



Anna Kozłowska

Talking to Strangers

by Thomas Fleming

“Black History Month, sometimes called February . . .” Sam Francis’s witticism has been repeated *ad infinitum*, by friend and foe alike, usually with little appreciation of the broader implications. Ever since the French Revolution, Jacobin reformers conceived it their duty to redesign the calendar. If they cannot always get away with dating the history of the world by their revolution or even eliminate traditional religious holidays, they always succeed in glutting the seasons (and street names) with sacred dates like 14 juillet, cinco di Majo, or the Friday or Monday that falls closest to the birthday of some beloved hero or martyr of the revolution.

The American calendar is increasingly dominated by these artificial feast days, and the annual rhythm is determined by consumerist seasons known as “summer vacation” and “only 90 more shopping days ’til Christmas,” which nonbelievers celebrate with the same devotional zeal as the occasionally conforming Christians who established them.

It is the mark of the ideological state that private life and community traditions must take second place to the public good and the national cults. Wherever “the public interest” is concerned, no one is to be exempt. I once caught the end of a World War II propaganda film (*Gangway for Tomorrow*) in which a loafer (played by John Carradine) is arrested and asked by the local magistrate what is he doing to help the war effort. When Carradine declares that he can do what he likes in a free country, he is reprimanded and sentenced to work in a munitions factory. In the last scene he is chipping in to help save the world for democracy with all the cheerfulness of a Gorky hero.

Where there are no wars to prevent us from minding our own business, there are always crises, many of them manufactured. In recent years we have had to endure the teenage pregnancy crisis, the hole in the ozone crisis, the drug crisis, and the violence on television crisis. But crises, which are often boring and complicated, can be a hard sell. Crimes and scandals make for more effective distractions from everyday life, especially if they can be dramatized in a show trial. Since the 1970’s, it seems, the only American calendar that counts—the television schedule—has been dominated by trials and hearings that have gradually usurped the functions of both news and entertainment.

Although I can vaguely remember my communist piano teacher talking about Joe McCarthy, my first real experience with show trials came with the Watergate hearings. I did my best to avoid the affair, but even the lack of a television set and a complete indifference to newspapers did not guarantee immunity. I listened to music on the radio in those days, and the only place for music was the local NPR station, and even if I managed to avoid Susan Stamberg, I could not avoid the conversations in the library or in the bar. No matter how much I tried to resist, I ended up knowing as much about Watergate as most of my fellow citizens.

After Mr. Nixon’s resignation, it seemed like years before the next ordeal, but more recently, the spectacles have come one after another, with hardly a breathing space in between: Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, the Rodney King case, and, of course, the O.J. Simpson trial. People of my parents’

generation dated their lives by what they were doing when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor; for their children, the dramatic moments were the Kennedy assassination, Kent State, and Woodstock. In future years, the grandchildren will probably ask each other: "What were you doing when O.J. Simpson was declared not guilty?"

I referred to these spectacles as "show trials," not because they are necessarily engineered by a repressive regime or designed to eliminate political rivals, but because they are used in much the same way that Stalin used the Moscow trials to deflect criticism from the Communist Party's criminal ineptitude and to rally his people around a dramatic episode that could induce a feeling of national solidarity. The Soviet press, it goes without saying, played a vital role in whipping up public opinion:

During the whole period of the trial, from the announcement on 28 February 1938 that it would take place until the actual executions, the papers had, of course, been full of the demands of workers' meetings that no pity be shown to the "foul band of murderers and spies." Leaders and articles rubbed it in. (Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*)

The Western press also did its best to "rub it in." While some leftist intellectuals and journalists condemned the trials (notably, John Dewey and the *Manchester Guardian*), the spectrum of liberal opinion ran from enthusiasm for Stalinist justice, expressed by Walter Duranty of the *New York Times*, to the restrained skepticism of the *New Statesman*.

One did not expect anything better from the Soviet press, which was entirely under the party's control. In fact, Lenin had moved quickly in 1917 to suppress newspapers that were, in order, rightist, liberal, and socialist. Before the revolution, he had promised to divvy up the press organs among the progressive parties according to their electoral strength—something like the system used for the radio and television networks controlled by the Italian government—but once in power, Lenin quickly saw the importance of establishing a press that would, in Ben Bradlee's words, "serve the public interest."

We do things differently here. We do not, for the most part, arrest dissident journalists or close down their papers. Instead, we allow the press lords to establish multimedia conglomerates and invite them into the governing coalition. The American press, in giving over their pages and air time to cheap thrillers—what the Italians call *gialli*—is, for the most part but not entirely, unwittingly serving as the propaganda arm of the regime.

Watergate might be regarded as a constitutional crisis that ought to engage the attention of citizens living in what they believed to be a free republic. That can scarcely be said of most of the crises and trials that interrupt *The Young and the Restless* and *Jenny Jones*. I did not know either of the Simpsons or anyone remotely associated with them. Neither of them represented anything significant: he, a hoodlum turned mercenary athlete; she, a loose woman who may well have driven her husband beyond the brink. If he killed her because he loved her and could not endure her behavior, perhaps he deserved, in a better world under a different legal system, to go free. I did not know Rodney King either, or Clarence Thomas, or Anita Hill, and while there may be a few Americans who regard such people as "role models," they must be very few.

Erwin Knoll—a veteran journalist—used to say that when-

ever the media were booming any particular crisis, it was a good indication that they had designs on our liberties, and a cynic might observe that as President Bush and Clinton have dragged us inexorably into the Balkans War, the press cartel has succeeded, first in making sure there is no honest criticism of American foreign policy, and second, in concocting a series of celebrity incidents that degrade the moral conscience of the citizens. When the *National Enquirer* actually scooped the networks on the O.J. story, it was clear that the distinction between news and scandal had been blurred, perhaps irremediably.

There are countless books and articles on the press: its history, its role in defining democracy, its problems, its scandals. What is hard to find is a serious discussion of the fundamental dishonesty, the trivial huckstering that characterizes even the best newspapers. I recently had dinner with a distinguished European scholar, who, with a little encouragement, asked me why there was so little freedom of discussion in the United States. Was it due to the village mentality described by Tocqueville? Or was it merely the effect of the tight grip of the media oligarchy? If the latter was true, how did I explain the parallel development in the universities?

These are difficult questions, which I do not quite know how to answer. But one stab at it takes us to the heart of the American people. If every nation gets the government it deserves, then perhaps our national dishonesty is only a reflection of the cowardice and dishonesty of most of our citizens. George Garrett, in *Poison Pen*, argued only half in jest that "American journalism does indeed perform a valuable public service":

For if, even for a brief period, a large number of Americans stopped swallowing the . . . (let's call it Pablum so as not to be crude and vulgar) the unadulterated Pablum that is concocted to stifle their hunger for truth, and if they were permitted to enjoy the self-indulgence of allowing their encephalitic and atrophied brains the merest little reflexive twitch of thought, a vague, faint, dimly realized, atavistic tremor of vestigial skepticism, why, sirs, all hell would break loose!!

It would be worse (or better, depending on your point of view) than the Terror which followed the French Revolution. . . . If, for some utterly whimsical and unanticipated reason, honesty were to become a factor in American life, it is obvious that the immediate result would be chaos and anarchy.

The People, instantly deprived of all their leaders in every known field of endeavor, would be a swirling mass of bleating, helpless sheep. And there would be no wolves to profit from this condition.

Our dependence upon the *Entertainment Tonight* reporting of network news and the government propaganda of the popular press confirms us in our servility, but the consequences go far beyond politics. The erosion of the strong public opinion, on which any republic rests, is serious enough, but moral and intellectual liberty can survive and even flourish under tyranny. Why have they been so successfully repressed in the benign despotism of consumer-socialism? One answer, perhaps not the whole answer but one part of it, is to be found in the case with which we have been persuaded to concern ourselves with strangers: movie stars, overnight criminal sensations, pathetic

victims of oppressions in countries whose names we can hardly pronounce. Here the media have to accept some of the blame for the worsening American character.

I made this point, *obiter dictum*, some years ago, and it is worth going into again. For several decades the primary point of the various “media” has been the arousal of strong feelings in their audiences. These feelings are not directed toward familiar objects—a reader’s mother, girlfriend, child, or neighbor—but toward complete strangers.

The passion most commonly appealed to is sexual desire. The attempt to arouse desire or stimulate passion for strangers by use of words and images goes by the name of pornography. In origin, *pornographia* means the depiction of prostitutes and prostitution, and pornography is the esthetic or imaginative dimension of prostitution, a business devoted to promoting the illusion that one human being is having an erotic relationship with another.

The reality of the “relationship” is simpler: a cash transaction without emotional or moral attachment. Money “can’t buy me love,” but the man who hires a prostitute can buy the illusion of love or passion or innocence, and it is this illusion that men are willing to pay for, not the mere act of fornication. If a discharge of surplus erotic energy were the only point, a man might find safer and less costly alternatives. No, what he is paying for in hiring a prostitute is the illusion of attachment, and, on a lower level, the purchaser of pornography is pursuing the same fantasy.

There are other desires, other interests, other passions: pity, fear, anger, and hatred, to name only a few. Aristotle believed that the object of tragedy was the purgation or discharge of pity and fear from those who participated as observers in the experience. However, the object of pornography and of the “trash” journalism produced by the television networks and the great newspapers is not purgation but merely stimulation, and while the news stories may be as fictional as the tale of the witch who murders her rival and her own children in order to punish her lover, we read and watch these fables as if they were real events whose participants are known to us. Someone else’s child, trapped in a well, monopolizes the attention of millions of Americans who neglect their children or entrust them to the care of strangers, and an airline disaster is celebrated as a major news event, even though the 200 people killed represent only a tiny fraction of the people who die, from various causes, every day throughout the world. This is information only in the sense that an exact count of the pop bottles found on Jones Beach in a given day is information.

A concern for distant strangers is, for the most part, an entirely futile exercise in cheap compassion. There is, after all, little that we can do to assist earthquake victims in Japan or to relieve the sufferings of the Christian women and children brutalized by Islamic fundamentalists in the Balkans War. Where we can do something we know to be helpful, such charity is meritorious—although such occasions are less frequent than we think. But weeping over the images of starving children can have the effect of blinding us to the problems of the lady down the block nursing a dying husband.

The interest that we Americans take in the misfortunes of complete strangers is among the most bizarre characteristics of modern life. Of course, this moral plague did not break out recently. Ever since the creation of the yellow press, motion pictures, and television, the less rooted elements of our population have driveled after celebrity actors and sports heroes, begging

for autographs, joining fan clubs, reading magazines. There was a recent story of some poor Australian working man who came all the way to Indiana to visit the boyhood shrine of his hero, James Dean.

But it is not just uneducated workers and lonely housewives who lust after celebrities. Read the memoirs of famous politicians and journalists and note how many of them boast of knowing actors, singers, and athletes—as if it were not something to be ashamed of. American Presidents eagerly cultivate relations with Jane Fonda or the Beach Boys, and it is remarkable to see how willingly the great and powerful reduce themselves to the level of “the rich and famous.” What is the difference between Bill Clinton—or his predecessors—and Regis Philbin or Taki?

An interest in celebrities is, in most cases, a sign of personal emptiness, of a life evacuated of meaning. It is natural to respect heroes and revere saints, but when a man collects celebrities, whether in the lower form of autographs and “fanzines” or in the higher form of premeditated name-dropping, he is confessing to the inadequacy of his private life. This is particularly touching, since so many celebrities—politicians and stars alike—are two-dimensional cutouts, devoid of an inner life. George Garrett tells Christie Brinkley in *Poison Pen* that it is ridiculous to complain that she is not the same person as the girl on the magazine covers. Nobody cares, he insists, apart from her “family and kinfolks, your few true friends and maybe your husband Billy Joel.” Scratch the last.

Our capacity for love and concern is finite, so is our ability to take an interest in something. Few of us can, simultaneously, study Japanese, Hebrew, and Slovenian. Make this argument, and someone will be sure to say that most people only use a small fraction of their brains. This is a cherished piece of white urban folklore—something akin to the black nationalist fantasy that AIDS was created by the CIA. Of course we do not use our brain to its full capacity, any more than we employ all the power of our computer in writing an essay. Some of the memory is tied up in installation programs, dictionary and thesaurus, modern software, and a host of operations I cannot begin to imagine. While it is true that few of us give our brains the daily workout they deserve, we could do only marginally better, even if we invested half the day in studying the calculus.

Watching Oprah and reading *TV Guide* are not only empty exercises for anyone who is not a satirist; they not only do nothing for us, but they actually deflect us from our proper duties and concerns. Celebrity journalism does not merely waste our time; it wastes ourselves. The more we concern ourselves with David Letterman, the less interest we take in our own lives. Every day, we become less real, less authentic. Lost in the electronic crowd of adoration, we may forget how to find our way back to ourselves, and we are only happy when we can find a connection with the mystical world of stardom. In Walker Percy’s first novel, the moviegoing hero, Binx Bolling, catches sight of a pair of newlyweds on the streets of New Orleans. The reality of their “drab little lives” is graced momentarily by the sight of William Holden, who smiles a blessing on their union.

In every earlier phase of our national intoxication, a new technology was sure to be offered as a remedy for empowerment: educational television, cable TV and VCR’s, PC’s and satellites—all have been sold as tools of reempowerment by the current generation of lightning-rod salesmen. If I had been writing a few years ago, I should have speculated, at this point, on

the next step into virtual reality, but before I could think about raising the question the step had already been taken. Now we are being told that the solution to our woes, public as well as personal, is to be found somewhere on the Internet.

What can you say to people who think that every day, when they wake up, the world is a blank slate on which to scribble a new reality? This is going Locke one better. It is no longer the mind of a newborn individual that is a *tabula rasa* but the world itself, newborn with every innovation. We are always either at the dawn of a new age or at the end of history. Unhappily, this utopian optimism reveals that the one really blank slate is the American mind.

The Internet, we are told, represents the next wave of personal and political liberation. We can make our travel plans, find new recipes, and make friends with disembodied spirits who use code-numbers and aliases. According to stories in the popular press, real marriages, however frail, are undermined when husbands spend so many hours talking to their imaginary friends that they have no time for their family. Women are not immune. A jilted husband, writing recently to Ann Landers, complained that his wife had been seduced by one of her electronic penpals and was refusing to return to him. This is some nightmare out of *Poltergeist*, when the ghosts on the screen invade our living rooms.

Not only our living rooms and our bedrooms, but also the voting booths. According to the author of *The Electronic Republic*, the Internet will restore the direct, participatory democracy of ancient Greece. Now, I am all in favor of restricting the vote to adult male children of native-born citizen parents, but even supposing that we had access to real information on home pages and bulletin boards set up by candidates and interest groups, one essential item is being left out of the equation: personal knowledge of a man's character. Even a television image or a stump speech gives us more insight into what a candidate is really about than all the information in the world on his voting record or official positions. If Bill Clinton suddenly adopted a pro-life/antigovernment platform, would any sensible conservative trust him? Look into his eyes: the two-dimensional television screen is deep enough to plumb the depths of his character.

Each new advance in "information technology" begins by promising us individual liberation and ends up making us the prisoner of the technology. Gossip is a better guide to politics than the newspapers, because good gossip sometimes represents a genuine leak of information through unfiltered sources and almost always reflects, even when it is entirely false, the sense of the people. The wildest rumors about the Vincent Foster suicide may turn out to be closer to reality than the official story, but whatever the truth, the rumors say a great deal about the public's perception of this administration.

But the worst of newspapers is better than the best news program, because we can put down the newspaper, have second thoughts about the facts or point of view, compare it with other papers. With television, we are caught up in the imaginary stream of someone else's consciousness. We can turn it off, but we cannot, so long as we are in the stream, exercise our critical judgment, unless the story goes so roughly against our grain that it turns us into the antagonist who shouts back at Dan Rather. To resist requires the very power of the will that television has undermined.

Television is a primitive form of mind control compared with the possibilities offered by computerized journalism. Of

course, the Internet offers boundless opportunities for hatching the best kind of conspiracies. Use it, if you can, as you would use any instrument of communication—a waxed tablet or a bullhorn or an overhead projector, but never allow yourself to get sucked into the illusion of empowerment.

There may be strength in numbers, but it is not your strength, and there can be no community with people whose lives you do not share. It is not morally healthy to fill your head with alien experiences. Schizophrenics who hear voices in their heads would give anything for a moment of silence. There are tens of millions of people on the Internet, but, for all the useful knowledge they can give you, their name might just as well be Legion. Books take days and weeks to master and digest. Quicker access to more and more information may help the reporter in preparing his story, but it also makes him less critical about the torrent of facts, more gullible about the sources.

There are more voices babbling in Hell than there will ever be online, and the sum total of their wisdom would fit comfortably on the head of a pin, with room enough left over for several choirs of angels. Your mother must have told you, "Don't talk to strangers." Don't listen to them either, especially if they are journalists.

Seville 1492-1994

by Gloria Whelan

In the park of Maria Luisa
newspapers lie unfurled,
the world bartered
for Andalusian light,
for the thick scent
of orange blossoms.

Let the Moors raise their towers of gold,
grow gardens that froth
with white roses,
Ferdinand and Isabella
will march south
to drown them
in their perfumed bath.