



December 2003

Dear MARS HILL AUDIO listener,

On Sunday, October 5, Neil Postman died of lung cancer. He was 72 years old. Postman was probably best known for his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

Two days later, in one of God's little providential ironies, Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California.

One of the main points of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was that the patterns of communication encouraged and sustained by television (with its moving images) were displacing those encouraged by print (characterized by the word, discursive reasoning, and the possibilities of logic). Postman's position was not that words are good and images are bad, but that the images preferred by television as it actually exists as a social institution are images designed to titillate and entertain. Postman's great concern in that book was for the quality of public life in a democracy. The introduction to the book pointed to the contrasting dystopias of *1984* and *Brave New World*. In the first, a repressive and tyrannical Big Brother manages and manipulates all aspects of life to secure power. In Huxley's vision, recreational drugs and entertainment media narcotized an entire population beyond the point of resistance; power was sustained by making fun mandatory and omnipresent.

I read Neil Postman's book when it first came out and since I had pursued undergraduate studies in communication theory (with an emphasis on film theory and criticism), his concerns made a lot of sense. They still do, almost twenty years and one gubernatorial recall later. Subsequent books, including Neal Gabler's *Life: The Movie* and Todd Gitlin's *Media Unlimited* expanded on the theme suggested by Postman and added a number of additional insights. But Postman's alarm, sounded as the baby boomers (the first generation raised on TV) were approaching middle age, deserves credit for warning thousands of readers that, in his own words, "as the influence of print wanes, the content of politics, religion, education, and anything else that comprises public business must change and be recast in terms that are most suitable to television."

In the years since I first read that prediction, the influence of the dynamics of entertainment in Christian settings has expanded at an alarming rate. The chapter in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* on religion focused on religious

broadcasting, and the dilemma of making Christianity entertaining on television. In 1985, Postman never imagined (who could?) that less than two decades later the production values of good television would come to reign live and in person in thousands of “worship spaces” (sanctuaries no more) around the country.

One of the great tragedies of “entertainment evangelism” is that it renders the Church ever less able to take a prophetic stand against the dominance of entertainment in other spheres of life. Neil Postman believed, as do many others, that politics and education (among other social activities) are significantly truncated when they are carried out in accordance with the “Brave New World” model. But how can Christians love their neighbors away from the hegemony of perpetual amusement when they have surrendered to it so thoroughly on Sunday morning? How can we work to sustain adequate levels of public seriousness so that political and educational institutions are properly encouraged (along with, it is hoped, a concern for justice and truth) when we appear allergic to seriousness in our own institutions? Politics and education properly pursued require discipline and the making of hard choices. They aren’t always fun. But are Christians able to make that argument plausibly when they fret so much about whether their church activities are fun enough?

Neal Gabler made the following point at the beginning of *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*:

While an entertainment-driven, celebrity-oriented society is not necessarily one that destroys all moral value, as some would have it, it *is* one in which the standard of value is whether or not something can grab and then hold the public’s attention. It is a society in which those things that do not conform—for example, serious literature, serious political debate, serious ideas, serious anything—are more likely to be compromised or marginalized than ever before. It is a society in which celebrities become paragons because they are the ones who have learned how to steal the spotlight, no matter what they have done to steal it. And at the most personal level, it is a society in which individuals have learned to prize social skills that permit them, like actors, to assume whatever role the occasion demands and to ‘perform’ their lives rather than just live them. The result is that *Homo sapiens* is rapidly becoming *Homo scaunicus*—man the entertainer.

And toward the end of the book, Gabler made this observation:

The great cultural debate that loomed at the end of the twentieth century and promised to dominate the twenty-first, then, was one between the realists who believed that a clear-eyed appreciation of the

human condition was necessary to *be* human, and the postrealists who believed that glossing reality and even transforming it into a movie were perfectly acceptable strategies if these made us happier—a debate, one might say, between humanness and happiness. In a sense, the controversy over Prozac and other antidepressants—was a happiness induced by pharmacology better than a less euphoric state that was natural or *real*?—was an early skirmish in the war, and a template for it. Now so many other deep cultural tensions in America—between art and conventional entertainment, between traditional journalism and the new news, between old-fashioned ward politics and the new politics of ‘feel-good,’ between heroes and celebrities, between functional architecture and expressive architecture, between biological naturalists and genetic engineers, between Luddites and computer hackers—resolved themselves into a similar question: Is reality, as it was traditionally construed, morally, aesthetically and epistemologically preferable to postreality? Or: Is life, as traditionally construed, preferable to the movie version of life?

If Christian faithfulness were only a call to evangelism by whatever means possible, than capitulation to the spirit of the age (whatever it might be) might not be that serious. But since we are called to make evident the consequences of our redemption in every sphere of life, the Church cannot afford to be culturally complacent or careless. If the culture around us is committed to abandoning or thwarting the true, the good, and the beautiful, we are not obliged (out of some sense of evangelistic winsomeness) to join the party. Precisely because we value politics, education, the arts, science, and all aspects of human life, we must not allow them to be held captive to dubious assumptions or agendas. When we adopt the disordered ways of the world we are not really loving our neighbors. Jesus enjoined his disciples to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves; he never suggested that they go out as sheep in wolves’ clothing in order to increase market share.

I am pleased to be able to say that Neil Postman, Neal Gabler, and Todd Gitlin have all been guests on the MARS HILL AUDIO *Journal*, as have hundreds of other wise and perceptive observers of contemporary culture and students of the complicated histories that brought us here. I have the great privilege of scouting around for such thinkers and introducing them to people too busy to scout much for themselves. The conversations we share with you are an opportunity to thoughtfully take time out from business as usual, to reflect on the merit of the conventions that shape our lives, and to consider the possibility that there are better ways of living life.

We have always tried to keep the price of a subscription to the *Journal* low enough to make it affordable to a larger number of subscribers. We’ve been able to do that because we try to keep our costs and expenses low and we

have been blessed by the generosity of thousands of supporters who believe that our mission is a worthy one.

If you share that belief, please let us know, and be a part of a project that hopes to encourage those resisting the spirit of the age in its manifold forms. Your gift is tax deductible, and will be a great encouragement to us in a time that can often be disheartening.

Let me thank you in advance for your help. And let me encourage you to offer prayers of thanksgiving for those writers and teachers whom God has gifted with wisdom, patience, wit, and clarity of thought; many so gifted do not yet know the Giver, so pray also that their quest for truth will take them farther than they could imagine.

Merry Christmas!

In gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Myers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Myers