

## MEDIA BOOK REVIEW

Stephens, Mitchell. *The Rise of the Image, The Fall of the Word*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, 259 p.

The author, a professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at New York University, analyzes Peter Jennings's documentary on ABC ("In the Name of God," 16 March 1995). In its first 96 minutes, produced by Roberta Goldberg, there are 51 different images and fewer than two hundred words spoken by the narrator Peter Jennings along with ministers and church members. The images included scenes of

- churchgoers praying, laughing, weeping and collapsing,
- a Christian stage show,
- a congregation joining in aerobics,
- ministers preaching,
- ministers using show-business techniques, and
- ministers defending their use of show-business techniques.

Intercut with these images are pictures... bending and blurring of

- religious icons,
- three candles... blowing out.

Words from the Bible flash on the screen. Ethereal yet insistent music plays. Cameras dart here and there.... The piece has an almost balletlike beauty, but it is not particularly profound. It is, after all, only the introduction to an otherwise traditional documentary....

However, this segment of videotape... does manage to impart a remarkable amount of information and impressions—to the point where the more conventionally edited hour-long documentary that follows begins to seem superfluous.

This brief introduction, therefore, suggests that images—fast-cut moving images mixed with some words and music—have the potential to communicate at least as efficiently and effectively as printed words. (p. 4-5)

The author goes on to describe the visit of then vice president Dan Quayle to a Georgia elementary school class.

"Are you going to study hard," he asked to which the students responded with a fervent, "Yeah."  
"Are you going to work hard and mind the teacher?" Again, a strong, "Yeah."  
"And are you going to turn off the TV during school nights?" This time there was an even stronger, "No!"

Stephens cites a Gomery study of four and six year-olds asked whether they liked television or their fathers better. 54% chose TV. Television has become dominant in fifty years. It is now on in the average American home 8 hours a day, which considering school and work, is just about all the time. Fifth graders spend seven times as much time watching television as reading. In the

early 1990s the Gallup Poll found that the number of Americans who had read no books of any kind in the past year had doubled—from 8 to 17 percent—between 1978 and 1990. Globally the evidence suggests almost 3 billion people (or more than half the world's people) watching television regularly (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, 1995, Roper Starch Worldwide and Discovery Channel).

Television's popularity is not only because of its easy accessibility and seemingly "inexhaustible diversions," the author points out, but in the very power of moving images. "There is a magic in them, a magic that may come to dwarf that of other forms of communication." And of course television is merging with computers to form a new "unimedia." (my term, DWB)

This book views television as only one stage in a larger movement.... New kinds of moving images viewed in new ways are likely to lead to its triumph. A term is needed that encompasses the stages to come... The best alternative seems *video*—a compact word, derived from the Latin verb *videre* "to see." ... video as content, not any particular size screen or variety of box. (p. 7-8)

The dominance of television and moving images in communication and persuasion can be seen in America of the 1960s to 1980s.

- John F. Kennedy's handsome face eclipses Nixon.
- Images of burning huts and bodies overpower printed explanations of America's intervention.
- The flags and balloons of Reagan's presidency overcome pessimism and cynicism.
- MTV and other channels attract young viewers away from standard networks.

In just fifty years television and other aspects of the electronic revolution replace the primacy of the written word.

The author remembers television coming into his home and the attraction of those early shows—becoming lost in "Howdy Doody," "Leave it to Beaver," and reruns of the "My Little Margie" show. "Nevertheless, like many..., I was suspicious of television, concerned that I was, if not subjecting myself to harm, at least squandering my time." (p. 27)

This book, I should make clear, is the work of an inveterate reader and writer—someone who is unable to enter a bookstore or library without a sense of excitement but who contemplates racks of videos with nary a smile. The book uses the established, wonderfully proficient medium of printed words to proclaim the potential of video, an immature and still awkward medium. The book attempts, in other words, to look without prejudice beyond its author's inclination, beyond its own form. (xii)

The critics of television are legion. After photographer Richard Avedon opined on television that "images are replacing words as our primary language, New York Times television critic responded, "That, precisely, is the problem as American culture drifts ever more distressingly into superficiality." (p. 11) Other critics are noted:

- Back in the 1960s Frank Lloyd Wright called television "chewing gum for the eyes."

- T.W. Adorno (Frankfurt School of sociologists) found TV bringing “the very smugness, intellectual passivity and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds.”
- Theodore Roszak described TV as a “narcotic disintegration of the sensibilities.”
- George F. Kennan accused TV of being “essentially antisocial.”
- Pope John Paul II: TV “glorifies sex and violence and recklessly spreads false values.”
- Neil Postman sees us as so engrossed with “amusing ourselves” as to have lost all capacity for serious, analytic thought.

How can it be that Mitchell Stephens can argue the thesis of this book: “that the moving image has the potential to help resolve (our current) crisis of the spirit”?

(The world of) neighborhoods filled with good conversation, bustling libraries and old-fashioned sincerity—if it ever really existed—is disappearing; it will not return. But this new form of communication should provide us with the tools—intellectual and artistic tools—needed to construct new, more resilient ways of looking at our lives. This will take time.... Video, I will argue, is the medium of which the twentieth century’s avant-garde has dreamed. (xi).

Stephens begins his argument with the Bible. The parallel biblical explanations of origins “In the beginning God created the heavens and earth” and “In the beginning was the Word” (Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1) assume, not only the creative existence of God, but the power of words and thought. “. . . it can be agreed that without language most of us could not think about much. . . . This is the first reason that talk of the fall of the word causes so much anxiety.” (16) The way people communicate determines, to *some* extent, how they think. Even beyond the content, the medium is the message, as McLuhan and others pointed out.

It is from the past that Stephens derives his argument about the present and future of human communication. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Socrates is describing a conference of Egyptian gods. Toth is the inventor of writing, math, and other skills. He argues before King Thamus that his arts should be shared with all Egyptians for their greater wisdom and progress. The king, a more powerful god than Toth, decides against writing for two important reasons, which Socrates and Plato seem to accept.

- “This invention (writing) will produce forgetfulness in the souls of those who have learned it. They will not have to use their memories, being able to rely on what is written.”
- (Besides, written words) “come without benefit of a teacher’s instruction” and will only produce “a semblance of wisdom. . . truth without real judgment.” (18,23)

Stephens does not claim to be an inventor nor a god, but feels like Toth—defending “not just some new electronic gizmo but an entire, relatively new form of communication.”

I will argue that once we move beyond simply aiming cameras at stage plays, conversations or sporting events and perfect original uses of moving images, video can help us gain new slants on the world, new ways of seeing. It can capture more of the tumult and confusions of contemporary life than tend to fit in lines of type. Through its

ability to step back from scenes and jump easily between scenes, video can also facilitate new, or at least previously underused, ways of thinking... I believe video too will prove “a new recipe” for new kinds of “wisdom.” (18-19)

The essence of this author’s argument is as follows. Most moderns do not appreciate the richness of oral tradition. Ancients (and those in traditional societies), who knew the power of their teachers and story-tellers, feared the coming of writing. Similarly, those of the Writing Age feared widespread use of paper and the printing press. “In 1671 Virginia’s longtime governor, Sir William Berkeley, thanked God for the absence of printing presses in his colony.” (33) There were also suspicions and criticisms surrounding the arrival of Arabic numerals, of photographs in newspapers, of telegraph, telephone, radio, and pencils with erasers—as the author points out. Understanding these fears helps us understand anxieties about our latest communication revolution—the rise of moving images and the fall of the word.

In his Amusing Ourselves To Death, 1985, Postman believes—similar to Jerry Mander before him (1977), Allan Bloom, 1987 and Ken Myers 1989—that television is about show business and can be nothing else. With H.G. Well, Postman argues that “we are in a race between education and disaster.” As Aldous Huxley warns in Brave New World, people are lost “not because they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.” Postman concludes that television is amusing us to death. (163)

In contrast, Postman describes the reading or typographic mind and a print culture of a past golden age.

In a culture dominated by print, public discourse tends to be characterized by a coherent, orderly arrangement of facts and ideas... In a print culture, writers make mistakes when they lie, contradict themselves, fail to support their generalizations, try to enforce illogical connections. In a print culture, readers make mistakes when they don’t notice, or even worse, don’t care. (51)

The name I have given to that period of time during which the American mind submitted itself to the sovereignty of the printing press is the Age of Exposition... (marked by) a sophisticated ability to think conceptually, deductively and sequentially; a high valuation of reason and order; an abhorrence of contradiction; a large capacity for detachment and objectivity; and a tolerance for delayed response.... Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business. (63)

Stephens’ answer to Postman, as we have seen, is that these very charges have been leveled against all of civilization’s new media including writing and print. Two things must be remembered about his position:

- Society has, Stephens says lost some values and wisdom in the transition away from the age of print.
- Television and other electronic media are presently far from offering the wisdom they should. They must grow to provide the leadership and instruction they are destined to control.

Stephens argues, as Amazon.com's synopsis says, that "the moving image is likely to make our thoughts not more feeble but more robust." This same review goes on to explain Stephens further response to critics by showing how "an emerging computer-edited and -distributed 'new video'—have the potential to inspire transformations in thought on a level with those inspired by products of writing and print. Stephens sees in video's complexities, simultaneities, and juxtapositions, new ways of understanding and perhaps even surmounting the tumult and confusions of contemporary life."

I know this is hard to accept. Believe me, on an evening when each of my children lies prone before a different TV carrying a different vapid program, it is hard to write. The fall of the printed word—the loss of our beloved books—is a large loss. Nevertheless, the rise of the moving image, as we perfect new, nonvapid uses of video, should prove an even larger gain. (230)

The new video will not go away. Its potential must be developed. Its addictive dangers do pose some threat to us, and it must be treated with caution.

All our enlightenments are not behind u. We are beginning again, and in this new beginning is the moving image. (230, concluding words of book)

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you see this debate as an example of postmodern thinking confronting modern trust in human reason and logic? In your opinion, is there anything to this author's notion of a new age of moving images benefiting society in the future? Is this, for you, new age dreaming or historical and social analysis?
2. How much television did you watch growing up?
3. How much television do you watch now? Does it give you any benefits beyond entertainment and relaxation?
4. Can television and the electronic media benefit a young person's thinking and growth?
5. How do you measure the detriments and benefits of television and the World Wide Web in today's societies?
6. If you consider television to be an overall negative factor for society, do you believe with Jerry Mander that we could get rid of it?

#### IMPLICATIONS

1. Analyses and evaluations of television and popular media are very important.
2. Most of the scholarly evaluations of television have been extremely negative—to the point of demanding its elimination (Jerry Mander, 1977).
3. This book is at least a most interesting suggestion of seeing electronic media and the moving image as part of the historical transitions from oral to writing to print and now video ages.
4. Among all the interpretations of pop culture and the media, and through our own experience, we must settle on a consistent view and develop skills of discernment for our selves—and young people.

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