## CULTURAL TELEVANGELIST

*He used to do negative ads for LBJ.*
*Now he plays an intellectual on TV: the "Ideas-R-Us" man.*
*When it comes to ideas, he can get them for you—*
*wholesale. Welcome to . . .*

# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO MOYERS

TOD LINDBERG

In 1866, Frederick Law Olmstead and Calvert Vaux delivered a report about laying out Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The "great advantage which a town finds in a park," they write, "lies in the addition to the health, strength, and morality which comes from it to its people, an advantage which is not only in itself very positive but which as certainly results in an increase of material wealth as good harvests or active commerce." Olmstead's spirit and sense of mission, as Roger Starr has noted, were characteristic of the reformers and moralists of his day. There is direct continuity between his view and the view of those who now make public-television programs.

Public television has its origins in a two-sided critique of its medium. On the one hand television is an immensely powerful medium, capable of reaching and influencing tens of millions of people, an avenue of communication the likes of which the world has never seen before. On the other hand, it is a dangerous medium. In commercial television, the imperative is to reach for the largest possible audience, and the easiest way to do this is to make the appeal at the level of the lowest common denominator. Standards erode rapidly, quality does not sell: and the viewing audience is thereby debased.

By contrast, public-TV producers are not susceptible to the crass commercial motives that result from the need to provide an audience attractive to the advertisers who pay the way. The medium is thus freed of the burden of aiming low, and television is once again (or at last) free to deliver quality equal to its power.

Deliver it to whom? For the makers of public television, the answers vary with the program: *Brideshead Revisited* to people interested in British history and culture, perhaps. *The Story of English* to those curious about the mother tongue. The American Ballet Theatre's *Apollo* to fanciers of dance. But in a sense, the answer is larger, the ground common. The makers of these programs have in mind, first, a broad audience of educated and cultured people; second, the presumably broader audience of those who wish to *become* better educated and more cultured. The latter will be introduced to British history and culture, to the philology of English, to Baryshnikov and Balanchine. They may even begin to cultivate an appreciation of these things. It is because they sense this potential for uplift out there in the darkened living rooms of America that those who make public-television programs are so fervently evangelistic. Olmstead wanted to make parks available to the people; public television wants to make ideas available.

"Ideas," in the sense employed on public television, are sometimes complicated, but not beyond the reach of anyone's understanding. Ideas, after all, are useful—functional things that people should not ignore simply because they do not have much time. Like fresh air or mixing with the upper orders, ideas are good for people. Public television can deliver these goods, open the doors, provide a passport valid for travel throughout this elevated sphere.

A recent example is *A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers*, a series of 49 half-hour shows first aired on PBS in the fall and now being rebroadcast on a number of stations. Its format is simple: Bill Moyers travels to a home or office in the world of ideas. He interviews its occupant one-on-one, and the edited result, with a short voice-over at the beginning to introduce the subject as he walks along a campus path, perhaps, or meets with students, makes up the half-hour show. In a handful of cases, Moyers grants an extra half-hour. The last episode of the series, called "Summing Up," is a sort of greatest-hits program, an essay Moyers has composed from snippets of preceding shows.

The program's title betrays a master's touch, at once earnestly affirming that ours is, yes, a world of ideas, while at the same time humbly suggesting that the program touches upon *a* world only, one of many possible worlds (there being, of course, so very many ideas). It is also (though this reading may not have been intended) a world of ideas with Bill Moyers in it: he is the interlocutor and executive editor; he presumably had a large say in picking the subjects, as well as a large measure of control over the editing.

Graphic designers have made studies of what the eye looks at when it is presented with different elements on a page, for example, in a newspaper. It would be interesting to know how people really watch television. A dark movie theater is a very different environment; there are only two choices: stay and watch, or get up and leave. Television, by contrast, offers many channels to

*Mr. Lindberg is Executive Editor/News of* Insight.

# Our Guest Tonight Is Socrates, Himself a Noted Interviewer

**Moyers:** I think it was Friedrich Nietzsche—or perhaps it was Jack Valenti—who said that your wife, Xanthippe, made things so unbearable for you at home that she indirectly made you into the cleverest "street dialectician" in Athens. And yet you were also admonished that you would "cut a poor figure in the city." I believe Callicles warned that you would be hauled before a jury—and you wouldn't know how to defend yourself.

**Socrates:** Yes, but I always understood that. I said it was one thing for a doctor to address a jury composed of doctors; it was quite another for a doctor to address a jury composed of laymen. When a philosopher addresses a jury, or addresses the "multitude" in politics, it *is* rather like the doctor addressing the jury of laymen.

**Moyers:** He cannot speak to them of the things that doctors would understand.

**Socrates:** Exactly. He must speak the kind of words that can persuade, even though they cannot convey real knowledge. In short, he needs rhetoric, not philosophy.

**Moyers:** Some would say that you've just described the state of American politics from Watergate to Iran-Contra. Would you not say that we have fallen into dark times?

*Mr. Arkes is the Edward Ney Professor of Jurisprudence at Amherst College.*

**Socrates:** Well, I do not think you have invented any novel form of vice—except, perhaps, for the graduated income tax. Still, there is one new twist: we used to look, in politics, for a gentleman, for one who could understand the philosopher and yet speak to the multitude. But now you no longer even have the political man speaking to the public. You have, in his place, the Interviewer, or worse, the News Anchor, rationing or rephrasing the words of the "public" man.

**Moyers:** But someone has to bring the news. Is that really so bad?

**Socrates:** Let me put it this way. You are the most earnest of the species of Interviewers. The measure of the current situation may be found in the modest test of how close, in fact, you come to conveying to your listeners the sense of what I am saying now.

**Moyers:** You once complained—and I think we have it on tape—you complained of those politicians who have "paid no heed to discipline and justice, but have filled our city with harbors and dockyards and walls and revenues and similar rubbish." But have you always been reserved in this way about public works?

**Socrates:** That was not precisely what I had in mind. I was merely comparing certain politicians to servants who mistake feeding for well-being; who gorge and fatten our bodies, but disregard, as I said, "the rules of health."

**Moyers:** But wouldn't you think that political men who grasped those "rules of health," as you call them, would also be concerned about those 37 million Americans without health insurance?

**Socrates:** I think I was speaking, rather, of a willingness to understand what is good for us *by nature*, and to choose, "in place of an insatiable and uncontrolled life the life or order that is satisfied with what at any time it possesses."

**Moyers:** Yes, but that "program," if I may call it that, would seem to settle in with a large measure of inequality. And for us, the "idea" of America *is* the idea of equality.

**Socrates:** But of course you understand that I am not offering a "program." I am simply arguing for the proper ordering of our lives and our souls. I am merely staging a gentle incitement, you might say, to the kind of life that not only would be marked as good in this world, but which would be "plainly of benefit also in the other world."

**Moyers:** I'm sorry for persisting, but what would that say to the poor and homeless, who are very much anchored in *this* world?

**Socrates:** It says that they may not really be poor in the measures that finally count. And when they reach the other world, they could be sure at least of this: that it will not be Anaheim.

—Hadley Arkes

choose from, and remote control has made the physical act of "switching" simpler, even seductive. But short of the ultimate sanction—turning the program off—there is a wide range of options, from chatting with someone else in the room, making coffee, glancing at the day's newspapers, to looking out the window, all readily available.

Talking-heads television, such as *A World of Ideas*, is by common consent the hardest kind of television to make interesting for the viewer. The most successful method has been to introduce conflict, if not shouting—opposing points of view vying for supremacy. *The McLaughlin Group*, while it did not invent the technique, has perfected it. Some think this is a low device, and in any case it is difficult to sustain for long in a face-to-face interview. For whatever reason, Moyers has not made use of it. He is a very polite man on camera.

In the world of ideas, Moyers has principally contributed the idea of Etiquette. He is one that will do to swell a progress, start a scene or two; a perfect Prufrockian attendant lord. He is:

Deferential (to Carlos Fuentes): "I'll tell you what's good about Mexico, as I see it, and then you tell me what you think is good about the United States. When I go there . . . I love the feeling of life. I love the literature. I love . . ."

Glad to be of use (to Barbara Tuchman): ". . . the American people did learn from the Vietnam experience, not to let another President take us into a war unless he can present overwhelming evidence that our national security was clearly at stake. Don't you find that encouraging?" Tuchman: "Yes, I think we have learned from that . . . "

Politic (to Noam Chomsky): "I mean, I don't want to leave people with a wholly negative analysis, although I believe in facing reality."

Cautious (to Joseph Heller): "See, what you're doing is

assaulting a fundamental premise that's been drilled into us in this country, which I think I still believe, that the individual matters, the individual really counts . . ."

And meticulous (to Henry Steele Commager): "There was a speech by George Washington in which he used the word 'posterity' nine times."

Full of high sentence (to Jessica Tuchman Matthews): "What's going on here? What's happening to this earth, our home?"

But a bit obtuse (to Peter Berger): ". . . reading Peter Berger, one comes to the strong impression that democracy and capitalism are necessary partners, and in Japan to a lesser extent, more so in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea, those are authoritarian societies." Berger: "No, that does not contradict my view. . . . you need a market economy in order to have a successful democracy. But the only other way around is not correct."

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous (to John Searle): "What you say smacks so strongly of common sense that I wonder what the argument is all about, except that I haven't been black and I haven't been female."

These statements have been taken out of context here, and this has had the effect of making them seem more ludicrous than they are. Set in type, they may be arresting; from the television, they are merely sonorous banalities that deflect any desire to pay attention to the screen. If Polonius actually lived and breathed, he would not come across as actors have played the role—that is, he would not be funny and interesting: he would be Bill Moyers.

For the Hamlets—those who might be sufficient to hold one's attention—we have the guests. When he says of his guests, "I set no agenda, wrote no questionnaires. I wanted to hear what was uppermost on their minds," he means it. To his mind, he has been the exemplar of disinterested inquiry, as near as is given to a man to be disinterested. And this is what his activity has consisted of: "I've been listening to men and women who are thinking, talking, and writing about what's going on in America, in our lives, our hearts, and minds. Someone said once that we get information from books, but real learning must come from exposure to those in whom it lives. 'A human being,' he said, 'is the very embodiment of an idea.' I went looking for such people."

There is a sense in which the notion Moyers expresses is defensible, roughly along the lines of, "If a book sits on a library shelf unread, what good are the ideas it contains?" But Moyers plainly means more: sitting down and talking with someone for half an hour is a superior method for getting "ideas" than reading the books or articles that person has written. For the benefit of those at home who are not in a position to be "a privileged traveler and a fortunate student," as Moyers describes himself, he will stand instead, a public-television everyman. Here is the world of ideas in which watching Leon Kass for an hour makes it unnecessary to read *Toward a More Natural Science.*

Tim Bower

This is a more radical proposition than those in public television—perhaps including Moyers—would really be willing to defend. Even so, as a description of the relation between viewing habits and the life of the mind, it is true for no small part of the audience. The ratings for public television are not high, but more librarians and schoolteachers certainly saw Leon Kass than will ever crack the spine of his collection of essays. The same is true of *Brideshead Revisited.* This is a version of the world of ideas, accessible to those who can manage to keep their attention focused on the screen.

But, as might be expected, the guests are a mixed bag. Some are good, even compelling, and some are not. Clarity and eloquence before the camera (for that matter, in person) are not the gifts of everyone. How well one does on television depends as much on how well one speaks one's piece as on what piece one is speaking.

Where does this leave the public-television notion that a human being is the very embodiment of an idea? Sarah Lightfoot Lawrence, for instance, spoke passionately, but regrettably made the mistake of wearing large, dangling earrings, which bobbed to and fro as she moved her head. The effect was distracting. And it distracted attention from —and interest in—the ideas she presumptively embodied. Max Beerbohm once refused an invitation to dine with Henry James in order to read a just-published Henry James short story. He found the true embodiment of Henry James on the all-too-carefully written page rather than in his idle, dinner-table conversation. That is perhaps an extreme repudiation of the Moyers point of view; but it serves for that very reason to make the point.

That is not to say that some of the programs do not have a certain gossipy, dinner-table interest. Joseph Heller demonstrates that learning is a life-long process in discussing the research he did for *Picture This*, his latest novel, which is set in ancient Athens: "Socrates, I was amused to learn, never wrote a word." Noam Chomsky, by way of illustrating the point that even though American institutions will not tolerate dissent, it is flourishing in unofficial avenues, says, "I mean, I can see it in my own personal life. For example, over the last couple of years the demands on me personally for, say, speaking somewhere have escalated beyond anything imaginable. I have to plan years in advance . . ." (Moyers, nearing the end of his second half-hour installment with Chomsky, probingly asks: "You've dealt in such unpopular truths, and have been such a lonely figure as a consequence of that, do you ever regret either that you took the stand you took, have written the things you've written, or that we had listened to you earlier?")

All this, of course, has precious little to do with the "world of ideas," any world of ideas. To judge it by its own terms, the series has placed a particular emphasis on such themes as the relation of individual Americans to their government and the dangers that come when government betrays the people's trust; the role of science, technology, and medicine in American life; man's place in the world, in the environmental sense; teaching children.

I watched ten installments on videotape and read transcripts of the rest, and thereupon hangs a tale. I got the tapes, as is customary, by calling the person who handles such things. I told him who I was and for whom I was writing, and left the selection of the agreed-upon number of tapes to him. I got Tom Wolfe; Leon Kass (two parts); Peter Drucker; Harvard education professor Sarah Lightfoot Lawrence; Vartan Gregorian, the outgoing head of the New York Library; Peter Berger; John Lukacs; law professor Mary Ann Glendon; and Maxine Singer, a geneticist. The political orientation of these people ranges from conservative to slightly left of center. It is not representative of the series as a whole. I did not receive, for example, Noam Chomsky (two parts), E. L. Doctorow, Joseph Heller, Barbara Tuchman, Sissela Bok, Jessica Tuchman Matthews, Sheldon Wolin, Northrop Frye, Carlos Fuentes, nor, curiously, the "Summing Up" program. For some reason, it seems Moyers's publicity department wanted to keep intact its ample reserve on the far left, and was even willing to significantly deplete its moderate resources and all but exhaust its conservatives to do so.

Moyers, in his "Summing Up" program, says, "It's not hard to figure out what we have to do if we are committed to saving our children's future—to our own posterity. We'd have to treat the environment with reverence, reverse the arms race, reduce inequality, overhaul our schools, and recover a sense of public and private morality." Oh, *that* world of ideas.

That a familiar sort of fuzzy-left political agenda emerges from such a series as *A World of Ideas* should come as no great surprise. John Lukacs, Peter Berger, Leon Kass (among a handful of others) having appeared on some of the program's 49 installments, the fairness doctrine has been complied with, and let the chips fall where they always do.

Moyers's political views date back to his days as an aide to Senator Lyndon B. Johnson. He is widely credited as the prime mover behind the most famous television commercial for Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign: the one in which a little girl picks the petals from a daisy as a voice counts down to a nuclear explosion. In a recent controversy with Senator Goldwater over this, Moyers managed to be simultaneously combative and sententious: "For some of us, Senator Goldwater apparently excepted, life's experiences bring growth and change and even second thoughts about one's early enthusiasms."

Moyers's second thoughts came only two years later, in 1966, when he voted with his feet against Johnson (by now increasingly preoccupied with Vietnam at the expense of the Great Society) and left the Administration for journalism. By the standards of the profession, his career has been distinguished, particularly his documentary work for public television, then for CBS, now for public television again. The title of his 1971 book gives a flavor of his sensibility: *Listening to America: A Traveler Rediscovers His Country*. This can be an indiscriminate sensibility, leaving one susceptible to all manner of cant—for example, the proposition that some official culture of repression prevents Noam Chomsky from finding outlets for his political views. But, at its best, this sensibility can actually move journalists to report what they see and hear, as in Moyers's acclaimed CBS Reports program, *The Vanishing Family—Crisis in Black America.*

This was a program in which ideas were embodied not in talking heads self-consciously elaborating a theme, but in ordinary people actually living them and their consequences. It was superior to *A World of Ideas* in exactly the same way as *Lear* is superior to a self-conscious play of debate. Alas, the ideas that were so destructively embodied in the lives of Newark's poor, welfare-dependent, and feckless underclass blacks were the very ideas that Moyers had championed so fiercely under Johnson. Which gives a certain poignancy to that "second thoughts about one's early enthusiasms."

DWIGHT MACDONALD, in his 1960 essay "Masscult and Midcult," writes: "If there were a clearly defined cultural elite here, then the masses could have their *Kitsch* and the classes could have their High Culture, with everybody happy. But a significant part of our population is chronically confronted with a choice between looking at [commercial] TV or old masters, between reading Tolstoy or a detective story: i.e., the pattern of their cultural lives is 'open' to the point of being porous. For a lucky few, this choice is stimulating. But for most, it is confusing and leads at best to that middlebrow compromise called Midcult." Midcult, to Macdonald's thinking, is not an elevation of low culture but a corruption of high culture: masquerading as high culture, it encourages people to believe they are getting the real thing.

Macdonald writes that "Midcult has it both ways: It pretends to respect the standards of High Culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them." This description is accurate as far as the cultural product is concerned, but does not quite do justice to the people who produce it (as Macdonald himself is aware: a footnote to the preceding passage describes the process as "unconscious"). In fact, one of the characteristics of the middlebrow has been a *genuine* respect for high culture, even if this respect was unaccompanied by a genuine taste for it. The problem was not that people failed to believe, in their heart of hearts, that T. S. Eliot was any good: it was that they also believed Archibald MacLeish was good—just as good, and that they only ever had any particular desire to read Archibald MacLeish.

When Bill Moyers talks about ideas, he is talking about people who have them. "A human being is the very embodiment of an idea." This is the end of even a pretense of respect for "the standards of High Culture." It is a stop on the same path where one finds received wisdom, gurus, and cults of personality. It wants to inspire people to sit at Sissela Bok's feet, not to read *Secrets* or *Lying*. Moyers, who preached in Baptist churches as a young man, is once again in the pulpit, this time as an intermediary between the faithful and their secular gods, a public televangelist on a mission of salvation—saving the children, saving the planet, saving viewers from themselves. □