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The Vanishing Word

The Veneration of Visual Imagery
in the Postmodern World

Arthur W. Hunt, III

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The Vanishing Word

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Introduction: Tomorrowland

*It's a wonderful world. It may destroy itself but
at least you'll be able to watch it all on TV.*

BOB HOPE

ALTHOUGH OUR COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES DAZZLE
US, THEY ALSO HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO UNRAVEL US, AND
TO MAKE US A BEWITCHED PEOPLE.



In the early 1960s, Orlando was a crossroads community of citrus groves, farmland, and swamps. Back then one could buy an acre in Orange County for about two hundred dollars. So when Walt Disney bought forty-six square miles worth, the citizens of Orlando must have mused how life would be different under the shadow of Mickey Mouse. However, the dreamer from Hollywood was not content to just build another theme park; he was ready to try his hand at building an elaborate city of the future. Upon the Florida flatland, Walt Disney envisioned a “City of Tomorrow,” where dirt, disease, and poverty would be nonexistent; a nuclear-powered metropolis, controlling its own climate and recycling its own waste; a radiant web of white pods connected by silent transit systems. He quietly asserted that the city would be paid for from the profits of his new Disney World.¹ Only

a handful knew the scope of Disney's City of Tomorrow and how it came to dwarf all other projects on his drawing board. Walt Disney never saw his utopia because he died in 1966, just after construction began in Orlando. Disney's successors, more concerned with the bottom line, settled for what is now the present-day EPCOT. Heirs of the Disney dynasty thought it more prudent to follow the tried formula of entertaining crowds with fantasy rides. The City of Tomorrow evolved into an expanded entertainment haven. Other parks followed. Today Metro Orlando receives more than forty-five million visitors a year. Almost all of us, at one time or another, have made a pilgrimage to one of central Florida's amusement meccas.

The development of Orlando allegorizes the changes taking place in our own culture. Like Walt Disney's successors, we also have thrown off our modern visions of utopia for an easier, more attainable, fun land. Orlando serves as an emblematic gauge of an image-driven public, dependent upon movies, television, and video games. Of course, the *theme* of Orlando's theme parks is primarily a reflection of the film industry. The Magic Kingdom, MGM Studios, and Animal Kingdom largely exist because of the movies they mimic. Universal Studios created their theme park especially for children and adults who would pay good money to swim with Jaws, fly with E.T., or fight side by side with the Terminator.

THE AGE OF THE IMAGE IN A TECHNO-WONDERLAND

It does not take a social scientist to tell us that our culture has an insatiable appetite for visual stimulation. Within the last several years Disney and others have devoted their energies into creating virtual-reality rides, even procuring NASA rocket scientists to design image-enhanced simulators. This is not to say America has given up on space exploration, only that there seems to be more profit in applying our hologram-like technology toward amusing consumers. In promoting Orlando's new Island of Adventure, Steven Spielberg predicted that "virtual reality will live up to its

name for the first time in the next ten years . . . because you'll be surrounded by images. . . . You'll feel the breezes. You'll smell the smells. . . . Yet when you stand back and turn on a light to look at where you've been standing, you're just in a dark room with a helmet on."² Spielberg claims that those in today's generation demand reality in their high-tech recreations. The dinosaurs must have wet noses and look like they have been rolling in the dust all day or they just will not do. Entertainment engineers know that the level of electro-sophistication possessed by young media connoisseurs is so keen that the thrill once provided by a wooden roller coaster is now antiquated.

Virtual reality's popular appeal has been augmented by advances in technology. And it is technology with which America has had an ongoing love affair. Historically the affection Americans have bestowed upon technological advancement has been rooted in a progressive spirit—a type of secular Manifest Destiny that sees any innovation as providential. Technology, progress, and the future are all synonyms in contemporary American culture. Technology has allowed us to live longer, has made us more comfortable, and has made us rich. Virtual reality is deemed good because it represents progress. The same can be said for the invention of television or the computer or the washing machine. To deny such technological providence is anathema.

A celebration of technological progress is enshrined at one particular attraction in Disney World's Tomorrowland—General Electric's Carousel of Progress. The ride is a cute summary of America's technological love fest. Touring Tomorrowland is like walking around in the future wearing Jules Verne spectacles. Perhaps the first to describe eco-tourism, Verne would have been delighted with Disney World. This is true not only because Disney made a film and a ride featuring *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, but also because Jules Verne shared Walt Disney's obsession with technology and the future. The Carousel of Progress traces a hundred years of progress as tourists relax in a sit-down, revolving theater. In the background we hear voices singing, "There's a great big beautiful tomorrow, shining at the end of every day." The

show focuses on a family's history through time, showing all the conveniences made possible by innovations in electricity. There is a father, mother, daughter, son, grandfather, grandmother, and a silly cousin named Orville. The ride scoots you from the past and into the future with a historical panorama of our most remarkable household inventions. What is so intriguing about the show is that every family in every generation looks the same—always laughing and enjoying each other's company. Only the inventions have been changed. The message we walk away with is that technology is neutral and only serves to make us happier.

TECHNOLOGY IS NOT NEUTRAL

Contrary to popular thinking, technology is not neutral. It has the propensity to change our beliefs and behavior. For example, any historian will tell you that the printing press hurled Europe out of the Middle Ages and into the Protestant Reformation. When Johann Gutenberg introduced movable type in the fifteenth century, a whole new world opened up—liberty, freedom, discovery, democracy. The Bible became available to the people. Martin Luther called the invention of the printing press the “supreme act of grace by which the gospel can be driven forward.” Europe was set on fire. People were thinking, arguing, creating, and reflecting. The printing press allowed ideas to be put in black and white so that anyone could analyze or criticize them. To a great extent, America was born out of a print-oriented culture.

What most often escapes our notice in public discussions is how new technologies create unintended effects. In this sense, technology is a mixed blessing to societies, whether the machines of warfare, transportation, or communication media. What Jules Verne knew, and what Walt Disney might not have cared to know, was how the future could have a dark side. Jules Verne understood the biases of technology, that technology had the capacity to change us or even destroy us. Because Captain Nemo feared the *Nautilus* would fall into the wrong hands, in the Disney movie he blew it up, along with the island that sheltered its mysterious secrets. Nemo's periscope might not have been able to rotate all

the way around, but he was not too far off the deep end to fathom the depths of human depravity. Nemo would have agreed with King Solomon, who wrote, “Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions” (Ecclesiastes 7:29). (Although Leonardo da Vinci contrived a submarine three hundred years before the birth of Jules Verne, it is an interesting fact of history that the great inventor suppressed it because he felt it was too satanic to be placed in the hands of unregenerate men.³)

Glitzy machines have a way of mesmerizing us so that we do not think about the unintended consequences they create. Our situation today is very much like a train that we have all boarded with enormous enthusiasm. With great splendor the train embarks from the station while we cheer, “Onward! Forward!” The train picks up speed, and we all shout, “Progress! Prosperity!” Faster and faster the wheels turn. With tremendous velocity the train races down the track. “Faster! Faster!” we yell. But we don’t even know where the train is taking us. We don’t know where it is going. It is a mystery train. Jules Verne and Walt Disney were able to make fantasizing about the future a commodity, which we have ingested right on up through George Jetson cartoons and more. For a hundred years we have anticipated the twenty-first century in visions of rockets, gadgets, and push buttons. But the new millennium has arrived. The future is here.

HISTORY’S TESTIMONY TO THE BIAS OF TECHNOLOGY

Technology’s inherent bias to mold belief and behavior can be detected in two particular inventions of the twentieth century—atomic weaponry and the automobile. “Nuclear fission is now theoretically possible,” wrote Albert Einstein in a 1939 letter to President Franklin Roosevelt explaining the power unleashed when the nucleus of a uranium atom is split. Fearing the Germans were close to the same discovery, Roosevelt authorized the Manhattan Project to develop an atomic weapon. Five years later

the bomb was ready. The decision to use the bomb followed two other possible alternatives. One option involved impressing the Japanese into surrendering by dropping it in some unpopulated wooded area. The idea was that the Japanese would run over, see the big hole, and give up. However, President Truman's advisers preferred a more tangible target. A second alternative was to invade Japan, but the casualties for such a plan were estimated to be over the million mark.

John Costello says some scientists on the Manhattan Project had doubts about the "genie of technological destruction their work had uncorked."⁴ James Franck, chairman of a committee on the bomb's "social and political implications," warned of the problems of international control and the danger of a precipitating arms race. His report claimed that the Japanese war was already won and that Japan was on the brink of being starved into surrender. Truman's advisers ignored Franck's report, urging the President to drop the bomb on a large city with a legitimate military target. Hiroshima had an army base and a munitions factory. Truman was confident. The President knew what kind of weapon had been handed to him after the first atomic explosion in Alamogordo, New Mexico, earlier that summer. Costello notes that an "irreversible momentum" to use the bomb superseded all other alternatives. Truman felt the bomb "would save many times the number of lives, both American and Japanese, than it would cost."⁵ One of Truman's generals later observed, "He was like a little boy on a toboggan."⁶

Shortly after eating their breakfast on August 6, 1945, the inhabitants of Hiroshima noticed an object floating earthward. It probably reminded them of an episode a few days earlier when a flock of leaflets fluttered to the ground warning of an imminent attack upon their city. The message could not have been too surprising. They knew a war was on, and the enemy was winning. The bulk that pulled the sail to earth that morning weighed four tons and cost four million dollars to develop. The last memory held by curious gazers was a solitary flash of light. Once detonated, the light rippled from the center of the city, puffing to dust

houses, bridges, and factories. The explosion killed one-third of Hiroshima's three hundred thousand residents instantly. Another bomb killed eighty thousand three days later, in the same manner, at Nagasaki. Over the next five years, five hundred thousand more would die from the effects of radiation exposure. Today nuclear weapons are forty times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb.

Truman's decision to use the bomb no doubt saved millions of lives. But it was a bargain with the devil. The trade-off for having developed a machine of mass destruction yesterday is living with the threat of being blown to little bits tomorrow. For over half a century the world has lived under the shadow of a potential nuclear disaster. Techno-enthusiasts are incessantly expounding what a new machine can do *for* us, but little deliberation is ever afforded as to what a new machine will do *to* us. Technological advancement always comes with a price, to which history is more than willing to disgorge examples.

Henry Ford once confessed, "I don't know anything about history."⁷ The comment was made to the radical journalist John Reed, who had an instinctive nose for revolutions in the making. Ford's revolution was fashioned on the automobile assembly line. So passionate was Ford about his own revolution of manufacturing Model T's, says Roger Burlingame, that he once threatened to fire any patriotic employee who chose to leave work and answer President Wilson's call to help guard the Mexican border when skirmishes erupted there. The *Chicago Tribune* soon after accused Ford of being an "ignorant idealist" and "anarchist." Ford thought otherwise and sued the *Tribune* for a million dollars. In trying to prove that Ford was indeed ignorant, lawyers for the *Tribune* asked him questions about the American Revolution. Ford had trouble explaining the basic fundamentals of American government. He did not know what part Benedict Arnold played in the war. When asked, "What was the United States originally?" Ford tersely replied, "Land, I guess." Ford would go on the record for pronouncing to the world, "History is more or less bunk." The sympathetic jury did not find the world's greatest industrial-

ist ignorant, nor an anarchist. But neither could the jury find the *Tribune* reckless. The verdict required Ford to pay six cents in damages.⁸

Perhaps had Henry Ford known his history a bit better, he would have foreseen the social effects of the automobile. Although the automobile awarded us the commute and the family motor vacation, it also assisted in severing community and family ties like no other invention of its time. In the days when carriages were still hooked to horses, it was not uncommon to find, in any town across America, large front porches with people actually sitting on them, chatting with neighbors. The essence of this forgotten phenomenon is recorded in the famous *Middletown* study:

In the nineties [1890s] we were all much more together. . . . People brought chairs and cushions out of the house and sat on the lawn evenings. We rolled out a strip of carpet and put cushions on the porch step to take care of the unlimited overflow of neighbors that dropped by. We'd sit out so all evening. The younger couples perhaps would wander off for half an hour to get a soda but come back to join in the informal singing or listen while somebody strummed a mandolin or guitar.⁹

The *Middletown* study focused on a typical American community in the 1920s. The researchers selected the town of Muncie, Indiana, termed "Middletown" because they viewed it to be the closest representation possible of contemporary American life.¹⁰ Halfway into the 1920s it could be said that the "horse culture" in Middletown had trotted off into the sunset. The horse fountain at the courthouse square dried up, and possessing an automobile was deemed a necessity of normal living. In his book *The Rise of Selfishness in America*, James Collier says the car soon became a way for youth to escape authority. It allowed young couples to pair off. It was, in effect, a portable living room for eating, drinking, smoking, gossip, and sexual immorality.¹¹ Of thirty girls brought before the Middletown juvenile court charged with "sex crimes" within a given year, nineteen of them were listed as hav-

ing committed the offense in an automobile.¹² When Henry Ford formulated the assembly line, he probably did not envision himself as a villain to virginity. Nevertheless, in making the automobile a commodity, he moved courtship from the parlor to the backseat.

It is not the purpose here to suggest that we stop developing instruments of war or permanently park our cars. These are not the rants of a technophobe. However, few of us in the information age ever stop to consider this truth: *For every expressed purpose a technology is designed to serve, there are always a number of unintended consequences accompanying it.* Tomorrowland poses a host of challenges that gadget masters are not likely to point out. And one of the most significant challenges that should concern us is what repercussions will transpire as America shifts from a print-oriented culture to an image-oriented one. Although our communication technologies dazzle us, they also have the potential to unravel us, and to make us a bewitched people.

THE ADVENT OF TELEVISION

The first American commercial TV broadcast occurred at New York's World's Fair on April 30, 1939. Television was the technology for the next generation, showcased in an exposition offering a gleaming glimpse of the future. The fair's theme was "Building the World of Tomorrow," the optimistic secular gospel Walt Disney later embraced as a major element in his own theme parks. A guidebook promoted the fair as the "stupendous, gigantic, super-magnificent . . . greatest-show-on-earth."¹³ The 1939 World's Fair was the culmination of a decade-long aesthetic enchantment with technology. David Gelernter, author of *1939: The Lost World of the Fair*, writes:

Nonetheless 1939 was a profoundly religious age, and its religiosity shows in the way it treated technology. It was not reverent. Rather it was spiritual; art made technology beautiful, made technology speak to the public not only pragmatically but emotionally. Art ministered to technology. Artists in the 1930s (not

all but many) were technology's priesthood. As a consequence art found itself embroiled alongside technology and the future.¹⁴

At the physical center of the fair stood a towering three-sided obelisk, and next to it an immense white sphere. Facing the dominating structures, President Roosevelt announced, "I hereby dedicate the World's Fair, the New York World's Fair of 1939, and I declare it open to all mankind!"¹⁵ The President's image was dispersed from aerials atop the Empire State Building in a live broadcast by NBC. A week earlier, David Sarnoff had dedicated the RCA building in television's first news broadcast. His words were highly insightful: "It is with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth in this country of a new art so important in its implications that it is bound to affect all society."¹⁶

Yes, it was *bound* to, which, no doubt, was the underlying basis of Sarnoff's humility. Also reflecting upon the impact of television at the time was the fair's science director, Gerald Wendt, who wrote that "democracy, under the influence of television, is likely to pay inordinate attention to the performer and interpreter rather than to the planner and thinker."¹⁷ This is perhaps the first insight that television would not be a conducive medium for serious discourse. Wendt apparently understood that even if television was utilized for the "public good," thinking could never be a performing art. But these kinds of debates would have to be postponed. *Life* magazine observed how the fair "opened with happy hopes of the World of Tomorrow and closed amid war and crisis."¹⁸ Four months after television's first commercial broadcast, Hitler invaded Poland.

The 1950s have been coined "the Golden Age of Television," but since the days of *I Love Lucy* our tube time has roughly doubled. Americans had little difficulty in accommodating the television set into their homes early on. But it wasn't too long after television's debut that the set prodded its way into the living room, replacing the older focal points of the fireplace and piano. (The practice of burning Yule logs on the television screen during

Christmas Eve began as early as 1950,¹⁹ which some may see as evidence that television shied away from intellectual material in its programming from the very beginning.) Current estimates confirm that the television screen is flickering about forty hours a week in the average household. A study conducted at the end of the century showed that 65 percent of children over the age of eight have a TV set in their bedroom, which stays on even during meals, and that 61 percent of parents have absolutely no rules about viewing habits.²⁰ Mini-van manufacturers now use the built-in TV as a selling point in their commercials. We are given images of the happy vacationing family, perhaps touring a national park out West. The parents up front are smiling because a pop-in video has pacified the children behind them. Just outside the window is a once-in-a-lifetime panorama, but the kids are not paying attention to it. *The Rugrats* are much more interesting.

DUMBING DOWN FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is a big difference between processing information on a printed page compared with processing data conveyed through a series of moving pictures. Images have a way of evoking an emotional response. Pictures have a way of pushing rational discourse—linear logic—into the background. The chief aim of television is to sell products and entertain audiences. Television seeks emotional gratification. As a visual medium, television programming is designed to be amusing. Substance gives way to sounds and sights. Hard facts are undermined by stirring feelings. Important issues are drowned out by dramatic images. Reason is replaced by emotion.

In a national literacy study issued by the U.S. Department of Education in 1993, almost half of the adults performed within the lowest levels of literacy proficiency.²¹ It is quite remarkable that although school is compulsory for all children in this country up into the high school years, a large chunk of the population is functionally illiterate. Such a statistic means that almost a majority of us have difficulty “using printed and written information to func-

tion in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."²² The Barna Research Group reported that the first half of the 1990s saw a dramatic drop in reading for pleasure. In 1991, 75 percent of adults claimed to read for pleasure in the course of a week. In 1994, the figure fell to 53 percent.²³ Barna says more people are using the library for alternative media (compact discs, audiocassettes, videos) rather than checking out books, and that a marked decline in reading is one of the fastest-changing behaviors within the last two decades.²⁴

Robert Zich, a special-project czar to the Library of Congress, predicted that the great national libraries and their buildings will go the way of the railroad stations, that we will soon be going to the library as we now go to a musty museum.²⁵ Thomas Jefferson correctly theorized that an educated populace would safeguard democracy against the onslaughts of tyranny; but had he foreseen the invention of television he might have remarked, as religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard did a century and a half ago: "Suppose someone invented an instrument, a convenient little talking tube which, say, could be heard over the whole land. . . . I wonder if the police would not forbid it, fearing that the whole country would become mentally deranged if it were used."

The term *dumbing down* is somewhat of a cliché; nevertheless, it is an accurate expression to describe what is happening to our public conversations. We have come to expect to be spoon-fed our news in bite-sized nuggets. Newspapers, which must compete with television to keep off the media's extinction list, have shortened the length of their stories and added attention-getting graphics. The major newsweeklies have also gone through a metamorphosis. Since 1985, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* have redesigned their layouts to explode out at you. Where once an article might have run a thousand words, the length of an average story is now less than 750.²⁶

The fact that we are on the threshold of a bold new image-cognizant and asinine era is evidenced on today's political terrain as well. Being a professional wrestler has recently been shown to be an effective technique for capturing the attention of the electorate.

For all practical purposes, it worked for Jesse “The Body” Ventura, who promised that if elected governor of Minnesota, he would rappel from a helicopter onto the statehouse lawn. (I have personally always categorized a professional wrestler as an individual who shouts and spits red-faced threats into a television camera after a round of grunting and gyrating playacting.) So, why did the good people of Minnesota elect Jesse Ventura as their governor? Did they temporarily lose their minds? Left-leaning cartoonist Garry Trudeau entreated the question of how a “land of small farmers, Norwegians, Lutherans, taciturn, slow-moving, buttoned-up, sensible types” could elect such a guy. In one *Doonesbury* strip Ventura says, “Everyone’s bored. I’m like free cable.”

Traditionally, distinguished persons of achievement constituted the candidate pool for political office. Now we must add celebrities. Daniel Boorstin says the hero, who once distinguished himself with noteworthy achievements, has now been replaced by the celebrity, distinguished solely by his image.²⁷ Something changed in American political life ever since the Nixon-Kennedy televised debates. Some say Nixon lost the presidential election to Kennedy because he was not telegenic enough. Quite possibly that is why Abraham Lincoln could not be elected President if he were running for office today.

Not only is our political landscape in flux, but Christianity also seems to be experiencing a type of remodeling, especially inside its sanctuaries. Generation Xers are hungering for a new style of worship that bares a closer resemblance to MTV than to their parents’ old-time religion. In an opening address at the 1999 Southern Baptist Convention, Paige Patterson urged his audience to be careful of “twelve-minute sermonettes generated by the ‘felt needs’ of an assembled cast of postmodern listeners augmented by drama and multiple repetitions of touchy-touchy, feely-feely music.”²⁸ The president of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination was alluding to a new style of worship where congregants “come as they are,” whether it be in jeans, shorts, or T-shirts. (One church in Virginia Beach had to alter this policy, when soon

after a waterfront sign was erected, visitors started showing up in their bathing suits.) Drama, dance, video clips, rock and roll, TV talk show formats, and eating in the services are just some of the elements of the growing “worship renewal movement,” where people attend church much in the same manner as they watch *Wheel of Fortune*. A critical examination would indicate that the movement is a by-product of a culture that has been weaned on television.

Omens like these made George Barna conclude that Americans today are intellectually and spiritually frivolous:

In this age, we find that Americans have been seduced by breadth rather than depth, by quantity rather than quality, by style rather than substance. It is the rare person who reads publications that require reflection; instead, the likes of *People*, *Sports Illustrated* and *TV Guide* dominate the newsstands. Harlequin novels and pop psychology reign at the bookstore. Conversations about the weather and the Super Bowl are more common and more intense than those about values and meaning in life. The political “wannabes” who prevail are most often those who offer superficial solutions to complex social problems, those who are the most photogenic or silver tongued, and those whose background is innocuous enough that the media cannot dredge up a scandal or otherwise assassinate their character.²⁹

Culture critic Neil Postman begins his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by contrasting two fictional prophecies—Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*. Of course, Orwell feared that we would be overcome by a tyranny that would take away our freedoms—Big Brother looking over our shoulder. Huxley feared that we would be ruined by what we came to love. In *1984* books are banned. In *Brave New World* no one wants to read a book. In one novel, Big Brother suffocates civilization with a forceful hand. In the other novel, civilization comes to adore its technologies so much that it loses the capacity to think, preferring rather to be entertained. Postman says that when we become “distracted by trivia, when

cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.”³⁰

Here we are now, hitchhiking on the information highway. The computer has ushered us into the information age. In a decade or so television and the computer will probably merge into one technology. It is highly likely that “text” will be de-emphasized in whatever form electronic media take in the future. This is altogether frightening. For if it was a *logos*-centered culture that helped to produce our Protestant heritage, as well as American democracy itself, what will be the birth child of the continuing devaluation of the written word?

The devaluation of the word and its hostile supplanting by the image is a direct assault upon “the religion of the Book.” In accordance to this thought, we are all in danger of becoming pagans. Not *just* pagans, but mindless and defenseless pagans who would prefer to have someone tell us how to think and behave. The possibility of tyranny still exists for us today because we have lost the biblical and mental defenses to arm ourselves against demagoguery. Our children are not being equipped to spot counterfeit leaders who would lead us astray with an overabundance of pathos. Kenneth Burke told us that one reason we should study Hitler is to “discover what kind of medicine this mad-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of similar medicine in America.”³¹ I want to show in the following pages how *Tomorrowland has the potential to become a total triumph for idolatry*.

Paganism never really died in modern western culture; it was only restrained. American Protestantism effectively suppressed many pagan forms up until the twentieth century; but the advent of image-based media has brought forth a revitalization of the pagan gods in popular culture. Sex, violence, and celebrity, which are so pervasive in the media, conform to a pagan ideal. Ignoring

history's warnings of technology's tendency to change us, we have blindly boarded a glitzy train with a one-way ticket to Digit City. Like Pinocchio, we are being hoodwinked into making a journey to Pleasure Island, and we could, quite possibly, share the same fate as those laughing donkeys.

Realizing I am not the first to suggest that we are entering a high-tech version of the Dark Ages,³² I have labored to provide a fresh perspective on an important topic. The book is designed to be historical as well as critical. The Judeo-Christian heritage, which characteristically has been *word*-dependent, is contrasted with paganism, which typically has been *image*-dependent. I will show how the Dark Ages in Europe illustrate what can happen when a culture lapses from the written word. I will then describe how the invention of the printing press launched three successive word-based movements: the Protestant Reformation, Puritanism, and the beginnings of the American experiment. However, the effects of these movements, embodied in Victorianism, were frustrated in the twentieth century with the entertainment values of the new electronic media. This is not to minimize the influence of individuals like Darwin, Freud, and Dewey. These men provided the philosophical excuse to drop moral restraints. I will go on to argue that the *image* has supplanted the *word*, inciting pagan forms to resurface. I suggest that the emergence of postmodernism is actually a by-product of two tandem occurrences—the rapid rise of the image and the denunciation of objectivity exemplified in the death throes of modernism. The traditional conventions of worship are being obliterated as we speak, and our church services are being shriveled to shallow spectacles. A church cut from its word-based heritage and a nation stripped of word-based modes of learning do not have the rhetorical or mental resources to guard against despotism. *The Vanishing Word* advances the proposition that our image-saturated culture is at risk of being preyed upon by a tyrant in waiting. Finally, several remedies will be suggested for our idolatrous predicament.

Notes

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20. "New Study Finds Kids Spend Equivalent of Full Work Week Using Media," Kaiser Family Foundation press release, November 17, 1999. See <http://www.kff.org/content/1999/1535pressreleasefinal.doc.html> (accessed August 8, 2001).
21. "Adult Literacy in America," National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 1993.
22. This is the definition for literacy used in the survey, "Adult Literacy in America."
23. George Barna, *Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), p. 34.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
25. See Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 127.
26. Byron T. Scott and Ann Walton Sieber, "Remaking Time, *Newsweek*, and U.S. *News and World Report*," in Philip S. Cook, Douglas Gomery, and Lawrence W. Lichty, eds., *The Future of News: Television, Newspapers, Wire Services, Newsmagazines* (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992), p. 201.
27. See Daniel Boorstin, "From Hero to Celebrity: The Human Pseudo-Event," in *The Image* (New York: Harper and Row, Colophon Books, 1961), pp. 45-76.
28. Julia Lieblich, for the Associated Press, "Southern Baptists Urged to Avoid New Methods of Worship," *The Leaf-Chronicle*, Clarksville, TN, June 16, 1999, p. B3.
29. George Barna, *Virtual America*, p. 147.
30. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 155-156.
31. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), p. 191.
32. The phrase, "high-tech version of the Dark Ages" was used by Robert Bork in *Slouching*

Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline (New York: Regan Books, 1997), p. 4.

Chapter Two: Tables of Stone

1. This is how Camille Paglia begins her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
3. See Mal Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), p. 61.
4. Henry M. Morris, *The Long War Against God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 255.
5. *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1965), p. 65.
6. Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, p. 62.
7. See Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), p. 146.
8. "Humiliation of the word" is a phrase borrowed from Jacques Ellul's book *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1985).
9. Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, p. 59.
10. For an ardent description of Egyptian art see Paglia, "The Birth of the Western Eye," in *ibid.*, pp. 40-71.
11. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1992), p. 155.
12. Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage* (New York: MJF Books, 1992), pp. 198-199.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
14. Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, p. 59.
15. Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination*, p. 161.
16. See Neil Postman and Camille Paglia, "Two Cultures—Television Versus Print," in D. J. Crowley and Paul Heyer, eds., *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 290. This chapter is a lively discussion of the separate worlds of image and print.
17. Walter H. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 78-83.
18. I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 221.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
21. See Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in Crowley and Heyer, eds., *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, p. 47.
22. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 13.
23. See Harold Innis, "Media in Ancient Empires," in Crowley and Heyer, eds., *Communication in History: Technology, Culture, Society*, p. 28.
24. C. H. Kraeling and R. F. Adams, *City Invincible*, 1960, quoted in A. R. Millard, "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel," in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 4 (December 1972), p. 102.
25. Innis, "Media in Ancient Empires," p. 24.
26. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, p. 13.
27. Eric Havelock, *Origins of Western Literacy* (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976).
28. Carroll Atkinson and Eugene T. Maleska, *The Story of Education* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1962), p. 11.
29. William Barclay, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1959), pp. 13-14. Also see the conclusion reached by James L. Crenshaw, "Education in Ancient Israel," in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 4 (December 1985), p. 614.
30. *Kiddushin 30b*, quoted in Barclay, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World*, p. 16.
31. See Alan R. Millard, "The Practice of Writing in Ancient Israel," in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 4 (December 1972), pp. 98-111.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
35. William G. Dever, "Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (March/April 2000), p. 34.