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Everyday Nihilism: The Culture of the Eighties

by Andrew Feenberg

Introduction

American artistic production during this decade went on against a cultural backdrop of astonishing mediocrity. These "Reagan Years," never very lively in any case, have already acquired the musty odor of the past. The reflections that follow attempt to highlight a few of the more noteworthy themes of the decade, without however pretending to exhaustiveness.

Seeing Through Politics

During the 1960s social critics introduced the concept of the "society of the spectacle" as a telling exaggeration of spectacular tendencies in contemporary business and politics. Ronald Reagan's "performance" as President has now accustomed us to taking this hyperbole completely literally.

The professionalization of politics in America has now reached the point where the functions of representation are almost completely separate from those of organization and rule. Americans are generally aware of this. They want a president who looks like a president, and are less concerned with what he believes and does than they are with his ability to maintain a convincing facade of legitimate and benevolent authority.

To the ironic participant in the political process, "convincing" means always "convincing to the others." But generalized sophistication seems to produce new requirements of leadership as constraining as the old ones of politics and ideology and incorporating them as tools. The question today is not whether we agree with the candidate's historical positions on the issues, but whether, having taken those positions, he can sell himself effectively. In the terms of one philosophically inclined adman: "Positioning is knowing thyself."

Television naturally plays a large role in disseminating this outlook. We who are able to follow the Presidential campaign of 1988 on the nightly news find ourselves slipping constantly into the position of media critics of the candidates. After each speech or debate, the newscasters discuss the merits of the candidates' self-presentation, the advice they are receiving from their managers, the opinion polls which gauge the success of their merchandising efforts, even the latest terminology of campaigning.

American television seems to thrive on the process of demystifying the myths it itself creates. By bringing us into the process as "insiders," television compliments our sense of ourselves as shrewd observers, never fooled by the media. At the same time, this approach positions us at a critical distance from the political process, where no idea or ideology can really touch us. We are observers of the performers' professional

competence, not historical subjects involved in a collective political enterprise. We are cool...

The Way of Denial

The single word that most effectively sums up the spirit of the decade is the word "yuppie." Yuppies--young upwardly mobile professionals--enjoy high status and income, flaunt their good fortune, spend as though they were still on the lower slopes of a sharply rising income curve, and believe in the unconscious depths of their souls that their success proves that all's right with the universe.

Perhaps the most astounding accomplishment of Reagan's government was to introduce "yuppie" style fiscal irresponsibility at the highest levels of the state. Reagan spent massively without asking anyone to pay the price through increased taxes, and somehow he seems to have gotten away with it. With Reagan, denial becomes an essential part of the American Way of Life.

Psychological denial is the refusal to face reality in the hope that it will go away. The old wisdom holds that reality is not so easily ignored; those who confront hard truths and sacrifice for the future are supposed to have the satisfaction of seeing the ultimate failure of their self-deluded and spendthrift neighbors.

The 1980s was a time of systematic denial in the political and financial domains during which the United State transformed itself from an independent power into a debtor nation. The 1990s may yet confirm the wisdom of the past, but what becomes of truth and morality if the cycle from denial to disaster can be indefinitely prolonged? This is the great achievement of the Reagan administration, and sets a model for whole categories of the American population which now live according to the way of denial.

Nay-saying experts have been promising that the cycle would close in economic crisis every year of Reagan's reign, but Cassandra is safely ignored these days. We are living the triumph of the performative: economic truths are in any case based on dubious and questionable theoretical paradigms, while a show of self-confidence works wonders on credulous foreign investors frightened by political and social instability at home. The humiliation of economic rationality over the past eight years is so complete that it has served as a vector for the spread of relativism and skepticism from the cloistered world of academic debate to every taxi cab and bar.

Reality Principles

Despite the general air of denial, Americans have faced up to certain inescapable realities in the 1980s. Although few consequences follow from these moments of recognition, they promise important changes in the future.

The process is also interesting for what it shows about the epistemology of contemporary politics. Traditionally conceived as a macroscopic projection of parliamentary debates, the public sphere has now become the scene on which candidates for "reality" present themselves for inspection. The point is no longer to win an argument, but to direct and focus attention on an emerging pattern. Here then are a few examples, worth citing for the encouragement they offer in a fairly gloomy picture.

War and Peace: After the trauma of the Vietnam War, the American military has become exceedingly cautious about engaging its troops on foreign soil. As a result, we

now have a government which inverts Teddy Roosevelt's menacing slogan: the U.S. talks loud and carries a small stick. With what anxiety we awaited the often threatened American invasion of Nicaragua! The enormous military infrastructure built in Honduras to support it has been complete for years. Tens of thousands of American troops have moved through those bases on "exercises" and "training missions." And yet, and yet, the major military action of the United States under the most verbally aggressive president in recent history was the conquest of...Grenada.

The Limits of Technology: Probably more than any other nation, the United States identifies itself with the triumph of technology. This has the agreeable consequence that every technological progress is a symbolic advance for the U.S., but every technological disaster then becomes a depressing national humiliation. The nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, followed by the even worse accident at Chernobyl finally laid to rest the dream of infinite and cheap power. To Europeans, perhaps, this is only a technical failure, but to Americans it is a deep wound in the ideological fabric of the country. Still worse was the Challenger disaster. A whole nation's children returned from school that day, having witnessed the accident live on television. What mark will this leave on their soul? What doubts and uncertainties? The realization that technology cannot do everything seems to be slowly sinking in.

Environmental Crisis: As Governor of California, Ronald Reagan once denounced environmentalism as a radical and unamerican ideology, claiming that trees caused more air pollution than automobiles. But today, global warming and holes in the Ozone layer testify to the reality of problems that looked like science fiction scenarios only a few years ago. It is still far too early to tell if this invasion of the public space by such menacing environmental themes will produce a corresponding public will to save the environment, but at least this is another reality that seems to have worked its way through the mists of denial to increasingly general recognition.

Nuclear Endings: Perhaps the most powerful "reality" to have surfaced during the 1980s is the possibility of nuclear war. Anti-nuclear sentiment emerged soon after Reagan's election as a reflex of the widespread concern with his bellicose rhetoric. After a generation of very effective denial, during which only small groups of intellectuals and "cranks" objected to nuclear weapons, arms control suddenly became a popular cause. The mortality of civilization is now generally accepted although it is not clear yet what can be done to avert it beyond speaking sensibly to the Russians, already quite an achievement for this administration.

Salvation for Fun and Profit

There are, of course, those who still believe in something because they want to and not just because they must. These are the pathetic victims of television evangelism, who send literally hundreds of millions of dollars a year to their favorite preachers. No one who has never seen these shows can quite imagine the depth of vulgarity and stupidity to which the human spirit descends when it actually believes something. Here deception and self-deception achieve for desperate lower class souls what denial achieves for their contented middle class brethren.

Religion as a commercial product has always existed, but only recently has spiritual commerce become fully aware of its marketing potential in a society of mass consumption. In the average American household, the television operates ten or twelve

hours a day, whether it is watched or not, as a reminder that life goes on in more interesting zones than those reserved for domestic duties. Movie stars, talk show hosts and actresses have long since been elevated to the status of secular saints, so why not schedule some real saints for a change, capable of placing the viewer in direct contact with the deity? It seems like destiny for television, as a "window" onto an omnipresent higher reality, to be seized by God Himself.

The chief effect of this divine invasion of the airwaves has been the rise of right wing "family ideology." I suppose that we get the ideologies we deserve and certainly the family in the U.S. is well on the way to becoming a personal hobby rather than a social institution. (About half of marriages end in divorce.) The struggle to restore the family is a reflection of this state of affairs. But the focal point of these moral energies is the fight against abortion, the "murder" of beings so devoid of social merit as to resemble the abortion foes' own wounded self-image.

The story of televangelism is not yet over, but already we know the conclusion. God's instruments, as usual, turn out to be human, all-too-human. While preparing for Armageddon and fulminating against sin, these saintly men were visiting prostitutes and bedding church secretaries. The shocking truth feeds into the general mood of knowing skepticism.

Intelligence, Artificial

According to several serious best sellers of the 1980s, this was the decade of the "new narcissism," an intensified pursuit of personal pleasure by individuals who had less identity than ever before. The collapse of public life and the decline of the family seem to cut individuality loose from its two main institutional supports. No longer concretized through real bonds and obligations, the person becomes a discontented spectator on his or her own life, engaged in strategies of manipulation and control directed toward itself and others alike.

This critique of psychosocial trends converges unexpectedly with the cultural impact of the new cognitive and computer sciences. Taking the computer as a model of the human mind, researchers have constructed new theories that appear to give deep insight into mental functioning. At the same time, computer scientists have applied themselves with passionate energy to replacing the human mind, for many tasks, with a new generation of intelligent machines.

These theoretical advances affect the lives of ordinary people only indirectly, through the prestige and plausibility they give to popular metaphors that link human beings to machines, and especially to computers. Over the last decade we have been informed by popular scientific and philosophic writing that we are "meat machines," and as such subject to the mechanistic logic of the computers we have invented in our own image. The technological obsolescence of mankind has never been closer to achievement. We may soon be those "sex organs of machines" Marshall McLuhan long ago promised we would become.

What is the self-understanding of a machine supposed to be like? A computer is nothing without a program and the human computer is only as good as its programs. The programming and reprogramming of people has become big business in the United States, building on the already successful business in self-help manuals of all sorts. Today this obsession with self-improvement has found a new and more scientific basis.

Operating manuals for the human body and mind proliferate on the non-fiction (?) shelves of bookstores.

The discourse of human relations in this new age of narcissism brings home the desolation of the mechanical man. People "push each others' buttons" today where once they might have been sentimentally described as falling in love.

Unplugging

Two new technologies have unplugged America in a startling reversal of the trend toward mass society. These are the videocassette recorder and the microcomputer. They have contradictory implications.

The VCR has become standard equipment in American living rooms. It now costs only a few hundred dollars and thousands of films can be rented for a few dollars each; local video libraries are far more commonplace sights than bookstores.

The VCR gives the viewer control over the time of the spectacle. It pulls him out of the broadcasting audience and opens up the possibility of highly individualized self-expression through choice of entertainment. But so far few owners of VCRs are choosing to significantly individualize their viewing choices.

There is a precedent for this state of affairs. The market segmentation that was earlier expected with the introduction of cable television failed to occur despite its hundreds of channels. Perhaps the videocassette marketplace will remain just as centralized and standardized as has broadcasting. Meanwhile, the primary producer of videocassettes remains the film industry, and it services audiences the average age of which is in precipitous decline.

The microcomputer is another technology that allows the user to control the local environment in new ways. It represents computing power for the millions, the possibility of breaking the monopoly of large corporations and government agencies in the control of the microprocessor. But to what end? The imaginary of struggle against a totalitarian dystopia based on giant computers contrasts painfully with the reality of millions of children typing their homework on Dad's word processor.

Although the microcomputer has no very clear function in the home, there are those who take the imaginary of home computing seriously. These are the "hackers" who attack large computers over the phone lines. A small elite of computer jocks, mostly recruited in suburban high schools, gather printouts from the trash of large corporations and decipher account names and codes, then use the information to "break into" private computers.

This new form of adventure is melodramatized in science fiction fantasies of a totally networked world in which the new heroes and villains operate in "cyberspace," invading and manipulating huge data banks and computing devices possessed of intelligence and will. Here individuality comes to mean possession of one's own microprocessor as a base for entering and conquering the networks.

The Terrors of Contagion

The 1980s discovered "networking" as an alternative to strict hierarchies and formal organizations. The network multiplies the power of its members by rapidly moving resources, and especially information, along coaxial pathways of mutual

confidence. Conference calls, FAX transmission and computer messaging supply instant access to the minds that compose the temporary social unit of the network, accelerating the participants beyond the speed of paper that is still the maximum velocity achieved by shuffling corporate and government dinosaurs.

The network evokes images of a new form of "post-modern" individuality, supple and adaptable, capable of staging its personal performance on many and changing scenes from one day to the next. Personal life becomes an affair of network management as family and other stable structures collapse. The individual achieves a relative liberation: if one cannot escape social determination, at least multiply the number of connections and contacts so that their point of intersection becomes a rich and juicy locus of choice. To be is to network.

But there is a reverse side to the coin: the network forms a transmission belt along which bad things can invade the subject. Thus alongside the theme of networking, the theme of contagion runs through the decade. The relatively trivial problem of Herpes was quickly followed by the plague of AIDS, a disease which weighs heavily on the newly lightened being of networked man.

More astonishing than these familiar biological disorders, which remind us of our poor biological origins, there is the wholly unprecedented infection of "computer viruses." These are "bugs" that consist in pure information, demonic programs which travel from computer to computer along the network doing mischief as they multiply, printing idiotic greetings on thousands of screens or erasing hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of programs and data without warning. Computer viruses threaten the new social bonds of our society and through them ourselves insofar as we depend on the networks by which we live.

The Challenge of the East

The rise of Japan and the other new Asian economic powers during this decade has finally been noticed in the United States. Whole markets, in televisions, stereos, motorcycles, pianos, certain types of automobiles and clothing, have been surrendered. Resentment against Japan is intense and results in periodic attacks on Japanese business.

But the reality is slowly sinking in: the United States is no longer the unquestioned manufacturing leader in the world today. It would cost a great deal to renounce all those cheap, high quality Japanese imports. Even as legislation is passed "punishing" the Japanese for their protectionism, books appear touting the "Zen" of management and offering it as a model for American business. It is ironic that Japanese management is based on participatory techniques brought to Japan after the War by an unsuccessful American management consultant.

Meanwhile, the East is becoming present in American culture in other ways. Huge numbers of Southeast Asian immigrants are changing the demography of many places in the U.S. These quiet and law-abiding peoples maintain strong family ties and respect learning and hard work, virtues that no longer seem to typify American youth.

The Asian immigrants make no impression at all on the media since they do not flaunt flamboyant styles or offer a new generation of mass culture heroes. They are mainly noticed in educational settings where they achieve success out of all proportion to their numbers. Whole university departments appear to have migrated eastward, and

many universities more or less openly discriminate against Asian students in order to achieve a better "balance" of ethnic types.

Could this be the providential significance of the Vietnam War? To provide America with a fresh pool of hardworking technical talent just as its own resources seem to be exhausted by easy living and self-indulgence?

Business as Usual

The culture of the 1980s differed most sharply from that of the preceding two decades in restoring the self-esteem of the business world. Making money became respectable once again, indeed, it gained more than respectability and became the most important form of public service. Taxes were cut for the rich in the hope that they would perform their public duties even more enthusiastically. Business life blossomed as the recession of the early Reagan years gave way to renewed expansion, and soon America was swept up in merger mania.

The health and vigor of American business is accompanied by a renewed confidence in the ideological underpinnings of the system. No longer is capitalism in crisis. These days it is communism that is the sick society. The old free market ideology of the pre-Keynesian era has made a comeback and it serves as the primary justification for social policy, and especially for dismantling social policy.

If problems remain, we are told, voluntary effort can solve them better than government. But who believes the cynical assertion that a "thousand points of light" will appear in response to the need? Meanwhile, homeless people sleep on park benches and in stair wells by the hundreds of thousands, a sixth of the American population has no health insurance, and infant mortality rates in the U.S. compare favorably with those of...Costa Rica.

The new atmosphere has encouraged great progress in economics. The theory of "rational expectations" holds that the sort of information economists use to understand the economy will enter into the calculations of economic agents as well. There is thus no privileged standpoint from which to view economic life; all observers are in a sense participants and vice versa. Economics is an information science.

The case of Ivan Boesky illustrates how the manipulation of information replaces traditional notions of economic speculation. Boesky and his associates committed the crime of "insider trading," using inside information about financial transactions to enrich themselves at the expense of clients and stockholders. Boesky was fined \$100,000,000, but he escaped prison by betraying his colleagues in crime. It is said that knowing the date on which his indictment would be announced, Boesky sold his holdings short in anticipation of a decline in stock prices. His take from this manipulation enabled him to pay off a fair portion of his fine.

Creativity, Inc.

American society remains remarkably dynamic. It is a rootless country in which people have always moved to capital, in which whole cities are recycled at the rhythm of the passing generations. It is a country in which it is so easy to start new businesses that the business world is a realm of social experimentation rather than a fount of respectability or conservatism. It is a country invaded by waves of literally millions of

immigrants, most without papers, from countries all over the world. And it is a country where a stripped down instant culture is transmitted to the immigrants in short order by schools and work.

The churning populace switches channels from Music Television to the Reverend Profit to Dallas, invents and popularizes new hobbies such as skateboarding and surfing, and creates new styles and fashions on a daily basis. These, projected all over the world to an astounded public, represent the image of America as a creative force.

At another level, huge corporations as large as cities, learn to break with generations of bureaucratic tradition and extract the creative energies of their personnel in purposefully disorganized environments. New computers, in particular, testify to the power of these new forms of "chaocracy" to generate invention in the age of bigness.

The 1980s were not an especially exciting time in the history of America. This was a bland decade. The proof is that young people today listen with imaginary nostalgia to the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. Yet the comparison with the Eisenhower years is not entirely apt. Daily life is often shaped far more by the social liberation achieved in the 1960s than by the current conservative ideological fad. The spirit is preserved, amidst stagnation, and an increasingly cynical government, while occasional bizarre excesses of decadence hint at more interesting things to come.