding—of companies, not of cattle—is the *cri du jour* in marketing and public relations, but it is more than that. It is integral to a way of life. Many kids want to be "owned," cheerfully trading in one set of "owners" for others as they grow up. When companies speak of branding, they mean two things: landing a symbol in front of you repeatedly and in multiple venues, hoping to attract attention, and building a ladder in the imagination from attention to belief (Prudential is rock-solid; Coke, effervescent; Apple, cool). The magic of imaginative association is nothing new; the practice of hiring celebrities to infuse goods with meaning and stoke up desire for them ballooned in the course of the twentieth century. To these testimonials have been added the symbols and logos, the typographies and labels, the long-playing theme ads and public relations campaigns that establish "corporate identity," radiating a feeling about a company's style, offering a "unique selling proposition" that links a company to a mood and a social type.

On signs, T-shirts, caps, coffee mugs, key chains, shopping bags, and posters, in shops, private and public museums, arenas, theaters, and tourist sites, branding is now normal. Companies invest grandly in state-of-the-art designers to acquire the right logos, for in a prosperous society people have so much time to pay attention and so much discretionary income with which to indulge their desires that branding rewards investment. But the most extraordinary thing is the extent to which branding is voluntary, even enthusiastic, a fashion statement of affiliation. Labels affirm membership. The United

States has reached an unprecedented degree of brand saturation, so many are the volunteers ready and eager to pay for the privilege of displaying their logos in public. In the 1930s, the down-and-out felt humiliated when compelled to wear sandwich boards to make ends meet, but children today gladly turn themselves into walking billboards. Once it was the working and farming classes who branded themselves by wearing Caterpillar Tractor and John Deere caps. But then came Lacoste's little alligators, followed by a flood of other insignia, to the point where in the 1970s it became almost impossible to buy an unbranded polo shirt. Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Donna Karan, Tommy Hilfiger, and other designers branded jeans, socks, and other garments galore, each cornering a status-specific market. Marlboro did the same, selling clothing and gear from specialized shops in Europe.

But conspicuous collaboration, the desire to be branded, was not simply manufactured from on high. In an era of ever-renewed self-reinvention, when religion, region, and trade fail to provide deep identities, a brand can be a declaration, like a preprinted greeting card. The consumer has not chosen to choose, exactly, but from among the range of images on offer, has consented to choose. And why not? For the price of the artifact, you buy a statement: *I am my logo. I have this glamour, or power, or smoothness, or (fill in style) behind me.* While some stragglers proudly go without logos, the path of least resistance now is to surrender and embrace them or wear them ironically.

Those who fight profit-making corporations promote their own anticorporate logos. Greenpeace has its own, as do campaigners against capitalist globalization. Critics may try to make the media torrent swerve, but cannot imagine drying it up. In the country of the branded, even the opponents brand themselves.

2 | Speed and Sensibility

HASTE MAKES MONEY

Turn on the TV, graze around, let the tsunami of images and information wash over you. A baseball game, with stats pouring across the screen—not only batting averages, RBIs, and ERAs but the on-base percentages, the speed of the last pitch, the number of pitches and first-pitch strikes thrown, the ball and strike percentages, even a visual of the batter's "hot zone" and a cutaway to the new relief pitcher, resolute, with a "scouting report" slashing across his image. Click to a basketball game—possible now that most major sports seasons overlap, often by months. Watch a slam dunk replayed, the image rotate, the picture plane flip over and peel away into oblivion. Note the stats on the Knicks' record against the Jazz over the past five seasons, and against other Western Division teams, as well as individual players' records against their match-ups at home and away.

On MSNBC an interview is in progress. An expert is discoursing on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction. At the lower right is the network logo; to its left, the current Dow Jones industrial average,