



Anna Myroek-Wodecki

Turn Out the Lights

by Thomas Fleming

It must have been Sigmund Freud who observed that whenever a new technology appears it is applied almost immediately to some sexual purpose. The dirty old man of Vienna was thinking of such inventions as the photograph and the moving picture, which gave a new impetus to the production and consumption of pornography, but he might just as well have been describing his own métier. As soon as experts appeared, claiming to have invented a science of the human mind, some of those experts began work on the first “scientific” treatises on sexuality. Freud, who was himself more sex-obsessed than his patients, devised a theory of psychoanalysis that is a mere projection of his need to reduce all human life to the sexual dimension. No wonder people found it so titillating. For most people psychoanalytic theory is nothing more than highbrow pornography, and the process of analysis, although designed as an exercise in *self*-abuse, turns all too frequently into a sexual relationship between the supposed doctor and his patient. Therapists have taken one step past even Casanova, who is said to have seduced women before robbing them. Now, they take the money as a down payment.

The 20th century has been the century of gimcracks, a remarkable number of which have been sexually exploited. Henry Ford’s motor cars may have spattered the highways with blood, but who knows how many children were conceived in them? The automobile, in turn, gave birth to the motor hotel, which has replaced the bordello as well as the hotel, and there is hardly any need to mention sound recordings, since most contemporary pop music would have been regarded as obscene even a generation ago, or the telephone, whose latest contribution to enlightenment is the 900 phone-sex that recently bankrupted a village in Guatemala.

But it is audio-visual technology—film and television—that has become the staple of the pornography industry, and no

backwoods American village is complete without a late-night sex channel and a video store renting X-rated films. The big breakthrough, however, is virtual reality. In its infant stage a few years ago, virtual reality allowed the viewer to imagine he was having carnal intercourse with a woman who, in real life, would not let him buy her a drink, but we are a progressive people, and by 1993 it was possible to participate in a gang rape without leaving the safety and convenience of one’s own home.

Think about it. Your next-door neighbor’s teenage lout—the one who occasionally babysits for you—is staying up all night with his senses plugged into sex videos. To enhance the illusion, he may be smoking dope or snorting coke. Whatever is going on in his mind is, in this free Republic of ours, of no consequence since the right to see dirty movies was a primary concern of the Founding Fathers, who inserted the “freedom from censorship” clause into the Constitution. You can find it right after the part that says all men are created equal.

The constitutional right to perversity only stops at the point of coercion, and it is not too hard to imagine a day when women will have the right to be murdered for pay on SNUFF TV. “You don’t have to watch” is the inevitable answer, but to avoid perversity in the 1990’s would mean wearing earplugs and a blindfold most of the time. Curiosity is one of man’s defining qualities, and it is particularly strong in children, who could not escape the mercenary eroticism of our culture even if they tried. It is all around them and us, in the 7-Eleven stores, in the video parlors, and on cable channels. We cannot watch the evening news or pick up the *Chicago Tribune* or the poor benighted *Rockford Register Star* without learning the details of Michael Jackson’s relations with little boys or of the broomstick jugglery performed by high-school wrestling teams. What would once have been called hard-core pornography can now be seen in R-rated movies, and it is not at all difficult to

get your hands on the kinds of pornographic materials people once had to order from France.

If we move from the would-be rapist's bedroom, where he has his own computer, television, stereo system, and VCR, down to the family room to take a peek at what Mom and Dad are watching, we will not be too surprised at their son's viewing habits. Many American families routinely rent films like *Blue Velvet* and *Basic Instinct*, and even if they do not allow their children to watch these films with them, kids always know what their parents are up to.

Let us suppose these are good Christian people who do not want to see Michael Douglas's backside; they do, nonetheless, like to watch PG movies and network television. When the set is off, the men may look at *Sports Illustrated*, their wives at *People*. If future archaeologists were lucky enough to locate a fair sampling of this cultural stratum, they might conclude, erroneously, that they had struck upon a late 20th-century pornographer's collection of exotica, while the truth is they had tunneled into the public library.

The week before preparing this issue, I was laid up with the Beijing flu. With senses sharpened by pain and a brain dulled by multicultural microbes, I was in shape to carry out my long-deferred experiment: watching a week of network television. Equipped with soft pillow and comfy chair ("Not the comfy chair!"), I watched new shows and reruns, talk shows and soaps, cartoons and real-life cop thrillers. My 12-year-old son who loves TV was thrilled in anticipation of seeing all the programs we never watch. Mostly for his benefit, I took a look at several family shows, such as *Full House*, but his attention wandered by the second commercial and before long he was off somewhere playing a game. In the middle of the second night, he came in and looked at a few minutes of *Beverly Hills, 90210*: "When I grow up," he concluded, "I sure hope I don't have your job."

The only important conclusion I was able to draw is banal enough: network television is awful, worse than even I had imagined. For one thing, the writing is wretched. I do not recall laughing aloud except once, when Phil Donahue was doing his impersonation of a public intellectual. Phil really is, without knowing it, a comedic genius, a sort of Professor Irwin Corey in spite of himself, and when he teams up with that other incorrigible clown, Vlad Pozner, the result is zanier than anything since Olson and Johnson.

Of the shows that were actually billed as comedies, only *Seinfeld* offered anything that could be recognized as jokes. Of the two episodes I saw, one was amusing in a neurotic sort of way but spoiled by Mr. Seinfeld's acting. Like Roseanne Arnold, Seinfeld seems to be staring at the cameraman, and he delivers his lines like a blackjack dealer laying out cards: efficient, well-timed, predictable. I had heard a great deal about the show, that it was "hip" and risqué, but all I found was the same formula-humor that dominated television the last time I watched it. *Seinfeld* was a lot dirtier—one whole show was devoted to an anonymous woman who makes a salacious proposition on tape. When it turns out to be his old girlfriend's idea of a joke, Seinfeld and his friends begin to eye her like a package of prime porterhouse being slowly unwrapped by a refugee from the Duke rice diet.

Another thing that has come a long way is the depiction of Jews. In the good old days of a decade ago, it seemed like an unwritten law that Jews played Italians and gentiles played Jews. Jewish characters were conceived of, essentially, as gen-

tiles with one or two distinguishing features—academic achievement and obsessive mothers. *Seinfeld*, on the other hand, might have been conceived by Julius Streicher: the main characters are whining and ineffectual; the humor descends to the level of nose-picking and sex fantasy. Why doesn't the Anti-Defamation League do something about the self-hating Jews who write these shows?

The Simpsons also pokes fun at American Jews but in the same spirit with which it picks on Hindus, cops, fundamentalists, and schoolteachers. For all its faults, *The Simpsons* is the only serious social satire allowed on television. Who can forget the episode in which Lisa turns bad and steals all the teachers' editions? "Does anyone remember the multiplication tables?" screams the math teacher. When Bart, like the good brother he is underneath, takes the heat, his punishment is to write "I will not expose the ignorance of my teachers."

Television humor, for the most part, seems to consist of ethnic stereotyping and references to other television shows. On Fox TV's *Sinbad*, a child refuses to go to church because he does not believe in God. At this point Stepin Fetchit—or is it Mantan Moreland or Nick O'Demus—challenges his atheism: "Then how you explain Wile E. Coyote?" Imagine if a white comic said blacks are so dumb they think Wile E. Coyote's survival is a proof of God's existence? And if it is not Roadrunner cartoons, it is *The Brady Bunch* or *Bonanza* that provides the only cultural frame of reference that can be taken for granted.

Much of the criticism of television has been selectively directed at MTV or particularly violent programs like *NYPD Blue*. This is a sucker's game. Banning MTV is a perfectly good idea, but neither the gangsta rap videos nor Beavis and Butt-head are anything more than the most superficial symptoms of a disease that has rotted out the institutions of our common life. One does not turn on MTV to receive edification any more than young men buy *Playboy* for the interviews. These are the red-light districts of the popular media: they have always been with us and always will be.

We must not expect to hear a Sunday school lesson in a bordello. Fair enough. But why should we tolerate the *Playboy* philosophy in Sunday school? The danger to society, represented by popular entertainment, is not to be found on the fringes but at the center, which seems to represent the moral system of the majority. The nastier shows do less harm precisely because we know they are nasty, and it is as much of a waste of time to criticize rock videos as it is to attack Bill Clinton. That Disney movies and conservative Republicans should represent the mainstream, that is the real American horror.

So long as film has existed there have been adult movies, by which I do not mean pornography but serious films on themes that are not "suitable for younger audiences." The same warning label should be placed on the plays of Shakespeare, Euripides, and Eugene O'Neill. Goethe observed that the admission of young women to the theater had ruined German drama, because it was no longer possible to take up difficult matters on the stage. Goethe lived in an age when people understood that even some very moral literature is not suitable for everyone, but democracy seems to assume that sauce for the gander must always be sauce for the goose and her goslings. If father can see a production of a licentious play, such as *The Country Wife*, then it must be, according to the 14th Amendment, fun for the whole family.

I do not think anyone regarded Ernst Lubitsch's sex farces as family entertainment, and although *To Be or Not to Be* and *The Merry Widow* would offend a Puritan, the vice is frivolous to the point of delicacy, reminiscent of Landor's description of Catullus: "Such stains there are . . . as when a Grace / Sprinkles another's laughing face / with nectar, and runs on." They did make movies of immoral tendency in the 30's and 40's, but it was also the age of John Ford and Frank Capra, and most people seem to have known the difference between *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. I do not know precisely when the morals of Don Juan became confused with "family values," but the revolution was accomplished by the time I was old enough to see films like *Pillow Talk*, whose message is simple: there is nothing wrong with Doris Day that a night in the sack with Rock Hudson cannot fix. Hollywood is, after all, the land of impossible dreams.

By the 70's moral corruption was a given of American film, and the more wholesome a movie looked on the surface, the more depraved was its subtext. *Paper Moon*, which was advertised as an endearing and old-fashioned comedy, was in reality among the nastiest films of the decade—a film that made vice cute and portrayed the Middle American family as a stultifying second-best to a life spent as a con artist. In fact, most of the family movies and TV shows of the past ten years are as solid as *Paper Moon*, and when I hear evangelicals recommending *E.T.* (hate your own species and love ugliness) or *The Cosby Show* (it's easy to have a successful black family, so long as Dad's a doctor, Mom's a lawyer, and both spend most of their time at home with the kids), I can only speculate on what Italians would call their *formazione*.

Some conservatives like to think that simple, decent people are being corrupted by improper role models. If only Magic Johnson had not done whatever he did to contract AIDS; if only Michael Jordan did not consort with gamblers; if only Cher would act her age. . . . But "the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings." Wherever did we get this notion that entertainers—or, worse, athletes—were human beings worthy of imitation? Once upon a time "show people," as we used to call them, were regarded as suspicious characters who, even if they lived blameless lives, had trivialized themselves by acting out other people's fantasies (consider the depiction of the players in *Nicholas Nickleby*). An athlete might be admired for his physical prowess, but only a "sportsman" would wish to make his acquaintance.

Today, however, the tables are turned, and it is everyday life that seems to be an illusion, while the affairs of strippers and basketball players who dribble on and off the court are the reality. One night I fell asleep during the evening news, and when I awoke I was treated to the details of a celebrity sex scandal. It gets worse every day, was my first thought, until I realized that the program was *A Current Affair* and not *Dan Rather*—a distinction without a difference.

Anyone who read the front pages of a newspaper during the past year might conclude that the most important events were the death of a basketball player's father, the same player's retirement, Burt and Loni's divorce, Donald and Marla's wedding, and an injured skating queen. Mr. Jordan and Miss Kerrigan may be estimable people, for all I know, but they are only entertainers, and any information about their careers belongs in the sports section rather than on the front page, and as for Mr. Trump and Mr. Reynolds, while it would once have been sufficient to declare that they are not gentlemen, I am more in-

clined to wonder if they are even human, much less men. There is something seriously wrong with any person who thinks that anything Michael Jordan does is news, and something wrong with a newspaper that would deface its front page with the rumor that Mr. Jordan is going to try out for the White Sox. This, then, is the substratum, the foundations of American culture: pregnant pinup girls on the cover of *Vanity Fair* and headline stories of emasculation. If cultures were separable, if high and low could be distinguished like Saxon and Norman in 1100, we might be content to sigh, regretfully, over the way these peasant dogs live and spend our time only on the upper slopes of literature and art.

Unfortunately, the same people who grew up watching *Father Knows Best* and *The Brady Bunch* are now writing novels and painting pictures. If American education amounted to anything, a few years in high school and college might be expected to elevate the aspiring artist above Wally and Beaver or Beavis and Butt-head, but such is not the case, because the people teaching literature and art, however advanced their pretensions, are accurate reflections of the movies, TV shows, and pop music that formed their taste and character. For the artist, what you get is what you see, and it is no accident that 60's pop art appealed to an entire generation of TV-watchers and consumers.

The problem with American culture was summed up last fall the day after both Federico Fellini and River Phoenix died. If popular culture has ever reached the level of real art, it is in Fellini's best films. Mr. Phoenix, on the other hand, had starred in a number of forgettable teen-exploitation movies. Whose demise received top billing? If you have to ask, you must be Italian.

Night after night we were treated to the sordid details of River Phoenix's "lifestyle." He was, his hippie mother sobbed, a victim of this cruel and unjust society. First the whales, now this. *Espresso's* American correspondent, Vittorio Zucconi, had obviously had enough and titled his column "*Requiem per un cretino*," pointing out the moral inequivalence between a victim of the metro killer and "a degraded young man, bored and overpaid, who destroys his own life with drugs." The Italian "prefer[s] to lament the passenger and not the star." Few American journalists can still make such a distinction.

What sort of person can regard River Phoenix as a victim of anything but himself? TV watchers, sports aficionados, *People* magazine-readers—the majority, in other words, of the American people. When Homer Simpson goes to college, he can only view his experience as an extension of *Animal House*, and when his distorted view of reality lands his friends in trouble, his only solution is a prank. Is he sure it will work? Of course, he insists, unless TV and the movies have lied to him all these years.

But television and the movies do lie, and their lies go far beyond the impossibly beautiful stories of gods and heroes on which we used to nourish our character. The lies told by poets used to represent our highest aspirations; now they hint at our basest declinations. There is some good even in the worst of us, a good deal of evil in the best, and on this basis every decent person must be shown to be a hypocrite, every villain a hero. Hollywood's lies corrode our inner spirit; they make us hate ourselves and go whoring after strange gods. Worst of all, they require no effort but are slipped into our consciousness as easily as a shot of heroin, and with the same effect. In reading a book or watching a play, we can abstract ourselves from the ac-

tion and judge it critically; with film and television, such abstraction is fatal to the experience. We either have to accept the show or turn it off. As a compromise, we can dull our brains with alcohol or pills. I learned this when I found myself enjoying *Thunderball* after the third beer.

Television—including televised sports—makes us all passive and impotent spectators of a fantastic world, which little by little replaces the real world of everyday life. When Homer tells his wife about the early years of their marriage, he is actually recalling a *Father Knows Best* episode. For Homer and for most of us, TV and movies are life, and our colleagues and children are real only insofar as they can absorb the energy and identity of these electronic phantasms. It is the joke about the man who reads *Playboy* and then kicks his wife.

Ray Bradbury saw this coming 40 years ago. In *Fahrenheit 451*, Montag's wife spends her days popping pills and watching soap operas on the three television walls of a room that has absorbed all their spare cash. Now, it is her dream that they can save enough for a fourth wall, completing the picture and shutting out life completely. When Montag interrupts her favorite show, turns off the walls, and forces his wife and her two friends to listen to "Dover Beach," one of the women bursts into tears. "You see?" exclaims the other friend, "poetry and tears, poetry and suicide and crying and awful feelings. . . . Why do people want to hurt people? Not enough hurt in the world, you got to tease people with stuff like that!"

But that is Montag's point exactly: to face the reality of suffering and evil. "Go home," he tells her, "and think of your first husband divorced and your second husband killed in a jet and your third husband blowing his brains out, go home and think of that and your damn Caesarian sections, too, and your children who hate your guts." Goethe observed more than once that great art requires a great people capable of appreciating Aeschylus or Shakespeare: "We admire the tragedies of the ancient Greeks. But, to take a correct view of the case, we ought rather to admire the period and the nation in which their production was possible than the individual authors." But turn-about is fair play, and one can only despise and condemn a nation whose art runs the gamut from Seinfeld to Philip Roth, from MTV to Philip Glass.

Media metaphors were a common ploy for the half-baked of 20 or 30 years ago. But if one were to parrot Marshall McLuhan's phrase that the medium is the message, then the alarming significance of electronic culture—of interactive television and virtual reality—is not the violence and pornography but the passivity and helplessness of people who cannot even look something up in a book or stare at a painting long enough for it to come alive. "Oh, but you don't have to do it anymore, since there are computer graphics so perfect that they can bring a seascape right into your living room." No wonder surrogate motherhood is all the rage: all experience these days is surrogate, a manufactured substitute for the real thing.

Another 60's guru, Timothy Leary, mixed media metaphors with real drugs: "Turn on, tune in, and drop out." These days, Leary has more or less given up on drugs and is reprogramming his mind on virtual reality, but the message is the same. We are not strong enough for real life—raw experience, neat whiskey, flesh-and-blood women. Let us have TV, vodka and diet coke, and virtual-reality rape. But if there are any old-fashioned men and women out there, particularly those who might cherish the illusion that there are still symphonies to compose and

poems to write, then you must do the opposite of what you are told every day, in school, in church, at work. No machine can make your life better; it can only make you weaker and dependent; there is nothing of value that can be done for you, because it must all be done by you. It is not love or even sex, if someone or something else does all the work. As *Lysistrata* once explained, passive resistance spoils the diet: "A man will never have his pleasure unless he shares it with his woman."

Nietzsche says somewhere that a lame man can mount a horse and ride to the top of a mountain, but when he gets to the top and dismounts, he still limps. All technology, he might have said, was invented to give the illusion of strength to the weak and corrupt. An unathletic accountant can buy a fast car; an ugly woman gets her nose fixed; the lonely guy subscribes to the *Playboy* channel. An intellectual, who used to spend decades learning history, philosophy, foreign languages, can now afford to major in sociology, and when he needs a piece of information he has only to plug into NEXIS and, *ecco*, an instant expert on what everyone else has been saying. Encyclopedias and reference works are only slightly better, and in their heyday near the end of the last century, such academic paraphernalia enabled the half-educated to write learned articles on Homeric duels or classical allusions in Tennyson. Victoria's poet laureate was not amused and complained bitterly against the bookworms and index-thumbers who committed scholarship against literary forms they could neither write nor understand.

There is a Taoist parable about a man hauling buckets of water out of a well and pouring them onto his field. When Confucius comes along and tells him of a simple device to make the work easier—something like a *shaduf*—the peasant replies that he has heard of such a thing, but his master (that is, a Taoist sage) had told him that it was degrading to be servant to a machine. That, at least, is how I remember the tale. The moral problem of the *shaduf* and all similar devices is that they take a complex human action and reduce it to a mechanical routine that makes the man an extension of the machine. A tool, on the other hand, is a projection of a man's self: a hammer hardens his fist; wheels give speed to his feet; a pencil turns his finger into an appendage of his eye; and the computer on which I am typing this is only a very expensive pencil that puts typists out of work.

A real tool or weapon is a means to making something or doing something inherently noble and useful. A man is no braver for possessing a sword or pistol; indeed, he may be only a bullying coward with superior firepower, but combat is a natural and even heroic enterprise that can ennoble the tools provided by technology. But the technology of war, like the technology of literary composition, is perilous. Military hardware now enables little men in offices to annihilate heroism and wipe entire communities off the map; and the first book I heard of being composed on a word processor was Jimmy Carter's memoirs. If George Bush had been forced into a judicial combat with Saddam Hussein, and if Jimmy Carter had been required to write in pencil, the world would have been spared much inconvenience.

Even useful and honorable tools can become subversive at the point they slip the reins of human capability. Anything you own and use, if you cannot understand its workings, makes you servile, and that includes computers, automobiles, and machine pistols. But a great deal of technology has no other purpose than to render us incompetent. A gas stove is a fine in-

strument in the hands of a good cook, but a microwave oven is designed to heat up prepared foods, just as television is *designed* to pour someone else's thoughts—already chewed, slobbered, and swallowed—into your head.

“Whatever does not kill me makes me strong.” If there is more than a grain of truth in Nietzsche's aphorism, then the reverse might also be true: what does not threaten me can only make me weak, and every technical aid that liberates us from hard work and direct experience reduces us to impotence. I do not say to you, writers and readers both, that you should eschew technology and live in the woods, but that you should judge each technical device on its merits. The most basic criterion ought to be: does the device make it easier to do what I would already be doing or does it create its own forms and demands. Synthesizer music, computer graphics, video games are all saccharine, and the spirit that feeds on them will starve to death. Most cases are not so simple, and the prudent man will have to ask himself: Can I live and work without this tool or have circumstances made it indispensable? I don't like cars, but without one I should have to live as a hermit and give up—well, here in Rockford, nothing except the half hour it would take to walk to the office when it is 25 degrees below zero, but I do

drive to Madison and Chicago, and I could never “escape to Wisconsin” (as the bumperstickers advise) without an automobile.

If you enjoy music, you should learn to play the piano or force your children to play, but even for an accomplished amateur a concert is an enjoyable experience. In these times, however, opera and symphony tickets are prohibitively expensive for a family of six, and the choice that confronts us is either musical illiteracy or some dependence upon recordings and videos.

Even in the case of apparently benign technologies, the day comes when you realize that you are now content to play the stereo instead of the piano, that you cannot live without the continuous chatter of Vivaldi in the background. The scholar may find his computer eminently useful, but eventually he may discover that he is spending more time on E-mail communications than on research. The electronic village may turn out to be a real village in the sense that it is populated only by illiterate peasants, and the best advice I can offer the artist in a world increasingly inimical to his very existence is to follow the example of the Pilgrim who left all he had and went off crying “Life.”

Turn off, tune out, drop in.

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The Blessed Metaphors

by Tom Disch

They reigned while the brain was still
a little simian, holy presences descending
in strobing flashes of enlightenment, as when
the bosomy Hagia Sofa first proposed
the notion of a stool: three legs in a firm
base and one could sit anywhere;
as when King Solemn divided the Gordian babe
who'd so much baffled her two mothers;
as when the gods of rain and dirt made love
and daisies blossomed, telling their pretty tales.
The nymphs and shepherds make garlands and agree:
Unless you die, you will not live again! And so,
My silly darlings, come—I'll put you in a bowl.