

CIVILIZATION  
UNDRESSED  
[1]

*AWAKE IN THE  
HOUSE OF NOTHING*

MO LOHAUS

## Civilization Undressed

by Mo Lohaus

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*This is the autobiography of a seeker struggling to live constructively, the diary of a political scientist studying civilization and its methods, a collection of memorable events associated with a quest for wisdom, and a workbook for recognizing and integrating metaphysical understandings. It points past socialized cognition to more practical and productive modes.*

*Events discussed here arise from states of awareness more discerning and decisive than those social management encourages. Treating these events and states as fact or fiction is your call. Acknowledging and arranging your perceptual priorities and evaluating the interplay of emotion and rationality are challenges you can face and enjoy while using this book.*

*Freedom and responsibility co-arise from how we make meaning and how we use it. Surviving, in the 2020s, depends on making meaning consciously, managing creativity wisely, mapping one's metaphorical reality, and using that map effectively. This workbook may support you in doing them successfully, but it may also make the condom of socially coerced cognition seem intolerable, and activity performed in it seem dreadful. Contact with the intimately impersonal triggers longings for sensitivity and authenticity.*

*This is a shop manual for individual evolution; a defibrillator of consciousness and courage. If you hope to be reassured about familiar and convenient perspectives and behavior, reading this book may be like shopping for lingerie in a hardware store. But if you intend to renovate the routines that domesticate you, you will find the tools you need here.*

# [1] Wait. What?

## [1.1] Get in

In 1492, when Columbus's ships arrived in the Bahamas, the Arawaks could not see them. They could hear metal clinking, water splashing, and voices murmuring across the waves, but because they could not conceive of ships they also could not perceive them. They had to paddle out in their canoes, through cognitive fog, and touch the ships with their hands to admit them to their senses.

For many 2020 was like 1492: Prejudices of conceiving blocked perceiving. Imagining threats too small to see hid giant monsters effectively. When uncertainty assaulted us, panic infected us, and conformity corralled us, moving with the herd felt safe, even as we were herded into cells.

This book reveals methods a few hundred conquistadors used to conquer millions of Native Americans; the same ones a few thousand conspirators use to conquer billions of us today. Applying lying and violence to controlling perception and behavior is the secret system of domesticating humans hidden in civilization. This renovator's guide to civilization is a blueprint for resolution and reunion; for setting focus, distilling essence, ending conflicts, and committing to action. It makes sickeningly clear what's happening to us and inspiringly clear what to do about it.

This recounting of events between 1970 and 2021 beats the corporate reality piñata till it poops out all its candy, and explores alternative everything till traditional priorities feel good. It tracks a humanimal reclaiming its sovereignty and lighting itself on fire with

love of living while visiting a sci-fi dystopia of death tech, predators of consciousness, and wise psychedelic wizards. By reading it you will paddle out far from shore and experience events that reset your reality.

Get in. Let's paddle.

## **[1.2] Something is wrong here**

(E)motion is energy in motion. I sense it, radiate it, motivate, and navigate with it. Emotion tells me what to do and how to be. I receive it, match it, and adjust to it. I vibrate it, pulse it, and broadcast it. I assemble a reality from waves cascading into me, aligning and informing me; making scale, sensation, meaning, and time.

From emotional elasticity settings form gradually; perceptions cohere and conceptions constellate. Ratios of rationality radiate and return; projecting patterns of priority and confirming them. By absorbing events and refining responses, I learn to focus, move, talk, and name.

If I dream it back together, in 1970 I am sitting on a carpet watching television as dark silhouettes of soldiers stride through a village across the background glare of burning huts. Thumping machine guns, crackling flames and barking orders echo through the living room. Shrieking peasants flee at full speed. A man with a bundle runs from a hut just as it blooms with flames.

People are terrified. Something is wrong here.

“Daddy? What’s Viyetnayum?”

“The place men go to kill.”

His voice seems angry. He seems tense and ready to fight. He glares at the television and goes back in the kitchen. I sit, waiting, for answers to questions I felt my first one implied:

*What is Vietnam, another place or another planet? What are we doing there, helping or hurting people? Why is someone showing this to me? Am I supposed to do something about it? And the man with the bundle running away: Will anyone give that man a new house?*

But he gave his answer. He put the conversation down on the counter, next to the toaster, and went back to what he was doing. He is a conscientious objector. We are Quakers. We are living in as strange city so he can do his alternative service in a clinic for the medically underserved.

It happens often after that: War pours from the television, people are terrified, and I feel disturbed. When I ask adults about it their bodies give answers: Their faces harden to masks, words fall from their mouths like carelessly chewed food, and their eyes make sidelong glances.

I have seen hard, masked faces before on news suits who play show-and-tell at supertime. Who show clips of bombing villages and burning forests. Who cough up slogans like “we are fighting communism,” and settle into smirks.

“Ask me more about it,” their smirks say. “Show how dumb and smug I am, and I will hurt you.”

Cronkite, Rather, and Wallace smirk regularly, but few normal adults do. Words fall from their mouths like carelessly chewed food, and their faces seem to say:

*I do not know things I feel I should, and feel ashamed of being ignorant. You seem to want a story from me, child, so I am making one up; telling you about the war and acting as if I care about it. You expect that from me, so I am doing it. But I am not enjoying this. The war*



*is supposed to be important, but I do not know what it means. My body feels anxious and uncontrollable whenever I look at it, so let me off the hook and stop asking.*

I eventually get the message, and stop asking. But before I stop completely, sensitive adults raise new questions about what I need to do. Their eyes make sidelong glances, signaling conflict and fear, seeming to say:

*I notice uncomfortable things: Many smiles are unreal. Many explanations fall short. Politeness is a kind of law we compulsively obey. We are not who we pretend to be. What we are doing together is not quite true; both in the war and here, every day. Even though we are smiling and trying to be nice, we are unhappy. We do not know how to be more real, so we are stuck with feeling bad. Mentioning this to you might get me beaten up, or cut off from people who matter to me, so I am telling you this with my body, trusting you to understand.*

And I do understand, because the same trap has me too: I notice more about what we are doing than others appreciate. When honest about my experience and perception folks become anxious, avoidant, angry, or demanding. My intelligence is inappropriate. My truth is inadmissible. My perspective is threatening. I hesitate to reveal them, even to myself, fearing terrible consequences.

### **[1.3] Inappropriate questions**

My career asking adults direct questions is short. After uncomfortable incidents I shift to open-ended questions so adults can share what they are ready for without feeling pressured. The final episode of blunt

questioning is lost in memory, but if it happened as a dream it would be this way:

I am in a diner with my parents. Behind the counter a television plays the show I asked my father about: A village is being destroyed and its people are running away. A man with a bundle runs from a hut just as it blooms with flames. A question forms then speaks through me:

“Will anyone give that man a new house?”

One moment, everything is normal. Everyone is at their tables by the windows or sitting at the counter, eating and talking. Then suddenly the floor is tilting, there is grinding, jolting, and bumping, and everyone jumps up.

The diner we were eating in was really a bus. The movie of reality we were riding in together, where everything makes sense, everything is fine, and we are the good people, drove into a ditch and stalled out.

Folks talk frantically, swarm around, and go outside to push the bus and get the movie going again. Some try to make my question sound irrelevant and what we were doing before make sense again:

*“Honey, sometimes grown-ups have to do difficult things. Our freedom isn’t free. Our good life has to be paid for. Sometimes we have to defend our way of living.”*

*“That’s right! That’s right! We’re fighting commienism in Viyetnayum, to keep our standard of living.”*

*“The commienists are jealous of our standard of living...of our values and choices...so we have to fight ‘em.”*

*“Bringing them democrisy is like bringing them to Jeezis: Once it’s done they’ll be thankful for it.”*

*“Boy, Carmela looks pretty today. What were we talking about, the Atlanta*

*Braves? The rain we are supposed to get on Tuesday? I'd like another cup of coffee, please."*

There is tightness in the faces and unhappiness in the smiles: Folks are trying to be polite and friendly but feel resentful about being poked. I am a kid. Kids ask funny questions, but no one is liking it. Ignoring is a kind of lying, and we all know it. Something is wrong here: If the man with the bundle were in our neighborhood we would help him out. Instead we are supposed to hate him and not care what happens to him after we burned down his house.

Something is wrong here: We are too scared to think and confused about what to feel. We accept what we are told to think and feel by smirking men in suits who seem to be in control. We are scared, running with the herd, and don't know how to stop and stand up to what's happening.

Stories we tell about what is happening and who we are make a kind of religion that hold us together. They help us work together; reminding us what we need to believe and need to ignore to keep going along with what everyone else seems comfortable with.

But none of us are comfortable and what we are doing is stupid. We religiously avoid discussing this. That is the law. We keep our self-hypnotic storytelling unconscious and our need-to-believes and need-to-ignores unnamed. If anyone rubbed them together it would probably set us on fire.

#### **[1.4] Edutainment**

After this I watch television alone and draw my own conclusions. I spend thousands of hours watching it, assuming I am being shown reality; assuming I am being shown the most important events happening in the

world by people who know and care. My assumptions deteriorate steadily until my understandings of why I am watching and what the news is are permanently revised.

It starts by realizing that I am shown only a tiny piece of what is happening in the world. There are millions of villages in the world: In a village made of sticks in Vietnam the houses are being sprayed with fire. In a village made of bricks in Greece they are painting the roofs blue. And in a village made of cinder blocks in South Dakota they are being poisoned by uranium in the drinking water.

I only get to see one of these villages. Someone chooses what to show me, what is news, and what is not; what I should focus on and what I should not; what I should feel and what I should not; which stories I should snuggle with, and which I never hear about, meet, or get close to.

I understand this because I choose what I attend to. I do not have to watch the news. I can watch other shows. If I time it right, and get in front of the television between two and four, I can watch bored desperados sneak off to motel rooms to lick each other's faces, grunt like animals, and extract genital fluid. If I tune in between seven and nine, I can watch hysterical maniacs compete for prizes from creepy men with greased hair and speechless women with easy-access breasts. If I wake up at midnight, and keep the volume low, I can watch dishonest predators pretending to be spiritual frighten viewers into giving them money.

Each program has priorities: On soap operas it is seducing and lying. On game shows it is winning new things. On televangelism it is believing and catharting. But what about the news? Why do they show me villagers fleeing from soldiers, but not villagers

painting their roofs blue, or villagers dying of cancer? Why do they show me the same things over and over, and skip the same things over and over?

Why are Greek villagers who cooperate off limits? Why are managers of corporations in South Dakota discussing the life expectancy of people they work to death for profit? Those kinds of show-and-tell might give me ideas about what we are living in and what to do about it. It might show me that acting cooperatively can just happen naturally, without any special effort or ceremony. Unlike the news team, eyeing each other suspiciously and maliciously, we could all just be honest, friendly, and cooperative, and make a better world now.

I eventually realize that what I see on television, in movies, and later on the internet, is more than entertainment; it is edutainment. The programs are scientifically designed to program me. They contain scripts, perspectives, and roles that I, by watching, internalize, rehearse, and eventually act out. This is observational learning. By watching actors do things, I learn how to perceive and behave: how to act, how to talk, what to feel, and what to want.

Through the predator's eyes of soap opera stars sexually compulsive ejaculatory assistants are the wants. Through the predator's eyes of game show hosts emotionally compulsive maniacs are the wants. Through the predator's eyes of pseudo-spiritual shysters financially compulsive donors are the wants. I practice their lines and body language and try on their personalities: shmoozing like the bad-boy mystery man, effusing like the game show know-it-all, and bamboozling like the unboundaried believer.

When it does not work out I study their prey. Actresses in soap operas win by being

sexually compliant. Game show contestants win by being emotionally compliant. Televangelicals win by being perceptually compliant. Each allows themselves to be steered and used by the dominant star; winning coital connection, home appliances, or mystical perception by being suggestible. Each infers rules, obeys them, and is rewarded.

There is a theme of predators and prey. We are trained to be one or the other in every situation: the seducer or the seduced, the host or the contestant, the shepherd or the sheep. We are programmed to recognize the dichotomy and assume the position that gets us what we have been trained to want, or avoids what we do not want.

We prey on and profit by cuing each other while playing roles and running scripts. Using the playbook edutainment presents to us—applying what we have observed—helps us feel comfortable and confident in situations and relationships we've been trained for. These roles and scripts teach us to be generic, to communicate symbolically, and to coerce each other subconsciously.

This magic gets us what we want, or think we want, but we become possessed by the roles we internalize and practice. No one is fully authentic. No one is fully honest. No one is fully real. No one is fully present or connecting. To a great degree, we are all just acting; matching generic templates of appropriateness we have internalized. Corporate cultural programming gets us laid, but is a condom that keeps us unfeeling, disconnected, and permanently dissatisfied.

The news franchises this model with a twist: Its dominant figures, who usually demonstrate confidence and potency, toggle periodically to model obedient submission to experts and authorities from official institutions. The top becomes the bottom. The

shepherd becomes the sheep. The messenger-prophet of the news signals what we are all supposed to learn and embody:

*This is the right way to perceive; confirming conformity compulsively. This is the right way of behave; fantasizing a dissociative identity and distributing its narrative. And these are the people to defer to, bend over for, and let have their way.*

*This is real, this is normal, and this is smart. This is what matters and how I respond to it. Be like me, do what I do, and you will be confident and successful too.*

### **[1.5] The dummy buffer**

Early on, my description of the news would be:

*Experts on current affairs report on the world's most important events so concerned citizens can inform ourselves and respond effectively.*

But as I identify its mechanisms, the description changes to something inappropriate for TV GUIDE:

*Self-convinced simpletons modeling ignorance, incompetence, and negligence present euphemistic narratives and directive definitions; promoting perspectives politely submissive to those who own the world, direct its leaders, determine its workflows, and structure the perception and behavior of the rest of us.*

Though I initially imagine I watch the news for empowering information, I eventually realize it is for social templating. I am not preparing to become a wise and powerful decision-maker or a skilled and informed navigator of life. I am learning appropriate

ways to think, feel, react, and behave to move with the herd around me without friction.

Let's track that transition:

I spend thousands of hours watching the news, trusting I am being shown reality. I trust I am being shown the most important events happening in the world by competent people who have carefully and caringly sorted an enormous amount of information so that they can present a succinct, strategically prioritized view of the most important parts.

But I concurrently spend thousands of hours reading books and magazines, observing and interviewing real people, and comparing what they say. Everyone I read, observe, or interview makes more connections with more explanatory power than those who read the news; who sink to the bottom of my pool of experts.

The news suits demonstrate no awareness of context at all. They are a smiling smoke screen of oversimplification, a permanent detour from making connections, and a dummy buffer between me and events. They display no understanding of science or history, illuminate no complex patterns of influence, and consistently avoid explaining their assumptions and conclusions. They sidestep the communication basics normal people must provide to be believed: backing up our perspectives with supporting evidence.

Somehow—because they are in an expensive, high tech set, their nose and ear hair have been groomed by professionals, their presentations are enhanced by elaborate motion graphics, or their stature is ennobled by commanding camera angles—they expect to be believed like Old Testament prophets.

*It is obvious that I am an important person who rightfully commands your attention and respect. It is obvious that I*



*know what I am talking about and that what I am saying is right. This is reality and you should recognize it! I am convinced and you should be too! I am charismatic and powerful! Do what I expect of you!*

By the time I reach high school I realize the news suits are in the lowest third of my class. They can repeat what the teacher says but do not know what it means or care about finding out. Their fact-finding and judgment skills are least developed. Their perspectives are least trustworthy. Their personality type is wrong for the job I expect them to do.

Yet, for unknown reasons, I still let them fondle my imagination and arouse my emotions by believing what they tell me. How dumb is that?

The more I watch these weird, self-convinced idiots, the more I dissociate. The more I dissociate, the more insensitive I become to my own experience, and the less I trust my own perspective and insights. Guzzling corporate news is stupefying, disinhibiting, and makes me fantasize.

In my drunkenness I see the news suits as what I want them to be: hotties not potties, heroes not zeroes. I want them to be curious about science and history, and care about understanding them. I want them yearning for learning, horny for know-how, and passionately devoted to accuracy. I want them to be truth addicts, masters of assessment, wise ones, and professional thinkers.

They are none of these things, and they are none of these things on every channel of every network. The top people in their profession are none of these things. Their ignorance, incompetence, and negligence conceal the malevolence of those who hire and direct them.

## [1.6] Faceholders and formalities

As my experience with teachers, thinkers, and writers increases, classifying the news suits becomes easier. At first I put them at one end of the ‘intellectuals’ category—the shallow end—because they are the most lazy, complacent, and smug ‘thinkers’ speaking publicly. They are the least excited about learning, and that makes them least competent and independent, least likely to wander away from standard assumptions, and least likely to accidentally reveal meaningful connections.

It soon becomes clear that despite how they are treated—as people of importance presenting ideas—they are not actually in the intellectuals category. They are military grade anti-intellectuals; professional conformists incapable of determining if doing the job of reporting really does the job of informing.

They are conductors of verisimilitude; ceremonial faceholders in a Janus profession. They are the face for the public; the point of contact for those entangled in similar illusions; with similar need-to-believes and need-to-ignores. They are actors in a double-blind drama: Neither they nor the audience know the purpose of the play, or that it is only a performance of activity.

Their psychological flaws are their professional assets. Their dislike of change makes them excellent censors. Thinking and questioning are clearly not their gifts. Looking convinced and coloring within the lines are.

If there were significant variations between the news suits on different networks the contrast would trigger awareness and suspicion of those clearly incompetent. But because every network hires people with similar psychological profiles, having

not-so-bright people reading news they did not investigate or think about seems normal.

They are hired to read the news because they provide the appearance of believing it. They give that appearance because they cannot question it. Being ignorant of history and science means having no contradictory information or leverage for criticism. They are professional know-nothings presenting a show about no-context.

If they understood the context, they might recognize the oversimplifications, distortions, omissions, and lies they distribute. That might show on their faces and bodies. They might seem to be chewing caterpillars. Their smiles might convey pain. Their torsos might twist or their facial muscles twitch. We might know they are lying by these tells. But because they do not know and do not think, they do not doubt. Because they do not doubt they do not squirm. Their bodies transmit calm, trust, ease, and belief, and our bodies accept the facsimile.

Their need-to-believes about who they are and what they do—important people doing important jobs—are as sturdy as any cult member's. And because they believe, and we witness they believe, we believe: This is the news. This is what is happening. This is what is important. This way of making sense of things makes me informed and successful.

I turn to them for direction, yet the reality narrative they present, day after day, year after year, is misdirection. Instead of modeling the careful activity of becoming more and more informed and discerning, they model religious repulsion to anything unfamiliar, and proudly do whatever is lowest friction. They pronounce the same slogans and banalities year after year, with contempt for divergent perspectives. By being sympathetic I internalize their biases.

Reading from the teleprompter with dull, fixed eyes, distributing directive definitions, correct prejudices, and official euphemisms, they draw the lines on the playing field of life and define what is out of bounds. They show me where it is appropriate to play and I accept it.

They guide me in fantasizing with them, in hallucinating what they need to believe; whatever helps them feel safe as part of a team. Having that need for simplicity and self-persuasion makes them perfect for the job of seeding a society that is ceremonial, submissive, and low-functioning.

A delicate balance is at play: Believing they are important people requires participating in a job that justifies their status and salaries. It requires the verisimilitude of journalism. The job must reinforce them. It must allow them to ignore that they are not really experts on what they are talking about, are familiar with it only in the most superficial way, and are fitting it together like children playing with Legos.

They must participate in a formality that convinces them that what they are doing is real. They must have sets, props, and supporting actors that help them believe and ignore the necessary things. They must have expensive equipment. They must have stylists, handlers, and fluffers. They must have investigators constantly calling in, presenting them with information that confirms what they already believe: a world view of easy good and bad where my team is always right. They must ask them questions, and these carefully selected supporters, with interlocking minds and ideologies, must consistently provide reassuring, elementary school answers:

*Yes, faceholder 211235813, beta corps worker drone in consciousness*

*command center Yankee: Your juvenile world view gets two gold stars! I share and validate it! Your semantic reality and cognitive recursions I affirm! Our analytical prejudices and assumptions are identical twins that require no wiping! The Russians, Chinese, and Arabs are bad, and we are good! Primitive people are dumb, degenerate, and dirty! Civilized people are smart, virtuous, and clean! The toothpaste smile is the mark of the godly! Money and morality are one!*

This is the formality of the job, and they are oblivious to it. Because neither they nor their researchers have wiped their assumptions—the standard ones about economics, politics, history, and science promoted and proselytized by their corporate work environment—their so-called journalism stinks. It is like investigating the contents of a Christmas stocking filled with gifts purchased and wrapped by others.

They do not question the benevolence of the Santa Claus who fills their inbox and bank account. They have neither heard nor read critiques of their supposed reality. They would not think to or want to. They are excluded from rigor by the psychological profile their employers identified and hired them for:

*Not too curious, interested, or bright. Prioritizes conflict avoidance and cognitive closure. Infers and produces demanded perspectives and behaviors compulsively. Emotionally dependent and socially compliant.*

Because they stick to the assigned reading list and do not peek outside, they have no context for questioning official narratives. They do not know the right questions to ask or the right places to dig to find treasure or bodies. And they are not diggers or thinkers

anyway. The answers they need arrive intuitively, emotionally, in the signals others give them about what is wanted. They are not leaders or initiators. They are not scientists or inventors. They are followers. They are trusters. They are believers. They are model employees. They are our templates.

### **[1.7] Need-to-believe**

My parents refer to Walter Cronkite as Uncle Walter, as if he were a trusted family member. I try it on but it does not fit. My grandfather, a sailor, later tells a story about being at anchor in a remote cove in Maine, within earshot of Cronkite, at anchor nearby, who “horribly abused his wife.” This does fit. He is not a nice man. Many supposedly nice people—so-called leaders and celebrities like Gerald Ford and Bill Cosby—seem creepy, predatory, perverted, and sadistic. Figuring that out and trusting my feelings—my direct knowing—are major victories.

Realizing normal, customary activities are dysfunctional is a parallel challenge; like listening to pushy, self-convinced simpletons reading misleading scripts and pretending that makes me informed. Going along with socially approved insanity usually involves suppressing my perception, ignoring my feelings, or pretending they don’t matter. I understand, deep down, that feelings do matter, that fulfilling formalities is not enough, and that developing functional engagement is important. Noticing my emotions, valuing my perceptions, determining how urgent they are, and responding effectively are basic animal responsibilities.

I learn to do this in situations where people around me, including my caretakers, are caught in need-to-believes and need-to-ignores that simplify their lives. They are busy

people. They have a lot to do. They want to complete tasks and clear their lists. They watch the news and suppose they are learning what is happening in the world while cooking dinner: check and check. Almost everyone feels overwhelmed and rushed, and from that perspective, doing what is normal seems good enough. If it is familiar, repetitive, and requires no thinking or follow up, even better: Clear expectations. Clear completion. Clear closure.

I am on the way to realizing that many conventional ways of doing things are corrupted by the pressure to rush and simplify. People reject complex perspectives reflexively, as a survival mechanism, because we feel overwhelmed by floods of information, responsibility, and emotion that threaten to wash us away. We cling to workflows that feel effective and safe, that seem to give us traction on events through which we are moving, and that minimize collisions with others.

Matching the emotions and perspectives of our speciesmates has worked reliably for millions of years. It is our genetic default. And it is a recognized behavior consciously and methodically exploited by those who herd us; who deliberately give us misleading beliefs by manufacturing events and paying faceholders to react to them and interpret them; who set up customs and rituals that persistently degrade our instincts and responsiveness. It is sinister.

## **[1.8] Everyday terrorism**

The war goes on, and I continue asking questions and trying to answer them. The bombing, shooting, hurting, and burning of Vietnamese people, and billy-clubbing, water-hosing, dog-biting, and shooting of American protestors trying to stop American

soldier-robots from hurting Vietnamese people register as an intentional strategy for terrorizing and brutalizing us all into submission. Both those receiving violence directly and those receiving it vicariously are traumatized and trained by it: We learn to walk by without saying anything and keep our heads down while others are violated.

We all know: This may happen to me if I show empathy.

Do the politicians, generals, and police chiefs who order and do this care about people at all? Or are they like the news numb-skulls; hired for blind spots those employing them can exploit? People are socially suggestible. When put in a subculture we adopt its assumptions and customs. If those around us believe we are facing revolution on the streets of America, we will order napalm, tanks, and razor wire. We will put 'bad' neighborhoods under curfew and imagine we are protecting people. Camping out in our fortified club house, we will order pizza, beer, and sex workers, crack a few jokes, get rowdy, get laid, and call it a night.

Watching the news during the 1970s, it is plain that we are not protected and guided by morally sanctified people, devoted to us and our well-being. Nixon and his cronies are disgusting, disturbing creatures, who make it obvious that the violent and predatory run society. We know this but dare not admit it. Our need-to-believe in Democracy has too much charge. If we lost that, we would have to admit we are slaves, herded around by bullies, who steal our money, and the time and effort spent earning it, every year on April fifteenth. We can neither think nor talk about the wars abroad and at home, the sadists and opportunists who manage our lives, or the siege of information and imagery we live in, because they are too overwhelming



and horrible.

We are overwhelmed deliberately, over and over, so that we stop looking, stop questioning, and stop caring. So that we accept simplistic and disingenuous slogans official know-nothings burp out. So that we stop talking or thinking about world events; subtracting ourselves from the equation of forces. Placed in the path of horror we become simpletons. We are terrorized towards obedience and traumatized towards submission: Give me a simple world I can deal with and I will leave the rest alone!

This is the *how* being used on us. The *whys* about the war may be true or untrue, but this is the observable activity applied to all enemies, foreign and domestic—and we are all considered enemies and competitors by those in charge. To terrify, traumatize, disassociate, and control us, events are scripted, directed, and manufactured. To bully us smirkers are hired. To program us culture is contrived and produced.

I learn on *Archie Bunker* how to deal with all this: After watching the news, reach for a beer and its numbing. Reach for entertainment and its distracting. Spout off opinions and imagine you have said something. Choose something simple, familiar, and manageable. Choose something comforting, that takes you on rides of neurotransmitters you already know well, that prepare you for bed feeling safe, catharted, drained, and normal.

It could be sports. It could be documentaries. It could be dramatic series. Anything that makes us feel our lives are normal. Anything that supports what we desperately need to believe: that we are all on a team, all in this together, that science, technology, and government are on our side, and that the personalities we have learned to wear, to fit in, will keep us safe; even if our

self-dishonesty is hanging over our belts and our superficial smiles signal despair.

The genres of our identities don't matter. The shows we watch, regardless of the subculture they reference, leverage a simple formula: create problems of overwhelming stimuli, then offer solutions of packaged identity: formality, conformity, and normalcy, or reactivity, nonconformity, and criminality. It happens every half-hour, one show after another: *You could be in this situation, or this one, or this one: This is how you deal with it. These are your options.*

Can adults really not see it? Watching war on the news, then cop shows and westerns, I see similar plots, roles, and themes; with good guys killing and bad guys dying. Heroes and villains fit consistent patterns: Soldiers burning and shooting people in Vietnam wear grimaces like police at protests. Villagers being chased from their homes resemble protestors attacked with hoses, sticks, and dogs, drug dealers slammed against the car on *Starsky and Hutch*, and outlaws biting the dust on *Gunsmoke*.

I infer a universal message: *Be normal. Obey. Do what the guys with guns say, or this will happen to you.*

## [1.9] Too soon to tell

I am still trying to make sense of that first disturbing night. I am still asking "Daddy? What's Vietnam?" And he is still saying "The place men go to kill." The living room is still flickering dark and bright and sounds are still strobing disjointedly, indicating drama. His answer, while true for him, still does not explain what the men on television are doing: Why they believe they are in Vietnam, what they are trying to do, or why they believe it is important.

I have now read and heard numerous explanations of what might be happening, but am still unsure of what is true. Are we fighting communism? Making the world safe for democracy? Winning the hearts and minds of the people? Securing our access to vital resources? Wasting the goods? Or just trying to survive?

Maybe my father knows why the troops believe they are there and what they believe they are doing. Maybe he knows they have no good reasons. Maybe they do have reasons, and he knows them, but their reasons seem less compelling to him than this show we watch together most nights, of burning and mutilating a beautiful forested land and its people with chemicals and sharp metal.

Whatever they believe about the war, the men come home in body bags. They come home and kill themselves. They come home and go crazy, live outside, eat out of dumpsters, drink themselves unconscious, and rage like animals. I know this. I have seen this. My father knows it too. He is paying attention, and will eventually notice my expression and explain the war to me. He explains things very well.

Inwardly I am asking: *What is this thing in the television? How do our worlds overlap? How do I twist my lens to get everything in focus; the friendly folks in my life and angry ones on the screen?*

Somewhere behind a door, across railroad tracks, or down a dirt road that nice people do not use is the-other-world, woven into mine like wires in a screen. People on television live there, and people downtown. They are not nice people. They do hurtful things and laugh about it. I am just beginning to know who is who. I know our worlds are connected, but not how.

My world is full of friendly faces: Eyes that notice. Ears that listen. Hands that help

and care. Pink, beige, or brown, everybody is kind to me. From what I can see, we are all here to help each other. And I need help: I am slow, sincere, innocent, and transparent. Folks are constantly reaching out to protect and care for me. Receiving so much kindness and goodwill makes me want to do my best for people, if I can only figure out how.

I am too slow to be funny or helpful. Things move too fast. I rarely figure out what is going on until it has already gone past. Whether funny, sad, ironic, or important, it only registers later. So I am here, but not here; noticing, but out of sync. Afterwards I will arrange the pieces of the scene—the television, flames, shrieking villagers, my father's words, and my own intuitions—into a collage that makes sense to me. I am caught in the gravity of the unfinished event, struggling with it till it releases me.

I think about it and search for more information. I read, follow adults around, and ask them questions. I like people and feel safe with them. To me we are one big family. Around this time, nearly two hundred years after the fact, a reporter asks Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai for his opinion about the French Revolution:

“Too soon to tell,” he says.

I like that. I too am slow to judge. I gather and digest, and digest, and digest. I wrestle with questions too abstract or impersonal to interest others. Maybe the personal is too painful, and the abstract is attractive because it seems safe, so I live in abstraction.

The scene in front of the television is my first puzzle piece in figuring out life. Here is the second:

We are entering a ballpark, pressing toward turnstiles like animals. My father is mooing like a cow, to be funny, and I am up on his shoulders. At first being close to

everybody feels reassuring, but it becomes scarier as we homogenize, put on our sports-fan personalities, discuss only the game, use special sports vocabulary, and cite sports statistics until the rest of life disappears.

When the game starts we all yell together. It feels good, sort of. But when I yell it sounds like someone else's voice. Who is here? And if it is not me, and it is filling me and yelling through me, is it filling everyone else, and yelling through them too?

In the dumb, grinning, yelling of the herd I feel anxious and wary. Rather than yell in a strange voice or play stupid for the safety of seeming normal, I turn to books, turn off my body, and visit virtual realities of stories, contexts, and meanings. I leave emotional soil and grow ethereal. There is no pain as I am receding into abstraction; as I become comfortably numb.

### **[1.10] It disturbs me**

I watch television most days and am sucked and suckered into the cunning guided fantasy of identity programming. Commercials and shows are my early education about how the world works, what people do, and how to fit in. As beefy guys in bars practice the religion of beer, I wonder: *Does anyone really argue about if it is less filling or tastes great? And if beer makes us fight over truly trivial stuff, why does anyone drink it?*

Dick Butkus and Bubba Smith are beer's apostles. They show how bullies gloat, wearing unsmiling smiles as they intimidate other guys. They seem like hurt little boys playing big bad men; grudgingly getting whatever they can through lying, bluffing, and wet, desperate handshakes.

They and other supposed celebrities teach me much. They teach me about smiling that

is crying and laughing that is lying. The shows and movies they star in are coloring books to fill in with my life. I think, talk, and act like them till I am playing their roles automatically, all the time.

Through these roles I find a way to express the feelings moving through me; those I cannot usually name or claim; that are too much to assert or inhabit. Unsure of how to play myself, I find in these roles a way to play someone; someone who seems happy and successful, like Oprah Winfrey, or independent and powerful, like Jeff Spicoli.

By mimicking actors I sign away my life. I am taken to the airport, become the cargo of a vast machine, and am passed through a devious and efficient workflow. I am disarmed, interrogated, and inspected. I accept DNA-damaging millimeter wave biometric body scans and gloved genital groping dissociatively and mute. Rules, laws, and threats of shame and prison frighten me into a generic, submissive life.

I am herded with the others down a tunnel onto a plane, where we strap ourselves into seats. We are lectured, liquored up, and distracted with movies, snacks, and hottie flight attendants. We endure workable approximations of life—fractional lives, half-souled, half-occupied—sitting in our seats without touching each other. Rarely bold enough to ask “Who is flying this thing?” Or “Where are they taking us?” Rarely able to voice the more urgent questions “Who am I?” Or “Would you help me be more alive?”

We seem like the first men I saw on television: fighting wars we do not understand, for reasons questionable at best, giving our lives to projects we did not create, about which we do not care, and from which we cannot escape.

It disturbs me. Ω