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so clearly from those other places where our citizens
come from.

We all enjoy the promise of that very opportunity for differentiation which they, and this great land, make of us. Here they are not given a choice between church doctrine, a theocratic tyranny, or the
calculated and in this case here of per-

relationship between sequence and moment. Within this system, "simulation" achieves a higher order of depiction than mere recording. Thus does the simulated enter the realm of the ethical, through its superiority to reality. Falsehood is advertised.

The idiosyncrasy of "watching" television (rather than "seeing" it) turns out to be no idiosyncrasy at all. Nothing fashioned from the field of bits is finally any different from any other selection. The uncertainties are merely formal, not substantial. By such deprivations of meaning, the medium renders itself purely aesthetic. Here it touches the fullness of the surrealist ambition, that total suspension of the "critical intellect." Television's narcoleptic joys suffuse the stymied brain, which is left with no recourse other than to sway to its intoxicating rhythms. Pattern after pattern emerges as the synesthetic kaleidoscope twists and twists, endlessly recombining the filtered light of experience. Judgment without judgment, presence without presence, existence without existence, the corpse grows endlessly more exquisite.

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PRIME TIME

*Deride
and
Conquer*

MARK CRISPIN MILLER

Nobody could watch it all—and that's the point. There is a choice. Your choice. American television and you.

—JIM DUFFY, President of Communications, ABC, in one of a series of ads promoting network television (1986)

Every evening, TV makes a promise, and seems at once to keep it. TV's nightly promise is something like the grand old promise of America herself. Night after night, TV recalls the promise that was first extended through America's peerless landscape, with its great mountains, cliffs, and canyons, tumbling falls, gigantic woodlands, intricate bayous, lakes the size of seas, heavenly valleys, broiling deserts, and a network of massive rivers hurrying in all directions, through a north thick with trees, through interminable plains, through multicolored tropics, through miles and miles of grass or corn or granite, clay or wheat, until those rushing waters ultimately cascade into the surrounding ocean. And throughout this astonishing land mass lie a multitude of huge and spreading cities, each distinctive and yet each itself diverse, bustling with the restless

efforts of a population no less heroically varied than the land itself—white and black and brown and yellow, bespeaking the peculiarities of every creed and culture in the world, and yet all now living here, savoring the many freedoms that distinguish the United States so clearly from those other places where our citizens, or their ancestors, came from.

Here all enjoy the promise of that very opportunity, that very differentiation which they, and this great land mass, represent: the promise of unending choice. Here they are not ground down by party rule, church dictate, authoritarian tyranny, or the daily dangers of fanatical vendetta; and in this atmosphere of peace and plenty, they are free to work and play, have families, and contemplate, if not yet actually enjoy, the bounty of our unprecedented system.

Such is the promise of America; and TV, every evening, makes a similar sort of promise. Each night (and every day, all day), TV offers and provides us with an endless range of choices. Indeed, TV can be said to have itself incorporated the American dream of peaceful choice. This development was poignantly invoked by one of the hostages taken, in June of 1985, by the Shiite gunmen who hijacked TWA Flight 847. Back home after his captivity in Lebanon, Clint Suggs observed that "when you go to Beirut, you live war, you hear it, you smell it and it's real. It made me appreciate my freedom, the things we take for granted." In America, such freedom is available to any viewer: "When we sit here in our living room, with the sun setting, the baby sleeping, we can watch television, change channels. We have choices."

TV's promise of eternal choice arises from the whole tempting spectacle that is prime time: the full breasts, the gleaming cars, the glistening peaks of ice cream, mounds of candy, long clean highways, colossal frosted drinks, endless laughter, bands of dedicated friends, majestic houses, and cheeseburgers. The inexhaustible multitude of TV's images, sounds, and rhythms, like the dense catalog on every page of *TV Guide*, reassures us again and again that TV points to everything we might ever want or need. Nor is this promise merely implicit. The commercials, perhaps the quintessential components of TV's nonstop display, not only reconfirm our sense of privilege with millions of alluring images, but refer ex-

plicitly and often to this extensive "choice" of ours: AT&T offers us "The Right Choice," electricity, we are told, grants us "The Power of Choice," Wendy's reminds us that "There Is No Better Choice," McDonald's is "America's Choice," Coke is "The Real Choice," "In copiers, the choice is Canon," Taster's Choice is "The Choice for Taste"—all such assurances, and the delicious images that bolster them, combining to enhance even further TV's rich, ongoing paean to its own unimaginable abundances. And yet, consider carefully just one of those innumerable commercials that seem to celebrate "choice."

A white van parks on a hot beach crowded with young people. Unnoticed by these joggers and sunbathers, the driver jumps from the front seat and quickly hoists himself inside the van's rear compartment—a complete broadcasting facility. Seated at the console, with a sly look on his boyish face, he puts on a pair of headphones and flips a switch. Two white speakers rise out of the van's roof. He then picks up a cold bottle of Pepsi-Cola, tilts it toward the microphone before him, and opens it. The enticing pop and whoosh reverberate across the beach. A young woman, lying as if unconscious on a beach chair, suddenly comes to, turning her face automatically toward the speakers. The hubbub starts to die down.

Grinning now, the driver pours the Pepsi into a tall Styrofoam cup, so that everyone can hear the plash, the fizz, the wet ascending arpeggio of liquid decanted from a bottle. Inside the van, the full cup sighs and sparkles at the microphone. Outside, the air is filled with the dense crackle of carbonation. Intrigued by the sound, a dog—with a white kite draped raffishly across its head—looks to its right, toward the speakers. Intrigued, a young man shifts his gaze in exactly the same way, taking off his glasses as he does so.

Now the driver leans toward his microphone and drinks the Pepsi noisily. At the sound of his parched gulping, the crowd falls completely still. One girl reflexively smacks her lips. His cup emptied, the driver sits back and delivers a long, convincing "aaaaaaahhh!"

The crowd snaps out of its collective daze. There is an atmosphere of stampede. Now ringed by customers, the driver stands behind his van, its rear doors opened wide, revealing a solid wall of fresh six-packs, each bearing the familiar Pepsi logo. He puts on a Pepsi

vendor's cap and chirps, "Okay! Who's first?" Each customer immediately raises one arm high, and all clamor for a Pepsi, as the camera zooms far back to show that the driver's victory is total. All those beach-goers have suddenly converged on the white van like houseflies descending on a fallen Popsicle. Except for that tight throng of consumers in the distance, the beach is a wide wasteland of deserted towels. In this depopulated space, a single figure wanders, the only one who has not (yet) succumbed to Pepsi—a man equipped with a metal detector, presumably searching for loose change, and so protected, by his earphones, from the driver's irresistible sound effects. Finally, there is this signature, printed over the final image and solemnly intoned by Martin Sheen: "Pepsi. The Choice of a New Generation."

Thus, this ad leaves us with the same vague conviction that all advertising, and TV in general, continually reconfirm: that we are bold, experienced, fully self-aware, and therefore able to pick out what's best from the enormous range of new sensations now available. Like most ads, then, this one seems to salute its viewers for their powers of discrimination, their advanced ability to choose; and yet, like most ads, this one contradicts its own celebration of "choice" by making choice itself seem inconceivable.

Within the little beach universe devised for Pepsico by BBDO, "choice" is nothing but a quaint illusion. The members of this "new generation" succumb at once to the driver's expert Pavlovian technique, like so many rats responding to any systematic stimulus. This easy mass surrender is no "choice," nor are these Pepsi drinkers capable of exercising "choice," since they are the mere tanned particles of a summer mob—transient, pretty, easygoing and interchangeable. To belong to such a "generation" is not to derive one's own identity from that multitude of peers, but to give up all identity, to dissolve into a single reactive mass, and become a thing lightweight and indefinite, like so much flotsam. In such a primal group, dog and man are indeed equals, the dog trying, just like a man, to beat the heat by covering its head, the man removing his glasses, as if to be more like a dog, the two of them responding identically to the sound of Pepsi streaming from a bottle.

In place of those capacities that might distinguish man from dog, here it is merely Pepsi that fills up every heart and mind, just as it

fills that Styrofoam cup. No one thus saturated could make choices. Although not, it seems, as malleable as his customers, the driver himself is no less driven by Pepsi, blitzing his territory on behalf of himself and the company combined. And even the sole survivor of the pitch, temporarily deaf to those delicious noises, escapes only by cutting himself off. His solitary project, moreover, does not really distinguish him from all the rest, since there is apparently nothing he can do, having scrounged those dimes and pennies from the sand, but spend his income on a Pepsi.

So it cannot matter, in this beach universe, that there is no one capable of choosing, because there isn't anything to choose. Here there is nothing but Pepsi, and the mass compulsion to absorb it. As soon as the sound of Pepsi fills the air, all the pleasures of the afternoon evaporate, so that this full beach, with its sunny fraternizing, its soporific heat, its quiet surf returning and returning, becomes, in an instant, nothing more than a sandy area where you crave a certain beverage. Despite the ad's salute to "choice," what triumphs over all the free and various possibilities of that summer day is an eternal monad: Pepsi, whose taste, sound, and logo you will always recognize, and always "choose," whether you want to or not.

It is not "choice," then, that this ad is celebrating, but the total negation of choice and choices. Indeed, the product itself is finally incidental to the pitch. The ad does not so much extol Pepsi per se as recommend it by implying that a lot of people have been fooled into buying it. In other words, the point of this successful bit of advertising is that Pepsi has been advertised successfully. The ad's hero is himself an adman, a fictitious downscale version of the dozens of professionals who collaborated to produce him. He, like them, moves fast, works too hard (there are faint dark circles under his eyes), and gets his kicks by manipulating others en masse for the sake of a corporate entity. It is his power—the power of advertising—that is the subject of this powerful advertisement, whose crucial image reveals the driver surrounded by his sudden customers, who face him eagerly, each raising one arm high, as if to hail the salesman who has so skillfully distracted them.

This ad, in short, is perfectly self-referential; and that self-reflection serves to immunize the ad against the sort of easy charges

often leveled against advertising. This commercial cannot, for example, be said to tell a lie, since it works precisely by acknowledging the truth about itself: it is a clever ad meant to sell Pepsi, which people buy because it's advertised so cleverly. It would be equally pointless to complain that this ad manipulates its viewers, since the ad wittily exults in its own process of manipulation. To object to the ad at all, in fact, is to sound priggish, because the ad not only admits everything, but also seems to take itself so lightly, offering up its mininarrative of mass capitulation in a spirit of sophisticated humor, as if to say, "Sure, this is what we do. Funny, huh?"

In the purity of its self-reference, this ad is entirely modern. Before the eighties, an ad for Pepsi, or for some comparable item, would have worked differently—by enticing its viewers toward a paradise radiating from the product, thereby offering an illusory escape from the market and its unrelenting pressures. In such an ad, the Pepsi would (presumably) admit its drinker to some pastoral retreat, which would not then—like that beach—lose all of its delightfulness to the product, but would retain its otherworldly charms. In this way, advertising, until fairly recently, proffered some sort of transcendence over the world of work, trying to conceal the hard economic character of its suasive project with various "humane" appeals—to family feeling, hunger, romantic fantasy, patriotism, envy, fear of ostracism, the urge to travel, and dozens of other "noncommercial" longings and anxieties. Of course, there are ads out now that attempt to make this dated offer, but nowhere near as often, or as convincingly, as the advertising of the past. Like this Pepsi commercial, more and more of today's mass advertisements offer no alternative to or respite from the marketplace but the marketplace itself, which (in the world as advertising represents it) appears at last to have permeated every one of the erstwhile havens in its midst. Now products are presented as desirable not because they offer to release you from the daily grind, but because they'll pull you under, take you in.