Chapter 7
THE ADULT-CHILD

There is a well-traveled TV commercial for Ivory soap in which we are shown two women identified as a mother and daughter. The viewers are then challenged to guess which is the mother, which the daughter, both of whom appear to be in their late twenties and more or less interchangeable. I take this commercial to be an uncommonly explicit piece of evidence supporting the view that the differences between adults and children are disappearing. Although many other commercials imply as much, this one speaks directly to the point that in our culture it is now considered desirable that a mother should not look older than her daughter. Or that a daughter should not look younger than her mother. Whether this means that childhood is disappearing or that adulthood is disappearing is merely a matter of how one wishes to state the problem: Without a clear concept of what it means to be an adult, there can be no clear concept of what it means to be a child. Thus, the idea on which this book is based—that our electric information environment is "disappearing" childhood—can also be expressed by saying that our electric information environment is disappearing adulthood.

As I have taken some pains to show, the modern idea of

adulthood is largely a product of the printing press. Almost all of the characteristics we associate with adulthood are those that are (and were) either generated or amplified by the requirements of a fully literate culture: the capacity for self-restraint, a tolerance for delayed gratification, a sophisticated ability to think conceptually and sequentially, a preoccupation with both historical continuity and the future, a high valuation of reason and hierarchical order. As electric media move literacy to the periphery of culture and take its place at the center, different attitudes and character traits come to be valued and a new diminished definition of adulthood begins to emerge. It is a definition that does not exclude children, and therefore what results is a new configuration of the stages of life. In the television age there are three. At one end, infancy; at the other, senility. In between there is what we might call the adult-child.

The adult-child may be defined as a grown-up whose intellectual and emotional capacities are unrealized and, in particular, not significantly different from those associated with children. Such grown-ups have always existed, but cultures vary in the degree to which they encourage or discourage this characterological pattern. In the Middle Ages the adult-child was a normal condition, in large measure because in the absence of literacy, schools, and civilité no special discipline or learning was required in order to be an adult. For somewhat similar reasons the adult-child is emerging as normal in our own culture. I shall reserve for the next chapter putting forward the evidence that this is, indeed, happening. The purpose of this chapter is to show how and why it is happening.

The short answer is implied in what I have been saying: As the symbolic arena in which human growth takes place changes in its form and content, and in particular, changes in the direction of requiring no distinction between child and adult sensibilities, inevitably the two stages of life merge into one.

That is the theory. The long answer is mere commentary. Nonetheless, that is what follows.

In considering the ways in which the modern adult-child is created, we have available several entry points but none more interesting than the meaning of political consciousness and judgment in a society in which television carries the major burden of communicating political information. Before television, as noted in the previous chapter, it was relatively easy to control the amount and kind of information about political leaders that was made available to the public. After television, it has become so difficult to do so that those aspiring to political office must employ "image managers" in an attempt to control what the public knows. One of the important reasons for this shift is, of course, the sheer quantity of information television provides. More important is the form of the information.

Our political leaders, like everyone else, not only give information in the form of linguistic statements but also "give off" information through nonverbal means. How they stand, smile, fix their gaze, perspire, show anger, etc., tell as much about them as anything they might say. Naturally, it is much more difficult to control what they "give off" than what they give, which is why Richard Nixon could not shake his image as a used-car salesman, and Gerald Ford his image as an oaf. Television is largely responsible for these enduring perceptions because it reveals with precision most of the information given off by the living images on the screen. It is, in fact, a mistake for us to continue to use the phrase "television audience," a metaphor taken over from radio. Even in those cases where the image remains relatively fixed, as during a presidential address, the image is still at the center of one's consciousness, demanding interpretation and in sharp competition with spoken language. Where the TV image is constantly changed, as is normally the case, the viewer is entirely occupied with, if not overwhelmed by, nonverbal informa-

tion. Television, to put it simply (and, I fear, repetitiously), does not call one's attention to ideas, which are abstract, distant, complex, and sequential, but to personalities, which are concrete, vivid, and holistic.

What this means is that the symbolic form of political information has been radically changed. In the television age, political judgment is transformed from an intellectual assessment of propositions to an intuitive and emotional response to the totality of an image. In the television age, people do not so much agree or disagree with politicians as like or dislike them. Television redefines what is meant by "sound political judgment" by making it into an aesthetic rather than a logical matter. A barely literate ten-year-old can interpret or at least respond to the information "given off" by a candidate as easily and quickly as a well-informed fifty-year-old. In fact, quite possibly more keenly. In any case, language and logic have almost nothing to do with the matter.

This alteration in the meaning of political judgment did not begin with television. It began in earnest as a side effect of the graphic revolution of the nineteenth century. But television so rapidly advances its course that we are justified in saying that with TV we descend to a qualitatively different level of political consciousness. And what makes this descent so interesting is that it represents a clear case of a conflict between the biases of an old medium and those of a new one. When the United States Constitution was written, James Madison and his colleagues assumed that mature citizenship necessarily implied a fairly high level of literacy and its concomitant analytic skills. For this reason, the young, commonly defined as those under twenty-one, were excluded from the electoral process because it was further assumed that the achievement of sophisticated literacy required training over a long period of time. These assumptions were entirely fitting in the eighteenth century in a society organized around the printed word, where political discourse was conducted largely

through books, newspapers, pamphlets, and an oratory very much influenced by print. As Tocqueville tells us, the politics of America was the politics of the printed page.

Whatever other assumptions guided the development of our political structure (for example, concerning property ownership and race), none was more deeply ingrained than that adults and children are intellectually different and that adults have resources for the making of political judgments that the young do not have. While it may go too far to say, as George Counts once remarked, that the electric media have repealed the Bill of Rights, it is obvious that the making of political judgments in the Age of Television does not call upon the complex skills of literacy, does not even require literacy. How many Americans of voting age have ever *read* anything Ronald Reagan has ever written? Or have read anything written by those who have provided him with his ideology? How many were able to follow the arguments advanced in the presidential debates? How many believed that Ronald Reagan advanced arguments that Jimmy Carter or John Anderson could not refute?

Merely to ask such questions is to know, at once, how irrelevant they are, to realize what a minimal role ideological premises, logical consistency and force, or adeptness with language play in the assessment of a television image. If we may say that the Age of Andrew Jackson took political life out of the hands of aristocrats and turned it over to the masses, then we may say, with equal justification, that the Age of Television has taken politics away from the adult mind altogether. As Jackson changed the social arena, television has changed the symbolic arena in which politics is expressed and understood. Although the press has a vested interest in claiming that this is not so, everyone else recognizes that it is, especially those who run for office and those who are hired to show them how.

If this conclusion seems to exaggerate the situation, then consider the matter of public information as it is conveyed

through television. To make a judgment about the quality of political consciousness, we must include an analysis of the character of the information available to citizens. It is well established that most Americans receive most of their information about the world through television, much of it through the format known as a television news show. What manner of experience do they have? What sort of information do they receive? What perspectives and insights are made available? In what sense, if any, is the public made knowledgeable? To what extent is a TV news show designed for the adult mind?

To understand what manner of thing a TV news show is —that is, any of the late news shows as seen in New York, Chicago, or San Francisco—we must look carefully at its structure. For example, all such shows begin and end with music; there is also music at every break for a commercial. What is its purpose? The same as in a theater or film: to excite the emotions of the audience, to create tension, to build expectations. But there is an important functional difference between, say, film music and TV news music in that in a film the music is varied according to the particular emotion the content calls for. There is frightening music, happy music, romantic music, and the like. On TV news shows, the same music is played whether the lead story is the invasion of Afghanistan or the adoption of a municipal budget or a Super Bowl victory. By using the same music each night, in the same spots, as an accompaniment to a *different* set of events, TV news shows contribute toward the development of their leitmotiv: that there are no important differences between one day and another, that the same emotions that were called for yesterday are called for today, and that in any case, the events of the day are meaningless.

This theme is developed through diverse means, including beauty, tempo, and discontinuity. Of beauty not much needs to be said beyond observing that TV newsreaders are almost all young and attractive—perhaps the handsomest class of

people in America. Television, naturally enough, is biased toward compelling visual imagery, and in almost all cases the charms of a human face take precedence over the capabilities of a human voice. It is not essential that a TV newsreader grasp the meaning of what is being reported; many of them cannot even produce an appropriate facial display to go along with the words they are speaking. And some have even given up trying. What is essential is that the viewers like looking at their faces. To put it bluntly, as far as TV is concerned, in the United States there is not one sixty-year-old woman capable of being a newsreader. Viewers, it would appear, are not captivated by their faces. It is the teller, not what is told, that matters here.

It is also believed that audiences are captivated by variety and repelled by complexity, which is why, during a typical thirty-minute show, there will be between fifteen and twenty "stories." Discounting time for commercials, promos for stories to come, and newsreaders' banter, this works out to an average of sixty seconds a story. On a WCBS show chosen at random, it went like this one night: 264 seconds for a story about bribery of public officials; 37 seconds for a related story about Senator Larry Pressler; 40 seconds about Iran; 22 seconds about Aeroflot; 28 seconds about a massacre in Afghanistan; 25 seconds about Muhammad Ali; 53 seconds about a New Mexico prison rebellion; 160 seconds about protests against the film *Cruising;* 18 seconds about the owners of Studio 54; 18 seconds about Suzanne Somers; 16 seconds about the Rockettes; 174 seconds for an "in-depth" study of depression (Part I); 22 seconds about Lake Placid; 166 seconds for the St. John's–Louisville basketball game; 120 seconds for the weather; 100 seconds for a film review.

This way of defining the "news" achieves two interesting effects. First, it makes it difficult to think about an event, and second, it makes it difficult to feel about an event. By thinking, I mean having the time and motivation to ask oneself: What is the meaning of such an event? What is its history? What are the reasons for it? How does it fit into what I know about the world? By feeling, I mean the normal human responses to murder, rape, fire, bribery, and general mayhem. During a survey I conducted some time ago, I was able to identify only one story to which viewers responded with a recollectable feeling of disgust or horror: the burning to death of a "demon-possessed" baby by its mother. I believe there is some significance in the fact that news shows will frequently include thirty to forty-five seconds of "feeling" responses by "the man and woman in the street," as if to remind the viewers that they are *supposed* to feel something about a particular story. I take this to be an expression of guilt on the part of producers who know full well that their shows leave little room for such reaction. On the WCBS show referred to, no reactions were asked for about the massacre in Afghanistan or the New Mexico prison riot. However, thirty-five seconds were given over to "on the street" reactions to bribery charges against Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey. The people allowed to comment said they felt terrible.

The point is, of course, that all events on TV come completely devoid of historical continuity or any other context, and in such fragmented and rapid succession that they wash over our minds in an undifferentiated stream. This is television as narcosis, dulling to both sense and sensibility. To be sure, the music, the promos ("Coming up next, a riot in a New Mexico prison . . ."), and the newsreaders' interactions ("What's happening in New Jersey, Jane?") create an air of excitement, of tension to be resolved. But it is entirely ersatz, for what is presented is so compressed and hurried—another story fidgeting offstage, half mad with anxiety to do its thirty-seven seconds—that one can scarcely retain in one's mind the connection between the promise of excitement and its resolution; that is to say, the excitement of a TV news show is largely a function of tempo, not substance. It is excitement about the movement of information, not its meaning.

But if it is difficult to think and feel about the news, this

must not be taken to mean that the viewer is not expected to have a feeling, or at least an attitude, about the world. That attitude, as I have said, is that all events, having no precedent causes or subsequent consequences, are without value and therefore meaningless. It must be kept in mind here that TV news shows are terrifyingly surrealistic, discontinuous to the point where almost nothing has anything to do with anything else. What, for example, is the connection between Aeroflot and Suzanne Somers? Between Studio 54 and Iran? Between *Cruising* and a massacre in Afghanistan? Bribed officials and the Rockettes? Will any of these stories be followed up? Were they there yesterday? Why is Iran worth 40 seconds and the St. John's game 166? How is it determined that Suzanne Somers should get less time than Muhammad Ali? And what in the end is the relationship of the commercials to the other stories? There were, on the WCBS show, twenty-one commercials, occupying close to ten minutes. Three commercials preceded the bribery story, four commercials preceded the New Mexico prison riot, three preceded the special report (Part I) on depression. As you can well imagine, the commercials were cheerful, filled with the promise of satisfaction, security, and, in two cases, erotic pleasure.

Given such juxtapositions, what is a person to make of the world? How is one to measure the importance of events? What principles of human conduct are displayed, and according to what scheme of moral order are they valued? To any such questions the TV news show has this invariable reply: There is no sense of proportion to be discerned in the world. Events are entirely idiosyncratic; history is irrelevant; there is no rational basis for valuing one thing over another. The news, in a phrase, is not an adult world-view.

Indeed, one cannot even find in this world-view a sense of contradiction. Otherwise, we would not be shown four commercials celebrating the affluence of America, followed by the despair and degradation of prisoners in a New Mexico

jail. One would have expected the newsreader at least to wink, but he took no notice of what he was saying.

What all of this adds up to is that a television news show is precisely what its name implies. A show is an entertainment, a world of artifice and fantasy carefully staged to produce a particular series of effects so that the audience is left laughing or crying or stupefied. This is the business of a news show, and it is puffery to claim, as producers do when they accept their Emmy awards, that the purpose of such shows is to make the public knowledgeable. The effect, of course, is to trivialize the idea of Political Man, to erode the difference between adult-like and childlike understanding.

This process is extended to areas other than the political. For example, we may consider the decline of—indeed, the merging of—Commercial Man and Religious Man. One of the clear markers of an adult sensibility is the capacity to distinguish between the commercial arena and the spiritual one. And in most cultures the distinction is clear enough to grasp. But in the Age of Television that distinction has become hopelessly muddled, in large measure because of the omnipresent form of communication known as the television commercial. Just as the news show alters the meaning of political judgment, the TV commercial alters the meaning of both consumership and religiosity.

So much has been written about commercials and their degrading suppositions and effects that it is difficult to find anything more to say. But certain things have not yet been given sufficient attention insofar as they have a bearing on the diminution of adulthood. For example, it must be stressed that there is nothing in the form of TV commercials that requires that a distinction be made between adults and children. TV commercials do not use propositions to persuade; they use visual images, as for every other purpose. Such language as is employed is highly emotive and only rarely risks verifiable assertions. Therefore, commercials are not susceptible to

logical analysis, are not refutable, and, of course, do not require sophisticated adult judgment to assess. Ever since the graphic revolution, Commercial Man has been taken to be essentially irrational, not to be approached with argument or reasoned discourse. But on television this supposition is carried to such extremes that we may charge the television commercial with having rejected capitalist ideology altogether. That is to say, the television commercial has abandoned one of the key assumptions of mercantilism, which is that both buyer and seller are capable of making a trade based on a rational consideration of self-interest. This assumption is so deeply ingrained in capitalism that our laws severely restrict the commercial transactions children are allowed to make. In capitalist ideology, itself heavily influenced by the rise of literacy, it is held that children do not have the analytical skills to evaluate the buyer's product, that children are not yet fully capable of rational transactions. But the TV commercial does not present products in a form that calls upon analytic skills or what we customarily think of as rational and mature judgment. It is not facts that are offered to the consumer but idols, to which both adults and children can attach themselves with equal devotion and without the burden of logic or verification. It is, therefore, misleading even to call this form of communication "commercials," since they disdain the rhetoric of business and do their work largely with the symbols and rhetoric of religion. Indeed, I believe it is entirely fair to conclude that television commercials are a form of religious literature.

I do not claim that every television commercial has religious content. Just as in church the pastor will sometimes call the congregation's attention to nonecclesiastical matters, so there are TV commercials that are entirely secular in nature. Someone has something to sell; you are told what it is, where it can be obtained, and what it costs. Though these may be shrill and offensive, no doctrine is advanced and no theology invoked.

But the majority of important TV commercials take the form of religious parables organized around a coherent theology. Like all religious parables they put forward a concept of sin, intimations of the way to redemption, and a vision of Heaven. They also suggest what are the roots of evil and what are the obligations of the holy.

Consider, for example, The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar. This is to TV scripture what The Parable of the Prodigal Son is to the Bible, which is to say it is an archetype containing most of the elements of form and content that recur in its own genre. To begin with, The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar is short, occupying only about thirty seconds of one's time and attention. There are three reasons for this, all obvious. First, it is expensive to preach on television. Second, the attention span of the congregation is not long and is easily susceptible to distraction. And third, a parable does not need to be long; tradition dictates that its narrative structure be tight, its symbols unambiguous, its explication terse.

The narrative structure of The Parable of the Ring Around the Collar is, indeed, comfortably traditional. The story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. For those unfamiliar with it, a brief description is in order.

A married couple is depicted in some relaxed setting—say, a restaurant—in which they are enjoying each other's company and generally having a wonderful time. A waitress approaches their table, notices that the man has a dirty ring around his collar, stares at it boldly, sneers with cold contempt, and announces to all within hearing the nature of his transgression. The man is humiliated and glares at his wife with scorn. She, in turn, assumes an expression of self-loathing mixed with a touch of self-pity. This is the parable's beginning: the emergence of a problem.

The parable continues by showing the wife at home using a detergent that never fails to eliminate dirt around the collars of men's shirts. She proudly shows her husband what

she is doing, and he forgives her with an adoring smile. This is the parable's middle: the solution of the problem. Finally, we are shown the couple in a restaurant once again, but this time they are free of the waitress's probing eyes and bitter social chastisement. This is the parable's end: the moral, the explication, the exegesis. From this we shall draw the proper conclusion.

In TV-commercial parables the root cause of evil is Technological Innocence, a failure to know the particulars of the beneficent accomplishments of industrial progress. This is the primary source of unhappiness, humiliation, and discord in life. And, as forcefully depicted in The Parable of the Ring, the consequences of technological innocence may strike at any time, without warning, and with the full force of their disintegrating action.

The sudden striking power of technological innocence is a particularly important feature of TV-commercial theology, for it is a constant reminder of the congregation's vulnerability. One must never be complacent or, worse, self-congratulatory. To attempt to live without technological sophistication is at all times dangerous, since the evidence of one's naïveté is painfully visible to the vigilant. The vigilant may be a waitress, a friend, a neighbor, or even a spectral figure—a holy ghost, as it were—who materializes in your kitchen, from nowhere, to give witness to your sluggish ignorance.

It must be understood, of course, that technological innocence is to be interpreted broadly, referring not only to ignorance of detergents, drugs, sanitary napkins, cars, salves, and foodstuffs, but also to technical machinery such as savings banks and transportation systems. One may, for example, come upon one's neighbors while on vacation (in TV-commercial parables, this is always a sign of danger) and discover that they have invested their money in a certain bank of whose special interest-rates you have been unaware. This is, of course, a moral disaster, and both you and your vacation are doomed.

But, as demonstrated in The Ring Parable, there is a road to redemption. The road, however, has two obstacles. The first requires that you be open to advice or social criticism from those who are more enlightened. In The Ring Parable the waitress serves the function of counselor, although she is, to be sure, exacting and very close to unforgiving. In some parables the adviser is rather more sarcastic than severe. But in most parables, as for example in all sanitary-napkin, mouthwash, shampoo, and aspirin commercials, the advisers are amiable and sympathetic, perhaps all too aware of their own vulnerability in other matters.

The Innocent are only required to accept instruction in the spirit in which it is offered. The importance of this cannot be stressed enough, for it instructs the congregation in two lessons simultaneously: not only must one be eager to accept advice, but one must be just as eager to give it. Giving advice is, so to speak, the principal obligation of the holy. In fact, the ideal religious community may be depicted in images of dozens of people, each in his or her turn giving and taking advice on technological advances.

The second obstacle on the road to redemption involves one's willingness to act on the advice that is given. As in traditional Christian theology, it is not sufficient to hear the gospel or even preach it. One's understanding must be expressed in good works—i.e., action. In The Ring Parable the once pitiable wife acts almost immediately, and the parable concludes by showing the congregation the effects of her action.

In The Parable of the Person with Rotten Breath, of which there are several versions, we are shown a woman who, ignorant of the technological solution to her unattractiveness, is enlightened by a supportive roommate. The woman takes the advice without delay, with results we are shown in the last five seconds: a honeymoon in Hawaii. In The Parable of the Stupid Investor, we are shown a man who knows not how to make his money make money. Upon enlightenment he acts swiftly, and, at the parable's end, he is rewarded with a car,

or a trip to Hawaii, or something approximating peace of mind.

Because of the compactness of commercial parables, the ending—that is, the last five seconds—must serve a dual purpose. It is, of course, the moral of the story: If one will act in such a way, this will be the reward. But in being shown the result, we are also shown an image of Heaven. Occasionally, as in The Parable of the Lost Traveler's Cheques, we are given a glimpse of Hell: Technical Innocents lost and condemned to eternal wandering far from their native land. But mostly we are given images of a Heaven both accessible and delicious: that is, a Heaven that is here, now, on Earth, in America, and quite often in Hawaii.

But Hawaii is only a convenient recurring symbol. Heaven can, in fact, materialize and envelop you anywhere. In The Parable of the Man Who Runs Through Airports, Heaven is found at a car-rental counter to which the confounded runner is shepherded by an angelic messenger. The expression of ecstasy on the runner's face tells clearly that this moment is as close to a sense of transcendence as he can ever hope for.

"Ecstasy" is the key idea here, for commercial parables depict the varieties of ecstasy in as much detail as you will find in any body of religious literature. At the conclusion of The Parable of the Spotted Glassware, a husband and wife assume such ecstatic countenances as can only be described by the word *beatification*. Even in The Ring Parable, which at first glance would not seem to pose as serious a moral crisis as spotted glassware, we are shown ecstasy, pure and serene. And where ecstasy is, so is Heaven. Heaven, in brief, is any place where you have joined your soul with the Deity—the Deity, of course, being Technology.

Just when, as a religious people, we replaced our faith in traditional ideas of God with a belief in the ennobling force of Technology is not easy to say. While it should be stressed that TV commercials played no role in bringing about this transformation, it is clear that they reflect the change, document it, amplify it, and in doing so, contribute to the diminution of mature spiritual orientations. As a consequence, they blur the line between adulthood and childhood, for children have no difficulty in understanding the theology of the TV commercial. There is nothing in it that is demanding or complex or that would inspire a profound question about the nature of existence. The adult who adopts this theology is no different from the child.

It is probably worthwhile to reiterate here that the child-like conception of political, commercial, and spiritual consciousness that is encouraged by television is not the "fault" of politicians, commercial hucksters, and TV executives who provide TV's content. Such people simply use television as they find it, and their motives are no better or worse than those of the viewers. To be sure, they exploit TV's resources, but it is the character of the medium not the character of the medium's users that produces the adult-child. This is an essential point to grasp. Otherwise we run the risk of deluding ourselves into believing that adulthood can be preserved by "improving" television. But television cannot be much improved, at least in the matter of its symbolic form or the context in which it is experienced or its speed-of-light movement of information. In particular, television is not a book, and can neither express the ideational content that is possible in typography nor further the attitudes and social organization associated with typography.

Television, for example, does not have effective resources for communicating a sense of either the past or the future. It is a present-centered medium. Everything on television is experienced as happening "now," which is why viewers must be told *in language* that the videotape they are seeing was made days or months before. As a consequence, the present is amplified out of all proportion, and it is a reasonable conjecture that adults are being forced by television into accepting as normal the childish need for immediate gratification, as well as childish indifference to consequences.

The context in which television is usually experienced is another matter of some importance. Like other media, such as radio and records, television tends to be an isolating experience, requiring no conformity to rules of public behavior. It does not even require that you pay attention, and, as a consequence, does nothing to further an adult awareness of social cohesion.

But undoubtedly the most significant aspect of television's structure is that which I have been so laboriously asserting: It expresses most of its content in visual images, not language. And, as a consequence, it must of necessity forgo exposition and use a narrative mode. This is why television's capacity to amuse is nearly inexhaustible. Television is the first true theater of the masses, not only because of the vast number of people it reaches but also because almost everything on television takes the form of a story, not an argument or a sequence of ideas. Politics becomes a story; news, a story; commerce and religion, a story. Even science becomes a story. That is why, as noted earlier, television programs such as *Cosmos* and *The Ascent of Man* are as visually dynamic and theatrical as anything else on TV; which is to say that Carl Sagan and Jacob Bronowski are presented—must be presented—as personalities, entertainers, and storytellers, surrounded by interesting things to look at. The science of Cosmology does not play well on television, and so we must watch Carl Sagan ride a bicycle as he tries to speak of it. Similarly, there is no way to televise a theory of cultural change, which is what Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man* was supposed to be about. But not one viewer in a hundred was aware of that fact, since his theory, as well as his supporting statements, was buried beneath a torrent of short-duration images. Only if the images were removed so that the language could be heard (as was the case when the script was printed in book form) could Bronowski's ideas become apparent and his questionable theory evaluated.

It is common to hear critics complain that TV appeals to

the lowest common denominator. But in what sense can we say of TV's images (e.g., Sagan riding a bicycle) that there is a higher intellect to which they can aspire? The superb science writer and professor of physics Jeremy Bernstein has put forward an answer of sorts in his critique of *Cosmos*.[1] Bernstein proposes that when a science program is presented, the visual image be kept stable, the professor on screen be situated behind a desk, and he or she simply talk. Assuming that the talk included complex facts, ideas, and conjectures, such a program would stimulate an educated imagination, Bernstein supposes. But such a program is not television. It is *Sunrise Semester*. It is television used to replicate the lecture hall or classroom, and it is doubtful that even those who aspire to the higher learning would watch for very long. Such people go to lecture halls and classrooms for what Professor Bernstein hopes they will learn. They expect something rather different from television, and those who produce programs provide it. As I write, WCBS is beginning commercial television's version of a "science show," for which a large audience is anticipated. It is called *Walter Cronkite's Universe*. No doubt Professor Bernstein, being an adult and an educated one, believes that the universe can speak well enough for itself and requires no boost from or association with Mr. Cronkite. WCBS knows better. And what WCBS knows is that the Age of Exposition, which was ushered in by the printing press and which gave the mind of the adult a special character, is very nearly over. It has been replaced by the Age of Narration, or, if one wants to be both more precise and picturesque, the Age of Show Business.

I do not use the phrase the Age of Show Business as a metaphor. I mean it to be taken literally, although there are two senses in which this might be done. First, it is in the nature of television to transform every aspect of life into a show-business format. Not only do we get *Walter Cronkite's Universe* (which could easily accommodate Don Rickles doing six minutes of outer space jokes and Lola Falana singing the

theme song of *Star Wars*), we also get *Rex Humbard and His Family,* on location, bringing a message from God. Reverend Humbard is only one of a coven of preachers who, in using television, have assisted the TV commercial in accomplishing the near infantilization of theology. Surrounded by singers, members of their family, and exceedingly handsome people both on the stage and in the audience, these evangelists offer a religion that is as simplistic and theatrical as any Las Vegas act. No dogma, terminology, logic, ritual, or tradition are called upon to burden the minds of the viewers, who are required only to respond to the charisma of the preacher.

As noted, the same requirement is all that is asked of the news watcher. As I write, WNBC has just announced the signing of Tom Brokaw to a multi-year multimillion-dollar contract. For what? To read the news. One is tempted to wonder if Mr. Brokaw might profitably take his act to Las Vegas: "Tom Brokaw's World, featuring Don Rickles on Sports and Lola Falana as the Weatherwoman." But this would be redundant since his act on TV will reach a larger audience. The most striking example of the "show business" model of the world is *Sesame Street,* the highly acclaimed educational show for children. Its creators have accepted without reservation the idea that learning is not only *not* obstructed by entertainment but, on the contrary, is indistinguishable from it. In defending this conception of education, Jack Blessington, director of Educational Relations for WCBS, has observed "that there is a gap between kids' personal and cognitive development that schools don't know how to address." He went on to explain: "We live in a highly sophisticated, electronically oriented society. Print slows everything down."[2] Just so. Print means a slowed-down mind. Electronics means the speeded-up mind. One of the consequences of this fact—apparently unnoticed by Mr. Blessington—is that television "Las Vegasizes" our culture. The gap he speaks of is the difference between the slowed-down processes of thought encouraged by exposition and the fast-tempo responses required

by a visually entertaining show. It goes without saying that *Sesame Street* in particular would do very nicely at prime time with both adults and children, not because of its alleged educational function but because, quite simply, it is a first-class act.

A second meaning of the phrase the Age of Show Business is related to the first but requires its own explanation. I refer to the fact that the business of television is to show—to forgo abstraction, to make everything concrete. And it is in this sense, as much as any other, that we can understand why adulthood is being diminished. We may pinpoint the issue by recalling what Lewis Carroll's Alice says just before beginning her adventures. Having nothing to do on a lazy day, Alice peeks at a book her sister is reading. But the book contains no pictures or conversations, by which Alice means stories. "And what is the use of a book," Alice thinks, "without pictures or conversations?" Lewis Carroll is making the obvious point that the pictorial and narrative mode is of a lower order of complexity and maturity than the expository. Pictures and stories are the natural form in which children understand the world. Exposition is for grown-ups.

If I may use Alice's question as a spur, What is the effect on grown-ups of a culture dominated by pictures and stories? What is the effect of a medium that is entirely centered on the present, that has no capability of revealing the continuity of time? What is the effect of a medium that must abjure conceptual complexity and highlight personality? What is the effect of a medium that always asks for an immediate, emotional response?

If the medium is as pervasive as television is, then we may answer in this way: Just as phonetic literacy altered the predispositions of the mind in Athens in the fifth century B.C., just as the disappearance of social literacy in the fifth century A.D. helped to create the medieval mind, just as typography enhanced the complexity of thought—indeed, changed the content of the mind—in the sixteenth century, then so does

television make it unnecessary for us to distinguish between the child and the adult. For it is in its nature to homogenize mentalities. The often missed irony in the remark that television programs are designed for a twelve-year-old mentality is that there can be no other mentality for which they may be designed. Television is a medium consisting of very little but "pictures and stories," and Alice would have found it quite suitable for her needs.

In saying all of this, and in spite of how it may seem, I am not "criticizing" television but merely describing its limitations and the effects of those limitations. A great deal hinges on what we understand to be the nature of this great culture-transforming medium. Speaking at the commencement ceremonies at Emerson College in 1981, Leonard H. Goldenson, chairman of the board of ABC, told the graduates that ". . . we can no longer rely on our mastery of traditional skills. As communicators, as performers, as creators—and as citizens—[the electric revolution] requires a new kind of literacy. It will be a visual literacy, an electronic literacy, and it will be as much of an advance over the literacy of the written word we know today as that was over the purely oral tradition of man's early history."[3] Putting aside Mr. Goldenson's demonstration, as suggested in one of his sentences above, that he has himself already lost some mastery of traditional skills, I believe the first part of his statement to be entirely correct, although not in the sense he meant to imply. Television and other electric media do not, as he rightly says, require mastery of traditional skills. That is exactly my point, for it means that such skills will be impotent to encourage the differentiation of intellect that is necessary to sustain a distinction between adulthood and childhood. As for his statement that "visual literacy" will be as much of an advance over the literacy of the written word as that was over the oral tradition, one can only wonder what sort of advances Mr. Goldenson has in mind. Although it would be naïve and inaccurate to claim that literacy has been an unmixed blessing, the written, and then the printed, word

brought a new kind of social organization to civilization. It brought logic, science, education, civilité; indeed, the very technology over which Mr. Goldenson presides. Thus, we may say that the literate mind has sown the seeds of its own destruction through the creation of media that render irrelevant those "traditional skills" on which literacy rests. It is a puzzlement to me that this fact should be a source of optimism to anyone save the chairman of the board of a television network.