

## **Coming of Age in the Global Village**

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I wish to analyze in this paper three acts of violence directed against public figures: Arthur Bremer's attempt to assassinate George Wallace in 1972; John Hinckley, Jr.'s attempt to assassinate President Reagan in 1982; and Mark David Chapman's unfortunately successful attempt to kill John Lennon in 1981. Each of these three acts was inextricably bound up with popular culture, and the sensibilities of the psychotic young men who committed them were formed by popular culture.

Yet as of now we have no way of discussing or analyzing this relationship—much less of understanding or ameliorating it. To explain this situation, I turned to my favorite of Walter Ong's books, *The Presence of the Word* (1967), where Father Ong reminds us that "The word moves toward peace because the word mediates between person and person. No matter how much it gets caught up in currents of hostility, the word can never be turned into a totally warlike instrument. So long as two persons keep talking, despite themselves they are not totally hostile" (192). It would seem, then, that if we could find a way to analyze popular culture—and not simply praise or condemn it—we might be able to change its effects.

Indeed, there is some evidence that this is the case. One psychological study (Leyens et al. 1976) showed that subjects who were taught to perceive violent movies aesthetically—in terms of composition and focus, for example—showed little if any change in their behavior after watching such movies. By contrast, a control group did become more aggressive after watching the same movies. Another study (Huesman et al. 1983) showed that children were hardly affected at all by violent television if they learned to write essays about them. Since the word moves toward peace, this is only what we would expect.

Let us consider whether an application of some of the principles which have informed the thought of Walter Ong may not help us begin an irenic dialogue about popular culture. For one thing, the three violent acts which I mentioned were committed by men and directed against men, and thus may be considered perverted forms of the agonistic structures, or ritualized contest, which Father Ong has discussed in *Fighting for Life* (1981). Ranging widely over the psychological, sociological, and anthropological literature which has appeared since Bruno Bettelheim's analogous *Symbolic Wounds* (1955), Father Ong has shown that such behavior has deep biological roots, and appears virtually everywhere in world culture. In traditional oral cultures, agonistic structures often serve as a rite of passage through which young men come of age, and achieve an identity as adults. They thus involve a twofold movement of enduring hardship and attaining some worthwhile things, such as status in one's society, by doing so.

Yet agonistic structures do evolve. As Father Ong puts it, "The fate of agonistic structures is tied in with the history of verbalization, and in particular with the technologizing of the word . . . . The conversion or technologizing of verbal performance gives the word and thought itself marvelous new powers and restructures the psyche" (1981:26). Since the effect of literacy is to foster the privatization of consciousness, what happens to agonistic structures, which are a form of socialization?

In *Fighting for Life*, Ong comments that, "The art of oratory, always highly agonistic, atrophied spectacularly after the advent of print" (26). Print changed other forms of verbal expression as well. The rise of the vernacular languages of Europe, associated as it was with printing, made Latin less useful. In his article "Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite," Ong has argued that "when Latin passed out of vernacular usage, it created a sharp distinction between those who knew it and those who did not" (1971:119). As a knowledge of Latin became increasingly irrelevant, it took on more and more meaning as a puberty rite, as an agonistic experience.

Puberty rites did not die out as fewer and fewer boys studied Latin, however. Although he does not use the term, Neil Postman has suggested in a recent book that the acquisition of literacy in any language, not just Latin, is a form of puberty rite. He interprets literacy as having created childhood in the sense that in

a literate society children who want to know what adults know must learn to read. Moreover, “when one learns to read, one learns a peculiar way of behaving of which physical immobility is only one feature. Self-restraint is a challenge not only to the body but to the mind as well” (1982:76).

In “Romantic Difference and the Poetics of Technology” (1971:255-83) and in other works as well, Father Ong has shown that the long-lasting stage in the evolution of consciousness which we know as Romanticism is an expression of a literate mentality. Wordsworth’s attack on the use of oral commonplaces serves as only one example of this change. Another example is the famous final line of “She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways”: “Lucy’s in her grave and, oh, the difference to me.” Notice that Wordsworth does not develop a comparison or a conceit to express his grief, as an earlier poet might have done; he internalizes it, as we would expect a literate person to do. The nature of his grief remains unknown, just as Lucy herself remained unknown in life.

We all know that the Romantics promoted a cult of spontaneity, and praised childlike naturalness; in the present context, it would appear that they were implicitly denying the need for agonistic experiences, and indeed the need for maturation of any kind. The Romantic admiration for naturalness and spontaneity has a democratizing quality, for it assumes that we are all natural, spontaneous—at least in the beginning. Thus, such Romantic attitudes spread rapidly in America, the most democratic country, and became an essential element of American consciousness.

If Romanticism de-emphasized agonistic experiences, and if America is a profoundly Romantic country, then it follows that American culture—literate as it was from the very beginning—will de-emphasize agonistic experiences and the need for the evolutionary maturation of the ego.

These remarks may help to create a context in which we can understand the meaning of television, as it fosters secondary orality in America. Since the Romantics praised the childlike quality of the human psyche, they might well have taken to television. Television, is, after all, accessible to all. Unlike pictographic or alphabetic literacy, “television offers a fairly primitive but irresistible alternative to the linear and sequential logic of the printed word and tends to make the rigors of a literate education irrelevant. . . . Unlike books, which vary greatly in their lexical

and syntactical complexity and which may be scaled according to the ability of the reader, the TV image is available to everyone, regardless of age” (Postman 1982:79). Children can watch television from the age of thirty-six months, and do not significantly improve in their ability to watch television. If we associate the Romantics with childlike states of mind expressed in the vernacular, then television is a profoundly Romantic medium.

This profoundly Romantic medium has made all parts of the world instantly accessible to each other, and has thus collapsed it into a global village, to use Marshall McLuhan’s term. Yet the American part of this global village has a consciousness processed through and through by literacy. It tends to believe that maturation is unnecessary and probably undesirable, and thus it tends not to produce fully developed narratives of maturation or fully developed agonistic structures. As a case in point, Leslie Fiedler (1960) has noted the frequency with which children appear as major characters in American fiction from Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* to J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. It is hardly surprising, then, that clinical psychologist Dan Kiley has concluded that “All across our land, our male children are refusing to grow up” (1983:24). Kiley considers this trend so important that he calls it the Peter Pan Syndrome, after Sir James Barrie’s character who said “I want always to be a little boy and to have fun” (22). No one conspired to produce the Peter Pan Syndrome, for it has appeared as a response to our historical situation. As Kiley puts it, “during the past ten or fifteen years, political events and media strategy have thrust our male children into a monumental sex role conflict” (30). How, then, do boys come of age in the global village?

One answer is that they do so through televised sports. As Father Ong has said, “Millions of males across the world know virtually no subject of sustained conversation other than spectator sports” (1981:152). It is certainly true that many American boys choose as role models men who play games. Although spectator sports may have an allegorical quality, they do not provide a narrative, and their relevance as models for behavior is thus limited.

In fact, sociologist David P. Phillips (1983) has linked televised championship boxing matches to homicide. He has shown that for the period 1973-1978 it is consistently the case that three days after a nationally televised championship boxing match in

which a white male lost, there was a statistically significant increase in homicides of white males. Similarly, three days after a nationally televised championship boxing match in which a black male lost, there was a statistically significant increase in homicides of black males. Social psychologists call this phenomenon a “priming effect” because its results are brief; boxing matches presumably trigger violent acts in men who already have a high level of aggression (Berkowitz 1984).

Phillips’ important and provocative research does not, however, explain the assassinations of celebrities, which usually require careful planning over a period of time. To explain these horrendous events, we need to notice a paradox about television. The easy access of television—no special skills are needed to watch it—does not translate into easy access *to* television. Yet once one does achieve access to television for a while, that access becomes generalized in such a way as to make the original achievement irrelevant. To take only one of many possible examples, former baseball player Joe DiMaggio receives a handsome salary for making television commercials for Mr. Coffee coffeemakers. He can do this not because he has any special expertise about coffee or coffeemakers but because he is a celebrity. Although he achieved fame with genuine achievements as an athlete, there is no direct relationship between his achievements and his commercials. People like DiMaggio resemble those products whose labels proclaim “As Advertised on TV.” To see something advertised on television, and to know that millions of other people have seen it advertised on television, is to know that it has become part of the national consciousness. To paraphrase what Saussure once said of language, such a product is a social fact. Similarly, people who frequently appear on television also become social facts—regardless of what they do. It was this situation to which Daniel Boorstin was referring a number of years ago when he commented that “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (1962:57). That is to say, television tends to make agonistic structures irrelevant.

To understand why television produces celebrities in Boorstin’s sense of the word, we may have recourse to etymology. In Russian, the verb “to turn on,” as in “to turn on the television set,” is *vklyuchit’*. This verb also has meaning, still in active use, “to include,” and is derived from the noun *klyuch*, “key.” Thus, to turn something on is to include yourself in it, to use a key to

enter something. When we turn on the television set, we in effect include it in the larger electrical circuit of the house.

When we turn on a television set, we literally include it in a circuit, but we also do something else as well; we are acknowledging our exclusion from the human circuit formed by the people whom we see on television. It is this sense of exclusion from the *polis* for which print media such as the infamous *National Inquirer* compensate. They form secondary circuits which include Americans, especially working-class Americans, in the gossip going around in the global village. This is, of course, the function of chatty headlines such as “What Johnny’s Really Paying—It’s More Than You Were Told.” Although celebrities despise the *National Inquirer* and others like it, these publications perform a useful service by offering their readers the feeling of being included.

For as of now, they do not feel included. After all, some people become well-known without enduring any apparent agonistic struggle and without achieving anything notable except through the media. Johnny Carson and Dan Rather, for example, are known; they exist in the consciousness of millions of people whom they have never met. There’s the rub, for television is a one-way medium which does not allow the interaction of dialogue. Director Peter Bogdanovich articulated the psychological tensions which result from the lack of reciprocity between celebrities and their admirers when he wrote, “It’s a feeling I’ve had with several movie stars I’ve met—knowing them so much better than they could ever know me—and finding it impossible to satisfactorily bridge the gap” (1973:100). Indeed, we know celebrities so much better than they will ever know us; this inescapable fact does create an unbridgeable gap. To explain the significance of celebrities, I propose a new meaning for the verb “to mediate,” a meaning which helps to explain the cycle of violence directed at public figures beginning with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and (one may hope) culminating with John Hinckley, Jr.’s attempt on President Reagan’s life in 1982.

The verb “to mediate” obviously comes from the Latin *medium* and thus it usually means “to be in the middle of something,” as when someone mediates a labor dispute. We need an additional meaning for this word, a meaning which derives from the meaning of “medium” in the phrase “communications medium.” This new meaning will describe the way communications media make people well known, with no reference to the reason for what

Boorstin calls their “well-knownness.” Television makes celebrities out of people by giving them media attention; it mediates them. We may thus speak of people such as Joe DiMaggio as mediated. DiMaggio’s career as a spokesperson for Mr. Coffee shows that to become a mediated person in a highly technologized society is to acquire great power and potentially great wealth.

A very persuasive example of this principle recently appeared in an article on the people who make large sums of money on the lecture circuit. In it, James S. Kunen advises his readers: “If you want to make it in the speaking game, you have to remember one thing: *Nobody comes to hear the speech*. People come to hear celebrities, to be in the same room with them” (1984:355). And who are these celebrities? An agent at a speaker’s bureau commented, “To the extent you’re on TV, that’s the extent you’re known” (*idem*). Here, as with so much else in American life today, the medium is the message.

This situation has important implications for our society; moreover, all of these implications are unforeseen, as the implications of media change usually are. Consider, for example, the social stratification implied in the phrase “global village.” The village in a true oral society usually has a clearly defined hierarchy. Similarly, in our age of secondary orality television has created a quasi-feudal society which consists of two classes, mediated people and unmediated people. Since it is television which creates the global village, in effect only mediated people live in the global village; only they are included in the network. Everyone else is on the outside looking in.

However, this mediated hierarchy of secondary orality exists without what we might call the conceptual infrastructure of the hierarchies in oral society. That is to say, the hierarchy formed by mediated people exists in defiance of the supposedly democratic principles of American society, according to which everyone is equal. Unmediated people simply are not, and cannot be, equal to mediated people in America today; they have not entered the circuit of social facts. To be sure, American society has never been as egalitarian as people liked to think it was, and hierarchies have always existed in it. The difference is that this mediated hierarchy is constantly on display. It provides constant proof that not everyone is equal, that not everyone belongs in the circuit.

Father Ong enunciated one of the principles of his life’s work when he wrote: “It is through the ability to communicate that

man achieves a sense of belonging” (1971:119). Those who remain unmediated cannot communicate with those who are, and thus they do not belong. The results of this situation now seem clear. We can say that it is the absence of institutionalized agonistic structures which has brought on much of the violence directed at mediated people in recent years. In a highly technologized society, a few unbalanced young men will compensate for the absence of ritualized combat with planned aggression in the form of assassinations.

Such considerations allow us to make sense of the bizarre acts of violence which began with the assassination of our first fully mediated president, John F. Kennedy, in 1963. President Kennedy was a television star before he became president and indeed the conventional wisdom has it that he became president *because* he was a television star. Although we have reason to doubt that we know, or ever will know, the complete story of this epochal event, it set in motion a series of events in which unmediated people struck out at mediated people. They did so in order to relieve the increasingly severe tension of not belonging.

We may refer to the need to commit violent acts simply in order to become famous as the Herostratus complex, after the Greek who in 356 BC set fire to the temple of Artemis in Ephesus in order to make his name immortal. In recent times, the Herostratus complex seems to begin with Sirhan Sirhan, the assassin of Robert F. Kennedy. After he shot Senator Kennedy in 1968, he said, “They can gas me. But I am famous, I achieved in a day what it took Kennedy all his life to do” (Ellis and Gullo 1971:230). It is Sirhan’s use of the word “achieved” that shows the agonistic quality of his act.

Yet Sirhan was not as self-consciously narcissistic as Arthur Bremer, would-be assassin of George Wallace in 1972. Bremer presents an exceptionally pure example of Peter Pan Syndrome, in which, Kiley says, “narcissism locks the young man inside his own fantasies” (1983:31). Bremer’s fantasies derived from his media experience, but eventually became completely self-contained, and gave him a bizarre combination of honesty and amorality.

Like a typical Peter Pan, Bremer was unable to sustain relationships of any kind, so he took to keeping a journal (which he copyrighted, with an eye to his future fame). In it, he constantly berated himself as a failure and an outsider. Still, Bremer clearly understood what he wanted. He wanted fame, just

as Sirhan Sirhan had five years previously. He wrote: “But I want them all to know. I want a big shot & not a little pot noise” (1973:97). This loner who wanted a bang not a whimper had no political convictions or motivations whatsoever (this fact seems to distinguish American assassination attempts from those in Europe). He simply wanted to become mediated, and shooting a public figure was the only way he could think of to achieve this goal. He originally planned to shoot President Nixon, and followed him to Canada in late 1971 with this purpose in mind. Since it was the image of the act and not the act itself which mattered to Bremer, he tended to fantasize that he was Fred Astaire: “To wear a white tie & tails and get Nixon-boy, WOW! If I killed him while wearing a sweaty tee-shirt, some of the fun and Glamore would defionently be worn off” (Bremer’s spelling and capitalization; 1973:81).

But after stalking Nixon for a while, Bremer decided that Secret Service men were too vigilant, so he reluctantly settled on George Wallace as a substitute victim. He complained to his journal that shooting Wallace would not make him as famous as shooting Nixon: “I won’t even rate a T.V. enteroption [*sic*] in Russia or Europe when the news breaks—they never heard of Wallace” (1973:105).

Commenting on Bremer’s narcissism, Harding Lemay has said: “It becomes clear that this journal is, in effect, a film scenario” (1973:19). Since Bremer had such obsessive dreams of mediation, it is only appropriate that the motif of the pathological loner as assassin became mediated in two major films of the 1970’s, Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), and Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976). The interrelationships which obtain between these films and American society in the seventies are so complex and delicate that each deserves at least a brief discussion.

The first shot of *Nashville* suggests a possible revision of Chairman Mao’s saying, “Power is what comes out of a gun”; it shows a van mounted with loudspeakers for use in a political campaign. In America, power is what comes out of a loudspeaker: mediated speech. Moreover, all the characters in *Nashville* are either mediated, or want to become mediated. Most of the action deals with the machinations necessary to persuade various country and western singers to appear at a rally for a maverick presidential candidate. *Nashville* thus has particular importance in the present context because it is the first film which dramatizes the similarities

between politics and show business as related forms of mediation. Politics and show business come together at the rally at the end of the film, where a character clearly based on Arthur Bremer shoots one of the singers, Barbara Jean.

In contrast to the diffuse structure of *Nashville*, which has some two dozen characters, *Taxi Driver* isolates the pathological male loner who becomes a would-be assassin. The title character, Travis Bickle (played by Robert DeNiro) fantasizes about shooting a political candidate; foiled by good security as Bremer was when he attempted to shoot President Nixon, he ultimately saves a young prostitute (played by Jodie Foster) from her pimp in a scene of extraordinary violence. Shots of newspaper clippings then tell us that his action has made Bickle a local hero, a fact which the girl's father confirms to him in a telephone conversation. This public recognition does not make us perceive him as any less psychotic, however. Interestingly, film historian Robert Kolker argues that Bickle's insanity comes from mediation: "The more deeply he [Travis] withdraws, the more he comes to believe in the American movie myths of purity and heroism, love and selflessness, and to actuate them as the legitimate child of John Wayne and Norman Bates: pure, self-righteous, violent ego and grinning, homicidal lunatic; each the obverse of the other; each equally dangerous" (1980:236).

John Hinckley, Jr. failed to understand such subtleties; he took *Taxi Driver* at face value, as just another American movie with a happy ending. For him, *Taxi Driver* was a dream come true. After all, Travis got what he wanted—those newspaper clippings made him a mediated person, and he saved Jodie Foster. In *Taxi Driver* Hinckley saw his fantasies of becoming mediated made into a romance and acted out. As it happens, he saw the film in Los Angeles where—like Charlie Manson—he had gone in the hopes of finding fame and fortune as a songwriter. Like Manson, he failed, but he found a surrogate identity in Travis Bickle. As a psychiatrist who studied him commented, "in even the smallest aspects of his behavior, clothes, drinking and so forth, he picked up habits of Travis Bickle" (Latham 1982:18).

Hinckley completed this identity with a fixation on Jodie Foster. Ms. Foster was attending Yale at the time, and Hinckley made several trips to New Haven in order to propose marriage to her and/or shoot her. Only an hour before he made the attempt on President Reagan's life, on 30 March, 1982, Hinckley wrote her

a letter in which he said “I will admit to you that the reason I am going ahead with this attempt now is because I just cannot wait any longer to impress you. . . . Jodie, I am asking you, please look into your heart and at least give me the chance with this historical deed to gain your respect and love” (Latham 1982:54). In terms of the present discussion, Hinckley is thinking logically, if not rationally. Like Bremer, he had no political motives; indeed, he thought that President Reagan was “the greatest president of the century.” But he understood that he was not a mediated person, and that Foster was. And he understood all too clearly that this difference constituted an unbridgeable gap between them. By shooting the president, he would commit a “historical deed”; he would bridge the gap by becoming mediated like her, and thus worthy of her “respect and love.” He was, and still is, suffering from unrequited narcissism.

When Hinckley set out to shoot the President, he had a gun in one hand and a John Lennon button in the other, for he had gone into a deep depression upon hearing of Lennon’s death on 9 December 1981. One of his many contemporaries who also loved the Beatles was Mark David Chapman, the man who had shot Lennon. If we merely substitute John Lennon for Travis Bickle, Chapman’s crime shows a pathogenesis with remarkable similarities to Hinckley’s.

As a child, Chapman was a loner who withdrew into a fantasy world. He created in his mind a imaginary kingdom, with himself as king, and ordered the Beatles to give concerts for his subjects. As he grew older, this kingdom evolved into a democracy, of which he was president. Yet he was a God-like president, and God-like powers required mediation. At Chapman’s sentencing, a forensic psychiatrist offered the following testimony: “In fact, he told me that he was not physically more remote from his people. He explained to me that just as God cannot reveal Himself directly to me, so he could not reveal himself directly to the ‘little people.’ Television was the way in which he could communicate with them” (Kempton 1981:14). Like Hinckley, Chapman’s dreams of mediation led him to choose a mediated role model—in this case, John Lennon. Like Hinckley, he began to imitate his role model as literally as possible. At a time when Lennon was not recording, and letting his wife Yoko Ono handle all his business transactions, Chapman married an Oriental woman who worked while he stayed at home. On his last day of work, he

signed out as John Lennon, just as Hinckley had registered at a motel as J. Travis.

Unfortunately, Chapman succeeded where Hinckley, fortunately, failed. Despite this crucial difference, they both thought of themselves as saviors. Hinckley wished to save Jodie Foster, as Travis Bickle had saved the character she played in *Taxi Driver*. All of these psychopaths needed models from which to take an identity, and Chapman found his model as a savior figure in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. To the consternation of his psychiatrist, and of the general public, Chapman insisted that he was the catcher in the rye. And, like Hinckley in his letter to Foster, he was reasoning logically if not rationally.

We recall that Holden Caulfield, the protagonist of Salinger's novel, fantasizes that he will stand in a rye field and catch the children who are playing there before they fall over a cliff. By killing his idol John Lennon, Chapman believed in a way which he apparently could not articulate that he was saving children. And what was he saving them from? He was saving them from the agony, which he himself experienced daily, of having to admit that he was unmediated. Since the Beatles were the most famous group of the sixties, and Lennon was widely recognized as its leader, Lennon was intensely mediated, as it were. The death of Lennon, then, would decrease the tension between mediated and unmediated people because it would remove one of the most mediated people of our time.

This discussion of assassins, Hollywood movies, and the death of a rock star may have seemed to take us from the more traditional subjects which usually concern Walter Ong. Yet no one whose life has been enriched by his interest in all cultural phenomena can afford to ignore the irenic potential of dialogue about the popular culture which surrounds us every day, and which is sometimes a matter of life and death.<sup>1</sup>

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#### Note

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