

CHAPTER 1

*Intimations of your real place in the great scheme of things. Whatever. It's all about options—and they are all about you. No limits. You are totally free to choose because it doesn't really matter what you choose. **Learning to love the Blob.** Deconstruction and shopping (not buying, just shopping; maybe leasing).*

Recalling the Real

ALMOST NOTHING, anyway.

Say your car breaks down in the middle of nowhere—the middle of Saskatchewan, say. You have no radio, no cell phone, nothing to read, no gear to fiddle with. You just have to wait. Pretty soon you notice how everything around you just happens to be there. And it just happens to be there in this very precise but unfamiliar way. You are *so* not used to this. Every tuft of weed, the scattered pebbles, the lapsing fence, the cracks in the asphalt, the buzz of insects in the field, the flow of cloud against the sky, everything is very specifically exactly the way it is—and none of it is for you. Nothing here was designed to affect you. It isn't arranged so that you can experience it, you didn't plan to experience it, there isn't any screen, there isn't any display, there isn't any entrance, no brochure, nothing special to look at, no dramatic scenery or wildlife, no tour guide, no campsites, no benches, no paths, no viewing platforms with natural-historical information posted under slanted Plexiglas lectern things—whatever is there is just there, and so are you. And your options are

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limited. You begin to get a sense of your real place in the great scheme of things.

Very small.

Some people find this profoundly comforting. Wittgenstein, for example.

So that's a baseline for comparison. What it teaches us is this: in a mediated world, the opposite of real isn't phony or illusional or fictional—it's optional. Idiomatically, we recognize this when we say, "The reality is . . .," meaning something that has to be dealt with, something that isn't an option. We are most free of mediation, we are most real, when we are at the disposal of accident and necessity. That's when we are not being addressed. That's when we go without the flattery intrinsic to representation.

Surfing the Options

But haven't things in people's lives always carried some message? Hasn't culture always filtered reality in some way and addressed people through representations of some kind—ranging from the categories built into a particular language to, say, symbolic insignia of rank and affiliation?

Sure. But *being aware of that* is new. This crucial point must be grasped and retained. Awareness of "culture" was once the prerogative of a very few reflective individuals. In the postmodern world it is common sense. In that awareness, the ethos of mediation is established. Academics express all this in a jargon about the social construction of race and gender—and of truth and value in general. But mediated people everywhere know that identity and lifestyle are constructs, something to *have*. The objects and places and mannerisms that constitute our life-world are *intentionally* representational. What cultures traditionally provided was taken-for-granted custom, a form

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of necessity—hence of reality. Options are profoundly, if subtly, different, and so are the people who live among and through them.

And this holds even if you never exercise those options, even if you cling to some tradition. You know you *could* be different, and so, perhaps, you cling more desperately. Fanaticisms flourish in an atmosphere of unlimited choice.

But most people are cool with it. At least in the blue states. And Europe.

The slang expression “whatever” distills the essential situation into a single gesture. It arose and caught on because it captures so precisely, yet so flexibly, the Janus-faced attitude we assume as we negotiate the field of options that so incessantly solicit our attention and allegiance.

On the one hand, it’s a party, a feast, an array of possible experiences more fabulous than monarchs of the past could even dream of—it’s “whatever,” as in yippee!, as in *whatever* you want, whatever you can imagine; you can eat whatever, see whatever, hear whatever, read whatever, even *be* whatever. “No limits,” as the SUV and Internet ads all promise.

On the other hand, an environment of representations yields an aura of surface—as in “surf.” *It is a world of effects*. This is another existential consequence of the fact that representations address us by design. We are at the center of all the attention, but there is a thinness to things, a smoothness, a muffled quality—it’s all insulational, as if the deities of Dreamworks were laboring invisibly around us, touching up the canvas of reality with digital airbrushes. Everything has the edgeless flowing feel of computer graphics, like the lobby of a high-end Marriott/Ramada/Sheraton—the sculptured flower arrangements, that glowy, woody, marbly, purply, cushioned-air quality. Every gadget aspires to that iPod look—even automobiles. The feel of the virtual is overflowing the screens, as if the plasma were leaking into the physical

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world. Whole neighborhoods feel like that now, even when you're standing in the street.

Especially "historic" neighborhoods. It's as if the famous ones—like Baltimore's Inner Harbor and Quincy Market, parts of York and Canterbury—have all been subjected to the renovating ministrations of the same giant company with one idea, the Red Brick, Gray Stone, and Iron Filigree Restoration Corporation. And as for little towns and villages with some claim—*any* claim—on our attention, well, I wish I had the copyright for those signs, painted in Ralph Lauren green or blue with the gold trim and the gold inlay of Gothic script. I mean, how did so many people in so many places decide to hang those out at the same time? Was that Martha Stewart's fault too?

Even what's left of the wilderness can have this virtual feel (see chapter 6). It's as if nature were succumbing to all the times it has been depicted in travel tales and adventure movies and nature shows, to all the times it has been toured and photographed and otherwise used—not, in this case, for raw material, but to provide an experience.

Here's a measure of how far into the natural realm virtualization has penetrated—one of my favorites, cross-indexed under Subtle. At the little zoo in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, one building is given over to a sequence of exhibits that illustrate the concept of an ecological niche—you know, flora and fauna from a rain forest, an Alpine meadow, a desert, a wetland, etc. Very educational. Perfect place for bio students on a field trip. And guess what the Prospect Park Zoo calls the building that houses this exhibit?

"The Hall of Animal Lifestyles."

I just love that one. Options everywhere—even animals have options.

And that's why, like so many expressions of mediation, the "whatever" gesture is a dialectic. As reality and representation fuse into a field of options, opposing tendencies arise like shadows. Haunting the

moment of “I can experience whatever I want” is the moment of “What difference does it make,” because this moment, the moment of the shrug, is essential to our mobility among the options.

We need mobility among the options because they are only representations.

And that means they are no more than they appear to be.

And so they are never enough.

And that’s why more is on the way. Always. That’s why trailers are better than movies. That’s why you are always already ready for the next show, even before this one is over. That’s why, in the midst of a fabulous array of historically unprecedented and utterly mind-boggling stimuli—whatever.

So mobility among the options in a virtualized environment gives to human freedom a new and ironic character. You are completely free to choose because it doesn’t matter what you choose. That’s why you are so free. Because it doesn’t matter. How cool is that?

This is another source of virtualization’s edgeless quality. It’s as if you live in a nested set of consoles, each with its own Undo and Rewind buttons. The notorious disposability of commodities is an aspect of this, of course, but, in a mediated world, disposability goes way beyond the physical. This isn’t just about paper cups and plastic bottles and Pampers. Take relationships (see chapter 5). The word “committed” now means something like “throw your whole self into it and hope it works out.” As opposed to “for better or worse, no matter what,” which is what it used to mean.

So the real world, dissolving into optionality, is reconstituting itself on a plane that transcends ancient solidities of nature and custom, craft and industry. The whole process, of which we have just afforded glimpses, has been accelerating since the invention of modern communication technologies (telegraph, photograph, telephone), and it crossed a qualitative threshold in the past couple of

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decades, with the rise of the new media. At the same time, there has been a convergence of the digital and the biogenetic that will lead eventually to a full-blown merger between the real and the representational in every department of our lives.

Here's the basic situation: On the one hand, there's the World Wide Web, satellite-cable TV, Palm Pilots, DVD, Ethernet—virtual environments everywhere. On the other hand, cloning, genetic engineering, biotech, and also AI, robotics, nanotech—and that adds up to virtual beings everywhere.

Optional environments, optional creatures. Made for each other (see chapter 7).

When people (or whatever they are) look back on our time, all this will appear as a single development. It will be called something like the “Information Revolution,” and the lesson of that revolution will be this: what counts is the code. Digital or DNA, they are both susceptible to mediation, to human control of what the code expresses. It doesn't matter what the platform is made of, as long as the program runs. Silicon or carbon based. Artifact or animate. The difference between them is disappearing. This is not science fiction. This is happening. Right now, for example, in an Atlanta hospital, there is a quadriplegic with his brain directly wired up to a computer. He can move the cursor with his thoughts.

I don't know if he can click.

Yet.

In Denial

Some people refuse to accept the fact that reality is becoming indistinguishable from representation in a qualitatively new way. They find permanent refuge in the belief that nothing is new under the sun. They already understand what they need to

understand in order to understand everything else. These same people tend to think it's deep to talk about historical pendulums swinging back and forth. Anyway, they never fail to remind us at some point, in that special perhaps-I'm-missing-something tone, as if reluctant to spoil the speculative fun, they never fail to remind us that there have always been representations and choices and etc., etc., and isn't what's going on now just more of the same?

Beliefs like that are crude denials of the psychological processes that actually determine how we function. Really fat people believe they are on the stocky side. Abject drunks believe they are poetical free spirits. Malicious prudes believe they are selfless do-gooders. And a lot of people still believe that, with some obvious exceptions involving hoaxes and errors, we know what's real and what's not. We can tell the difference between the loss of the *Kursk*, that Russian sub, and *Titanic* (meaning, the movie, of course), for example.

And maybe we can—when specifically focused on the issue. We can comb through daily experience, identifying and quantifying degrees of fabrication and orders of representation quite easily. It might take awhile, of course, because there *are* so many gradations when you stop to think about it. For example:

Real real: You fall down the stairs. Stuff in your life that's so familiar you've forgotten the statement it makes.

Observed real: You drive by a car wreck. Stuff in your life where the image-statement is as salient as the function.

In-between real real and observed real: Stuff that oscillates between the first two categories depending on the situation. Like, you're wearing something you usually take for granted, but then you are introduced to someone attractive.

Edited real real: Shtick you have down so pat you don't know it's shtick anymore, but you definitely only use it in certain

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situations. Documentaries and videos of all kinds where people are unaware of the camera, although that's not easy to detect, actually. Candid photographs.

Edited observed real: Other people's down-pat shtick. Shtick of your own when you are still working on it. Documentaries and videos where people are accommodating the camera, which is a lot of the time, probably.

Staged real: Events like weddings and formal parties. Retail clerk patter. Politicians on talk shows.

Edited staged real: Pictures of the above. Homemade porn.

Staged observed real unique: Al kisses Tipper. *Survivor*.

Staged observed real repeated: Al kisses Tipper again and again. Anchor desk and talk show intros and segues. Weather channel behavior.

In the interest of time, we can skip the subtler middle range of distinctions and go to the other end of the spectrum:

Staged realistic: Movies and TV shows like *The English Patient* and *NYPD*.

Staged hyperreal: Oliver Stone movies and *Malcolm in the Middle*.

Overtly unreal realistic: SUVs climbing up the sides of buildings. Digitized special effects in general, except when they are more or less undetectable.

Covertly unreal realistic: The models' hair in shampoo ads. More or less undetectable digital effects, of which there are more and more every day.

In-between overtly and covertly unreal realistic: John Wayne in a contemporary beer ad (because you have to know he's dead in order to know he isn't "really" in the ad, whatever that means).

Real unreal: Robo-pets.

Unreal real: Strawberries that won't freeze because they have fish genes in them.

See? No problem. The differences are perfectly clear.

But the issue isn't *can* we do it; it's *do* we do it—and the answer is, of course not. How could we? The perceptual and cognitive categories and rhythms of action we live by are determined by a daily experience completely saturated with these entities.

Take the new Times Square, everybody's favorite icon for the virtualization process, because that's where what is happening in the culture as a whole is so effectively distilled and intensified. All the usual observations apply—and each observation contributes its iota to muffling what it was intended to expose, including this one, my little contribution, which consists of noticing how everything in that place is *aimed*. Everything is firing message modules, straight for your gonads, your taste buds, your vanities, your fears. But it's okay; these modules seek to penetrate, but in a passing way; it's all in fun. A second of your attention is all they ask. Nothing real is firing, nothing that rends or cuts. It's a massage, if you just relax and go with it. And why not? Some of the most talented people on the planet have devoted their lives to creating this psychic sauna, just for you.

And it's not just the screens and billboards, the literal signs; it's absolutely everything you encounter. Except for the eyes of the people, shuffling along, and the poignant imperfections of their bodies; they are so manifestly unequal to the solicitations lavished upon them. No wonder they stuff themselves with junk—or, trying to live up to it all, enslave themselves to regimes of improvement. The flattery of representation has a downside, as we shall see—for the flattered self is spoiled. It never gets enough. It feels unappreciated. It whines a lot. It wants attention.

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Yes, there were ersatz environments and image-driven commodities and glitzy ads back in the 1950s, say, but this is something else entirely. Saying that it's just more of what we had before is like saying a hurricane is just more breeze. So you need to ask yourself this: do you parse the real from the fabricated in that *mélange*? Not *can* you, but *do* you? The Fox screen is showing an Afghan woman learning to read—real or not? Posed? Candid? Some glorious babe in her underwear is sprawled across 35 percent of your visual field. She's looking you right in the eye. You get that old feeling—real or not? A fabulous man, sculpted to perfection by more time in the health club than most parents have for their kids, is gliding by on Day-Glo roller blades eight inches high. He's wearing Tex-Tex gear so tight it looks like it's under his skin, and the logos festooning his figure emit meaning-beeps from every angle—real or not? What about the pumped-up biceps? If he uses steroids? But, once again, the issue isn't what you *can* do when I call your attention to it. Then you can be reassured—you can say, "Hey, okay, cool. I see what you mean but I still know the difference." Not the point. The real issue is *do* you make the distinction as a matter of routine processing? Or do you rely instead on a generalized immunity that puts the whole flood in brackets and transforms it all into a play of surfaces—over which you hover and glide like a little god, dipping in here and there for the experience of your choice, the ultimate reaches of your soul on permanent remote.

The Moreness of Everything

For small groups of privileged people there have always been style choices, entertainment choices, experience choices, of course. But slower to change—and fewer, far fewer. In kind and number. And this matters, because here we collide with a real limit, one of

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the only ones that remain, a limit to which even today's modes of cultural production must submit—namely, how much the screen of human consciousness can register at a given moment. No innovation in techno-access or sensationalism can overcome this bottleneck. It determines the fundamental dynamic of our public culture: the battle for your attention.

Compare, say, the cereal and juice sections of a supermarket today with one of thirty years or so ago. For you youngsters out there, take it from Dad: it used to be Wheaties, Corn Flakes, Cheerios (oats), Rice Krispies—and that was about it. One for each grain, see? Ditto, fruit juice. But now? Would you prefer pineapple-banana-grape or strawberry-orange-kiwi? And that's just a sample of the mixes from Tropicana—check out Nantucket Nectars'. Makes of cars? Types of sunglasses? Sneaker species? Pasta possibilities? On and on.

The business types understand all this. Umbrella brand names toss off diverse and evolving lines of market-researched products for targeted niches of self-inventing customers who have continual access to every representational fabrication ever produced in the whole of human history. That's "the environment," as they say. Vedic ankle tattoos anyone? Nineteen thirties cockney caps? Safari jackets? Inca ponchos? Victorian lace-up high-heel booties? Anything you can think of, you can have. If you can afford it.

The moreness of everything ascends inevitably to a threshold in psychic life. A change of state takes place. The discrete display of options melts into a pudding—and what I will call the Blob, usually a metaphorical entity, shimmers into visibility at this moment, the moment when you stand a-mazed before the vast display at the MegaStore.

Under these conditions, the mind is forced to certain adaptations, if it is to cohere at all. So, for example, when you hear

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statistics about AIDS in Africa for the 349th time, or see your 927th picture of a weeping fireman or an oil-drenched seabird, you can't help but become fundamentally indifferent—unless it happens to be “your issue,” of course, one you “identify with,” a social responsibility option you have chosen. Otherwise, you glide on, you have to, because you are exposed to things like this all the time. *All the time*. Over breakfast. In the waiting room. Driving to work. At the checkout counter. All the time.

I know you know this already. I'm just reminding you.

Which is not to say you are never moved. On the contrary, you are moved, often deeply, very frequently. You are entirely accustomed, actually, to being moved—by footage, by stories, by representations of all kinds. That's the point. Often you glide by, but sometimes you weep. You weep at movies, you weep at live coverage of 9/11 ceremonies, you weep when you hear “The Star-Spangled Banner” or when you hear Martin Luther King invoking his dream in a PBS documentary. I once found myself, alone in a motel room (admittedly at a vulnerable moment in my life), weeping over the “like a rock” lyric in a Chevy truck commercial.

It's not your fault that you are so used to being so moved; you just are. You spend a great deal of money and time accessing what moves you. You are a connoisseur of what moves you. So it's not surprising that you learn to move on to the next, sometimes moving, moment. As a mediated person, you know that your relations with the moving will pass, and the stuffed screen accommodates your adaptation to it by providing moving surfaces that assume you are mobile enough to accommodate them. And so on, back and forth, back and forth, everywhere at once, all day, all night, innumerable vibrations, back and forth, myriad capillaries of individuated mediational transactions engulfing the planet.

One might say, “Well, people didn't respond deeply to every

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dramatic development in the world two hundred years ago either.” And that’s true, but it isn’t an objection; it’s a confirmation. To begin with, until these media came along, people didn’t even *know* about such developments, or not as quickly, and above all, not as dramatically or frequently. Also, there weren’t as many developments, period. This is a crucial factor, another aspect of just plain moreness that gets overlooked. *Less was happening*. And what was happening was happening slower, and most of it didn’t reach beyond those immediately involved.

The contrast is stark with, say, the Middle Ages. By the industrial era, a lot more was happening, obviously, and the possibility of overload became an issue then. Think of Baudelaire, adrift in the city crowd, celebrating the artist for maintaining vulnerability in that chaos of stimulation, setting the standard for the genius of modernism. But a qualitative threshold has been breached since then. Cities no longer belong to the soulful flaneur, but to the wired-up voyeur in his soundproof Lexus. Behind his tinted windows, with his cell phone and CDs, he gets more input, with less static, from more channels, than Baudelaire ever dreamed of.

The Blob

Okay, for those of you who find the term “postmodern” really annoying because you still can’t figure out what the hell it means—it basically means the whole situation I’ve been describing. The term is frustrating because it seems to depend on what it isn’t for its meaning, but the expression won’t go away because, in fact, it means much more—too much more. A historical development as vast and various as this one is just plain hard to characterize positively, hard to imagine as a whole. For years I’ve been looking for the phrase that gets it right, the high-concept

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expression so dear to the heart of the pitchmeister. I've never quite managed it, but for a revealing reason. The problem with trying to comprehend the process of mediation is that you can't get outside it. It is like a shadow that expends no energy and makes no effort, yet never falters. Perpetual reflexivity is a haunting.

So I've taken to filing it all under the Blob, just informally, for casual reference purposes. The heck with trying to name the incomprehensible, so fall back on a pop culture joke, right? How familiar is that move?

(*The Blob*, 1958, Steve McQueen's breakout flick. Several sequels, plus, of course, on *Comedy Central's Mystery Science Theater 3000* you can watch the witty host and his robo-companions watching the movie. And if you want, you can tape yourself and a witty companion watching them watching the movie and then watch that. Not that you would, but you could.)

After a while I began to see virtue in the name. It isn't much of a metaphor because it's so inexact, and that began to seem like the point. Anything more specific couldn't possibly do justice to mediation precisely because it proceeds so variously. It works on a case-by-case-by-case basis. It comes from all directions and no direction. Nothing is too great or too small for its textured ministrations. Its elasticity is without limit, its osmotic processes calibrated to enfold the tiniest, most private gestures of your secret life and contain your sense of the universe and the meaning of love and death as well.

Perhaps you bridle. Perhaps you believe that you have retained sharpness and edge? I doubt it. The Blob will not tolerate edges—though “edgy” is fine; perhaps you are edgy, that's very possible. The Blob invented edgy. Edgy is one of the Blob's most active digestive enzymes.

Once in a while, in the public realm, some eruption of fate or evil—9/11, obviously, but also, say, a school shooting, the abuse at

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Abu Ghraib, the hostage beheadings, something like that—will feel as if it might be sharp enough, as if it might pierce the membrane and slice the pulp, as if it might at least *interrupt* the Blob's progress through the universe.

But no. Watch as the media antibodies swarm to the scene of those nascent interruptions. These are the junctures that require the most coverage—and the latent meaning, the ironic dialectic implicit in that word emerges. What must be *covered* is any event or person or deed that might challenge the Blob with something like a limit, something the Blob cannot absorb, something that could, in resistance or escape, become the one thing the omnitolerant Blob cannot allow, something outside it, something unmediated—something real.

But not to worry. The Blob may have to devote some extra time and energy to these challenges, but in the end it prevails. And how is the moment of its victory marked? By your indifference. That's the signal to move on, the signal for the Next Thing to appear. That's when the original being of the real thing has been fully mediated. It becomes representational, and that means optional. You can turn it off, or on. It's up to you again. The Blob is sated. The thing-that-would-be-real has been digested and incorporated. It no longer threatens to be anything *else*.

The Hard Part

The basic themes and concepts have been given, along with a general sense of how they work. The central notions—representational flattery and optionality's role in the virtualization process—are, so far as I know, original, but they synthesize ideas that have been out there for a long time, in the work of McLuhan, and in Ong, Lasch, Boorstin, Postman, Harvey, Sennett, Lapham, Gitlin,

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Rifkin, Rushkof, Gabler, not to mention Baudrillard and Eco and DeBord and all of them. If this were an academic treatise, I would have to parcel out a lot of credit.

These ideas are not difficult, taken individually. The trick is bearing them in mind together. This “bearing in mind” of aspects has been essential to phenomenology since Husserl, and it takes some practice. But the truly hard part, in this case, is evaluation, the ethical-political judgment piece.

On balance, is pervasive mediation a good thing or a bad thing?

One reason it is so important to get over the issue of real versus artificial/phony and focus on real versus optional is that if we don’t get clear on that, we’ll never see the problem of evaluation for what it is. We are coming up to a chapter on childhood, so here’s an illustration that anticipates that topic.

Nowadays, when I watch little kids (in certain neighborhoods) at play, I have to laugh. Bike helmets that could deflect a bazooka shell. Knee pads. Elbow pads. The playgrounds are padded too. Big rubber tiles carpet the whole space and all the equipment is rounded wood or plastic—nary an edge or a point to be found. Sometimes I think, yikes, where does this end? Why not just live in a bubble and be done with it?

Nostalgia for the real, they call it—in this case, nostalgia for the days when kids (especially boys) over the age of, say, eight, pretty much ran free. No one ever heard of a bike helmet, and injuries of all kinds were the assumed risks of childhood. In a way, you were supposed to get hurt, practically expected to break your arm at least once. The general idea was that this was part of learning to make your way in the world.

I get that nostalgia, but when it comes down to what I would *do* if I were the parent of a young child today—well, that’s a horse of another color, as my mother used to say. Now that I know about

bike helmets, now that they are an option, it would be downright irresponsible not to strap one on little Justin's head before he takes off along the (very uneven, quite treacherous, actually, I never noticed before) sidewalk on his razor scooter, wouldn't it? Imagine the guilt if he suffered a serious but avoidable injury. No, no, it looks sort of silly, a bit too precious; no doubt it's boomer narcissism run amok, all these kids being treated like hemophiliac heirs to the throne of the Hapsburgs—and we haven't even begun with educational mobiles from Baby Einstein dangling over *Consumer Reports*—approved cribs and self-esteem camps and Ritalin and all the rest. Easy to mock, but the point is—and this is how it works across the board—you end up opting for these options because, on balance, it's better than not opting for them.

I remember when health clubs began to appear. The first few times I saw rows of people on those cardio machines, pumping and peddling so furiously, sweat dripping, faces etched with determination, all working so intently—and *going absolutely nowhere*—I thought, this sums it up, this is the most ridiculous display of . . . of . . . something, hard to say exactly what, but something very definite and symptomatic. Imagine what it would look like to people who put out this kind of energy doing necessary things, like getting in the crop, hauling in the catch, reaching winter pasture. On the cardio machines, you're not even trying to score points or goals, it's not even a game. You are just pushing and puffing and straining on a machine very specifically and expensively designed for you to push and puff and strain on, and for nothing else. How weird is that? So ingrown. A sculpture of reflexivity.

Of course, what eventually happened is that I became one of those people, and now I barely give it a thought. Three or four days a week, there I am on the StairMaster, climbing, climbing—climbing nowhere. Because it is so convenient, after all, and it's a

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good workout, you can't deny that, and I get some reading done at the same time, and the truth is my legs can't take jogging on cement anymore, and bike riding in the city, with all the traffic and the fumes, is very unpleasant—to me at least, obviously some people are into it, and more power to them; that's *their* choice.

And so on, across the whole spectrum of options. Call it the Justin's Helmet Principle. The dynamic of evaluation goes like this: to begin with, an aesthetic sense that something is amiss; then the realization that you can't pin down exactly what the problem is, while the advantages are obvious—and that queasy feeling will subside in time.

Take a more extreme example, same dynamic, just more intense. This is an option the biotech folks are anticipating you will have in the not-too-distant future: you can have a clone of yourself—minus the brain, just the body—kept alive in a vat. The idea is that you will be able to harvest the organs from it as your own wear out. No more rejection issues in transplants. No more agonized waiting for that kidney.

Now, this is an unsettling prospect for most people to contemplate, at least at first. But scrutinize it. Why not? We already do transplants routinely. We've tried pig organs in humans. We froze Ted Williams whole. We supported partial-birth abortions where the brain gets vacuumed out of the skull. So what's wrong with this clone organ-farm idea, given what we already do? No one's forcing it on anyone, don't forget. It's just an option. And once they start doing it, you'll get used to it. It's just that first image of this brainless living body that looks exactly like you floating in a vat, that's what got to you for a minute—but people used to feel the same way about using cadavers to teach anatomy. Just superstition, when you think about it. Right?

And what applies to these particulars applies to the entire

process as well. Evaluation of the whole is slippery in the same way. Because the fact of the matter is that Disneyfication and diversity, say, are indissoluble aspects of the same gigantic phenomenon. It makes no sense, in the end, to be “for” one and “against” the other in any sort of an ideological way. You can’t have those inspiring CD-ROMs on the civil rights movement without Jerry Bruckheimer war movies. You can’t expect to accommodate Latino culture without a talking Chihuahua in a Che beret. Kermit the Frog gives college commencement addresses *because* no dominant discourse now determines value—and vice versa.

And so on. The key fact is this: *you* can pick and choose among the options—you can refuse to own a TV and spend all your time reading Proust (not that you would, but you could)—because *all* the options are out there. At some level, you accept this, and that is why evaluation of the whole is ultimately swamped with ambivalence as well.

Or would be, if people were clear about the issue. But many are able to avoid this ultimate ambivalence because of the fact that millions of people in this world live in utter misery, with little or no media and very few options, and the corporate interests that propel economic globalization are responsible for much of that misery—and are *also* the producers of mediated culture (see chapter 4). So it can seem to make sense to reject Big Macs and Jerry Springer, but not sushi and Salman Rushdie, on something like aesthetic grounds, while still holding the huge conglomerates to account politically. You can blame them for the vulgar options *and* for the misery of those left out of, or damaged by, the whole process.

But the truth is that sushi and Salman Rushdie are also brought to us by globalization, and the *ultimate* evaluational question about pervasive mediation doesn’t arise *unless you assume that economic*

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globalization has made room for everyone, and media culture is universal.

Pretend this is a forced-choice exercise in a values' clarification workshop. Nietzsche was willing to judge history aesthetically, willing to sacrifice the herd and all its works to higher specimens and their lofty enterprises, but are you? Suppose the "objective conditions of history" (remember them?) are forcing this choice upon you: not socialism versus capitalism or civilized versus vulgar, but mediated options for all versus continuing human misery on a massive scale. Suppose, in other words, that universal material well-being could be achieved and the environment protected, but only at the cost of having everything virtualized and everybody mediated—every person on earth immersed in the flattering field of commodified options that only some of us enjoy today. Just suppose. What would you decide?

Of course. It's just like the bike helmet for Justin.

Incidentally, now you can see why destabilizing fixed categories and opening up multiple readings was all the rage at the university. Deconstruction was the academic equivalent of shopping. Perpetually entertaining options among undecidables, exercising them provisionally, in accordance with a context and the needs of the moment—that's intellectual shopping. One may lease, as it were, a reading, but one never buys, for interpretations are bound to multiply, and no definitive documentation, no historical condition or authorial intent, will ever secure a settled meaning and resolve the play of language—any more than the purpose of soap or shoes can restrain the way commodities are packaged and marketed as representations of something or other, or the way you construct yourself over time by choosing among all these options—soap, shoes, health practices, readings, relationships, careers, whatever.