

schooling and mass media. Adopting such research strategies may lead to a more complete explication of these complex relationships.

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Postman, Neil, *The Disappearance of Childhood*. New York, N.Y.: Delacorte Press, 1982, 192 pp., \$13.50.

In his *Devil's Dictionary*, Andrew Bierce defined childhood as "The period of human life intermediate between the idiocy of infancy and the folly of youth — two removes from the sin of manhood and three from the remorse of age." Approximately three hundred years earlier, Balthazar Gratien said, "Every man must be conscious of that insipidity of childhood which disgusts the sane mind. . . . Only time can cure a person of childhood and youth which are truly ages of imperfection in every respect." In the years separating these unsentimental observers, a set of socio-cultural and economic forces transformed the conditions of life and the way life is felt and regarded by most of mankind. The bourgeois revolution and the Romantic movement were so successful in shaping a conventional outlook and sentiment in European and neo-European societies that utterances such as those just attributed to Bierce, strike us as droll.

Although some things remain as before (business is still in charge) much has changed. Infant mortality has been dramatically reduced — and so has adult authority — including that of parents. Nutrition and sanitation are much improved as are official literacy rates and medical practices. These and a host of other factors have changed the experience of childhood and our thoughts and feelings about it. This is not to say that the experience of childhood and our reactions to it are uniform now. Class and cultural differences exist now as before. Moreover, this is not to say either, that the central facts of childhood have changed. Early helplessness and prolonged dependency are biological and social facts which resist changes of almost any sort — no matter where or when. Peurility has probably been noticed always and everywhere; and the important facts of differing degrees of maturity, as phenomena of social significance are unlikely to remain unnamed and ignored in almost any circumstances.

Neil Postman, in *The Disappearance of Childhood*, seems to argue against the foregoing perspective. Postman (like others before him) claims that "childhood is a social artifact, not a biological category" (p. xi). Moreover, he continues, if "children" is a term which denotes "a special class of people somewhere between the ages of seven and seventeen," requiring special treatment and believed to differ from adults in important ways, then "children have existed for less than four hundred years" (p. ix). Postman tries to persuade the reader that while the ancient Romans acknowledged childhood, this recognition disappeared with Rome's decline. He believes that childhood had to be reinvented by the Renaissance (p. xii). In a passage which brings together the elements of a loose and unsatisfactory argument (he calls it a theory — p. xiii) Postman attempts to explain the alleged disappearance of childhood: He alleges that, "the absence of literacy, the absence of the idea of education, the absence of the idea of shame . . . are the reasons why the idea of childhood did not exist in the medieval world" (sic) (p. 17), and they are now (he claims) making childhood disappear again (p. xii).

This line of reasoning and this sweeping style are reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan, that deeply conservative Catholic from Alberta who became a mass media celebrity in New York. Postman, who is Professor of Media Ecology at New York University, is apparently an admirer of McLuhan and another Canadian, Harold Innis, whose ideas McLuhan simplified and popularized. Indeed, Postman seems to take Innis as his prophet, if not his model for scholarship.

Innis was an adventuresome, resourceful, and inventive scholar who disdained conventional boundaries between subject departments, or, as he called them, information monopolies. However, while he was bold,

irreverant, and iconoclastic, he disliked exaggeration. He was fond of quoting Tallyrand, who said "tout ce qui est exagéré est insignifiant." This attitude to exaggeration was definitely not shared by McLuhan and, apparently, is not shared by Postman. What the British polymath, Jonathan Miller, says of McLuhan, in his very fine intellectual biography, *McLuhan*, applies to Postman — at least when the latter adopts an historical mood, as he does in *The Disappearance*. McLuhan, says Miller, was "an exponent of a bankrupt form of cultural history, the success of whose peculiar endeavour relies to a great extent on the use of large scale, tendentious generalizations." In this genre of discourse, human development is treated on such a grand scale that details are foreshortened or lost in struggles between artificially paired alternatives. Thereby, reality is transformed by Procrustean stretches; and inconvenient evidence is ignored or lost in the "struggle between successive dynasties of synthetic Leviathans."

When Postman stakes out his ground, he is palpably exaggerated and probably wrong in much of his argument. For example, who on reflection can accept the claim that "reading creates adulthood" (p. 13)? In the history of mankind, few adults have known how to read; and even in times like the present when official figures suggest adult illiteracy is supposedly unusual, most reading is done by a very small minority and most adults have read virtually nothing. The fact that Postman does not bother to describe or define what he denotes with the word "adult" does not give him room for escape from the charge of error. For this *does* look like the error of mistaking subsequence for consequence. Exaggeration brings on these sorts of difficulties. Book culture is patently not an adult monopoly as claimed (pp. 76-77). Moreover, other real monopolies ensure that Postman is in error in claiming that "electric media find it impossible to withhold any secrets" (p. 80). Television does withhold secrets because some things don't lend themselves to visual treatment; and the market orientation dictates content. What is distributed by the mass electronic media does not so much destroy childhood as it infantilizes all users — irrespective of age or legal status. I am inclined to the view that because of this we live not in a society which is becoming childless; rather we live in what Innis would have called a paedarchy (a regime of children); and we are not governed by adult or mature judgement and experience but by paedocracy (government by children). As I see it, if childhood is disappearing, it is not because all adult secrets are ubiquitously exposed and/or that shame is on the wane. Rather, the authority and other claims of maturity of experience and judgement have been debased and discounted through the mass infantilization of the population. Mass infantilization is ensured when the population subordinates all values and distinctions to those of commercial organization, property relations, market logic, and consumer culture generally.

Postman does not seem to have grasped the fact that in the world of business, *anything*, is fair game for exploitation. This brings all into the supposedly adult domain of commerce. All things intimate, tender, pure and young are there made otherwise as they are homogenized by mass media with the tough, the compromised, and the aged elements in the commodity and dollar chases, as well as in fantasy. We all become "human resources" and are *used* as are resources of all kinds.

This and other shameful states of affairs have occasionally provoked a few sensitive souls to teach their young to be sensitive to the brutishness which seems natural to man, and to feel shame in its presence. Some of us, perhaps no more and not fewer than would have done so at any time in the past, recoil at the sight of children wielding weapons in Northern Ireland, in Central America and in the Middle East.

Finally, there is the awkward detail of evidence. Postman might have noticed that the Oxford English Dictionary documents historical usage of terminology denoting childhood in the senses we understand today, from the mid-10th century. One does not ignore such evidence. This and an apparent unfamiliarity with other matters which are awkward for his argument (such as the children's Crusades of 1212) place serious flaws in a superficially attractive piece. Exaggeration exacts a dear price.