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Why did we like the Marlboro Man in spite of ourselves? He had character. He wore the imprint of his world and his work on his face and clothing. He was tanned not because he'd been to a tanning salon but because he'd endured the sun of the plains and the high country. His face was heavily lined. He squinted, not from staring at a computer screen too long, worrying over derivatives, but because he moved in the cloudless outdoors of the prairie. He wore faded jeans, not at Tommy Hilfiger's dictate but because jeans were the toughest pants around and they showed the wear and tear of his riding and roping. He wore a sheepskin jacket, not because it was cool but because it was bitter cold in January and his neighbor ran sheep and sold their skins. He wore a slicker, not because it made him look tall and imposing but because it was the only way to keep reasonably dry on a horse in a rainstorm. And at Christmas time, the Marlboro Man didn't go to the corner lot for a manicured Scotch pine at $10 a foot. No, he rode into the hills behind the home place, looked for a young, handsome Douglas fir, cut it, roped it to his saddle horn, and slowly dragged it home in the falling winter light.

What so impressed us about the Marlboro Man was not the mere fact that his world was inscribed on his appearance. That is true of the homeless as well. It was the kind of reality that impressed us as it left its imprint on him—the vastness of the plains, the ruggedness of the mountains, the violence of the weather, the orneriness of cattle, and the grace of his horse. Our affection for the Marlboro Man was troubled, however, by doubts. It

Albert Borgmann is the Regents Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana, where he specializes in philosophy of society and culture. His most recent book is *Holding on to Reality: the Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (University of Chicago Press, 1999)

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was hard to ignore the ubiquitous cigarette or to separate the rancher's wholesomeness from his addiction, hard to forget that his purpose was to get us (or keep us) addicted too. It was hard seeing that Marlboro country was actually a cemetery. And it was disconcerting to learn that those rugged clothes were available to all from the mail-order Marlboro store whose address was given on the very advertisement. Most unsettling, perhaps, were the rumors that many a Marlboro man was an actor who didn't know a cinch from a stirrup.

The corruption of the best is worst, the Romans said. At the heart of what we would like to believe is genuine and wholesome we find fakery and exploitation. We might think that the world of ranching is still out there and can be captured in its purity and vigor by writers, photographers, or documentary filmmakers, and to be sure, such recordings and celebrations can be done. But melancholy shadows such accounts, and closer reflection reveals that the reality that underlies ranching life is brittle, fractured, and falling apart.

The economic base of ranching is thin and crumbling. The price of beef and a reasonable return on labor and investments are beyond the diligence and prudence of ranchers. Prices are determined by faraway forces such as beef production in South America and Australia, exchange rates, the welfare of Asian economies, and the preferences of consumers.

Beyond ranching, other industries we have considered basic, in which men wrest resources from nature—mining, logging, agriculture—are losing their fundamental status as well. Raw materials are being eclipsed in the knowledge economy, and sophisticated machineries and methods now come between humans and reality. These methods lessen and obviate direct engagement with reality. Along with cowboys and ranchers, the miners and loggers of old are being replaced by operators of powerful and intricate machines.

On Montana's ranches, the entering wedge of these developments is the personal computer. About half of the ranchers (often the women) use computers regularly for financial and cattle production records, and they are significantly more satisfied with their performance of these chores than their paper-and-pencil neighbors.[1] Still, there is skepticism about the spreading of cyberspace under the big sky. "The first four ranchers that I know of that started using computers," said one rancher, "all went broke within five years."[2] But when tax accountants, breeders' associations, suppliers, and county agents all computerize, ranches cannot afford to remain islands of traditional information. Some ranchers look forward to cyberherding. "When scanners can read top (identification of cattle)," said one, "and use a scale under a working chute, then we will gather the info. Data gathering

needs to be automated."³ This meek request will quickly be met by the agricultural information industry. Information technology is eager to deliver "precision agriculture," where everything under the sun will be measured, monitored, and controlled. As in business generally, whether increased productivity will justify the investment in computers is an open question though not one the individual ranchers are at liberty to answer. In any event, what is likely to get lost in the equation is the symmetry of rugged reality and human competence reflected in this observation: "My husband knows his cattle personally by working with them and has a memory for traits, problems, and style. His father had that trait and … our son seems to have it also."⁴

A similar loss is taking place in the wilderness of Montana. Smoke Elser, Missoula's revered outfitter, knows the Bob Marshall Wilderness as well as anyone and can tell his clients any time just where they are on their trip. But he has been shown up, at least in ease and accuracy, by a know-nothing dude carrying a global-positioning system (GPS) receiver that tells him within fifty or so feet where he is. The device can also track his progress, tell him how far he has traveled from the trailhead, and how long it will take to reach camp. And if he likes the trip, he can store all this information and retrace his steps exactly a few years hence, stopping at all of Smoke's favorite campsites and fishing spots. In time, ranchers will be replaced by agricultural technicians and outfitters by recreation specialists.

> There is something like an irreversible lightness to postmodern reality

These changes are merely the local manifestation of a global phenomenon. Information technology is rendering the entire earth ever more transparent and controllable. Remote sensing by way of satellites is delivering immense streams of data not only about the topographical particulars of every acre on earth but also about the weather, the vegetation, the soils, water, and more. All of this is being computerized and integrated with demographic and economic data through geographical information systems.

Control will always lag behind transparency. We know more than we can manipulate. But knowledge is the basis of control and allows us to adapt or avoid what we cannot subdue. In any case, there is something like an irreversible lightness to postmodern reality. The world has lost much of its darkness and heaviness. It is as though the laws of gravity and density have been, if not abrogated, at least loosened and softened.

One lawful relation, however, has not been affected by these epochal upheavals. It is the symmetry between reality and humanity, the one that

seemed so grandly instantiated by the Marlboro Man: a majestic world reflected in a remarkable man. How then does the postmodern lightness of being affect postmodern people? In a liberating way, it seems at first. Lesser density allows us to unfold more fully, lesser gravity to move more expansively. But there is the real danger that at length the growth will come to bloat and mobility to aimlessness.

We can see the charms and perils of lightness in the fate of the Montana ranches. The original homesteads in Montana were places where men and women removed a quarter section, as Locke would have it, "out of that state that nature hath provided and left it in," and mixed their labor with it and made it theirs.[5] The hardness of reality was overwhelming then, and old-timers will show you many a log cabin where someone in the dead of winter committed suicide. Those who survived began to expand and prosper and became the rugged and quietly self-confident individuals who have a legitimate claim on our admiration.

Postmodern ranches have lost their gravity.

Postmodern affluence, however, comes to people who produce information or entertainment rather than cattle or wheat, people who cast desirous glances at ranches ringed by rocky mountains and snowy peaks. They can acquire and own those ranches without mixing their sweat with the soil. Nor are they tied to the daily chores that get you up at five and won't let you get away for a vacation. Postmodern ranches have lost their gravity. They have become trophies and toys, and the country around them has been reduced to distant wallpaper. Often they are abandoned as quickly as they were acquired, leaving no trace on their transient owners.

The lightness of being is in many ways a blessing we should be grateful for. It has greatly diminished the threat of a nuclear holocaust and the specter of an environmental cataclysm. It has given us an economy that is improbably vigorous and stable. There are of course perils that lurk in the recesses of ignorance and unpredictability. More important, there are people in this country and entire peoples around the globe who are excluded from the blessings of the moment. Our insensitivity to their plight, however, may be a consequence of the very favors most of us in this country enjoy.

Peace and prosperity seem to exercise an enervating force on our moral tone. Adversity energizes. People on the left used to draw moral vigor from their opposition to nuclear arms and environmental exploitation. People on the right gained strength from their fight against the evil empire of communism. Without those enemies, our ethical vigor seems to atrophy. No hardship, no character—that appears to be our predicament.

For illustration, consider the plight of 18-year-olds who were required to give an account of themselves for admission to prestigious universities. As the *New York Times* sympathetically put it: "In her desperation, 17-year-old Jane Doe found herself wishing that somebody—anybody—in her family had died. 'Because then I could write about it,' she said. 'It's horrible and I hated myself for it. But I just wished I had something tragic happen to me.'"[6]

It makes one long for the ancient pain of sticks and stones, and some have been privileged to feel it, for instance, John Smith, a white Newton North senior who grew up in Africa and "actually did have a big thing happen."

> I wrote about racism toward myself. When I was about 11 or so, a group of kids threw stones at me, and that stuck in my head. That was just a big, big experience for me, and I guess I'm really lucky to have that because I know kids that are writing about, like, concerts they went to and stuff like that.[7]

On a larger scale, rigor has drained from everyday life and left novelists little to write about. Sven Birkerts traces this vacuity to a fundamental transformation of reality.

> Fifty years ago the human environment was still more or less the natural environment. We had central heating and labor-saving devices and high-speed travel, but these were still only partial modifications of the natural given. It is the natural given that is now gone. Now, for better or for worse, we move almost entirely within a regulated and mediated environment. Our primary relation to the world has been altered.[8]

Birkerts then treats us to a sketch of a day in the life "of the average American business man" and asks how does one give this sort of life "a meaningful, never mind dramatic, contour?"[9]

We are beginning to miss the hungry years. But obviously it would be childish and irresponsible willfully to bring about starvation, deprivation, or war to tone up our society's moral fiber. What is needed, one might think, are new horizons and new challenges. Since the frontiers of the material world have been closed, many have looked to the immaterial realm of cyberspace as the brave new world in which to define and affirm ourselves. Certainly, claims that have been made inspire hope that a new proving ground for human excellence has been found.

John Perry Barlow, cofounder of the Electronic Freedom Foundation, has said that the advent of cyberspace is "the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire," and Louis Rossetto, cofounder of the magazine *Wired*, has called it "a revolution that makes political revolution seem like a game."[10]

In reality, the pervasiveness of change is more subtle and difficult to discern. Imagine Rip van Winkle had gone to sleep thirty-five years ago and awoke just now. The world would look much the same to him as it did in the

late fifties and early sixties, though further developed along lines visible at the time. All of our characteristic structures and devices were then already in place—automobiles, high-rises, jet airplanes, interstate highways, shopping malls, televisions, stereo sets, microwave ovens. Under the surface of their appearance and use, these devices are of course quite different today. Computers have insinuated themselves in the machineries of our utilities and appliances. Invisibly they monitor and regulate our thermostats, cars, financial instruments, insurance policies, and in fact every technological object and arrangement of any complexity.

The one appliance that would be unfamiliar to Rip van Winkle is the computer, a television screen cum keyboard as it would look to him. With great advances in user-friendliness, the functions of a computer are now more easily explained than they would have been 20 years ago. To a lay person, its evidently novel function is communication, and the distinctive instantiation of communication is e-mail, instantaneous typing at a distance, as Rip might call it. Computers have transformed telephony too, and the near-term goal of that transformation will be reached when everyone carries a light and slender cell phone and can easily call anyone anywhere from any place at any time.

Most astounding perhaps is the ease and scope of information retrieval that cyberspace has made possible. If one should come across the Latin version of the proverb I quoted earlier, *corruptio optimi pessima,* and wonder whether one has guessed its genre and meaning correctly, a query on, say, Alta Vista will produce 36 hits, most of them occurrences of the phrase in some text. One, however, lists it under the heading of "Proverbi Latini" and furnishes an Italian translation. If you do not read Italian, you can have a machine translation into English: "That that was optimal, once corrupt, is pessimo."[11] These instances of how computers have invaded our lives, though far from exhaustive, represent something of the effect cyberspace has had on identity and character. That effect is a strange coincidence of control and withdrawal. *Prima facie*, computers have extended and strengthened our grasp of reality. We seem more firmly in control of our means and ends. We can drive more safely and effortlessly, we can reach people more easily, and we can call up information about the world more quickly.

Yet considered more closely, computers distance us from our world. When they control fuel injection in the engine, we lose touch with the notion that internal combustion requires a mixture of fuel and air, a fact our mechanics used to remind us of when they had to clean or rebuild the carburetor. When computers control the speed the vehicle is cruising at, we no longer need attend to the grade of the road and the force of the wind.

As for our relations to other people, having them call us at any time, re-

gardless of what we are doing, can be annoying. Hence for a while we will shunt all the incoming calls to our voice mail so that we can respond (or not) when it is convenient. Or we will have the calls identified by number or name so we can decide whom to talk to and whom to ignore. E-mail, of course, is the means of communication that provides both ease and control. In a democracy, however, control is usually a two-way affair. The control you assume over other's access to you is reflected in your loss of access to them. As you take control of people, you must yield control over yourself. Through this increasing mutual control, we can create greater distance from one another.

Information constitutes the singular concern and triumph of the computer. In fact we speak as often of the information revolution and information age as we refer to computers to characterize our era. Hence one should expect that when it comes to information, computers, with their links and peripherals, have truly opened a new world for us to explore, a world in which we can nourish and unfold ourselves. In one sense this is particularly so. Computers have made the retrieval of information easier and quicker by orders of magnitude. Where identifying the genre and meaning of an unknown phrase would have taken an hour before the era of computers, it takes only a minute in cyberspace.

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Though information is much more readily at hand in cyberspace, the social, physical, and conceptual architecture of information gets lost from view. At the time when our Rip fell asleep—in the early 1960s, say—determining the origin and meaning of *corruptio optimi pessima* would have taken you out of your office. You would have encountered your students and colleagues—indeed, sky and tree and the rhythm of your own stride—on your walk to the library. You would have encountered the reference librarian. If she was unable to translate the phrase she might have guessed that it was a Latin saying, discoverable either in a thesaurus of Latin or in a book of quotations. The thesaurus being forbidding both in language and in size, you would have tried the books of quotations first, shelved elsewhere in the reference library. There, confronted by roughly a dozen collections of saws and quotations, you would have found different principles of organization, varying degrees of inclusiveness, some misses, and a hit or two. Among the hits there may have been sayings of different analogies and like intent. In short, the information, when finally obtained, would have had its place in the social organization of the campus, in the physical arrangement of reference

works, and in some conceptual scheme of collection and selection.

When you retrieve information in cyberspace using a search engine, most of these contextual structures are submerged. The computer conjures up the item in question and a few dozen more or less related ones from a vast ocean of information. The item rises to the surface as from nowhere and, unless tied down by a bookmark, disappears again without being traceable in real space and often, therefore, without leaving much of a trace in your mind either.

Computer technology has come between people and reality, between one person and another, and between human beings and the architecture of information and knowledge. It has established an invisible zone of distance and disposability between us and our world. In allowing this zone to arise and by helping to establish it, we are deprived. We have deprived ourselves of the real resistance a person needs to acquire character.

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Although this condition generally inspires disengagement and disorientation, it has also inspired a number of hyperactive and highly focused people. The pleasures of comfort and control are too insubstantial to engage their ambition. It is, rather, the undergirding structure of comfort and control that provokes their ingenuity and industry. They are the elite who understand and improve the machineries of research and development, of industry and commerce, of finance and law, of medicine and education. The people engaged in these endeavors truly constitute a vanguard. They are bright, ambitious, and highly educated. They work long hours and are well remunerated. Most important to our discussion, they meet and overcome severe challenges. The underlying machinery of the technological society is the zone where the comfort of consumption connects with the recalcitrance of reality, and where ease and safety are wrested from resistance and risks.

Does this struggle with reality leave an imprint on the warriors? Does it confer character? On some it surely does. They get old and severe before their time. More generally, we recognize something like an ideal type of the elite person, however infrequently it may be fully realized. Such a person is sure of himself or herself without being vain, listens well but does not waste time, shows politeness without flattery, is forthright but does not disclose more than is required, and absorbs abuse without holding grudges. In short, women and men of this cast have something of Aristotle's high-minded man about them.[12]

Yet a contradiction haunts the efforts and triumphs that lend the elite

character. The endeavors that challenge and provoke their greatness result in challenges eradicated and greatness leveled. To bring digital, high-definition television to a technically satisfactory solution requires great ingenuity and perseverance. But as soon as success is at hand, ingenuity of construction will yield to banality of consumption. The greatness of the elite devours the greatness of the masses.

But should one insist on greatness? It has, after all, honorable alternatives. Decency is one, and by and large ours is certainly a country of decent people. Is it not blue-nosed to demand more? The question at the least reveals that the forum of social and moral criticism has changed fundamentally of late or, more precisely, has come to the conclusion of a radical, even though gradual, transformation. The era of clarion calls is over because so are the causes that used to warrant ringing appeals—civil rights, gender equity, nuclear disarmament, anticommunism, environmental protection. Of course, none of these challenges has been fully met. But their legitimacy is widely granted and their urgency has been blunted. Attempts to rally the troops once more under the banner of these causes now strike us as shrill and politically all too correct.

If there is to be a vital moral conversation any longer, it must proceed in the realm of what philosophers call supererogatory norms, standards that go beyond what is required as a matter of law and decency. There is of course a well-established school of liberal democratic theory that holds that the state and society have no business taking sides on questions of moral perfection and should restrict their concern to advancing the means rather than the ends of the good society. Conservative theorists have keenly felt the need for virtues that surpass the moral minimalism of the liberals, but their arguments often converge at a deeper level with liberalism. Civic virtues are frequently defended as the glue that holds society together; virtues turn out to be but one of the means of a basically open-ended society.

The reply to the liberals is that state and society are inevitably involved in shaping and constraining the moral choices individuals make. To the conservatives one must say that moral perfection is not a means but an end, and more important, an end that today is implicated in a new constellation of moral and material conditions.

These are involved and contentious issues. They come into relief, however, in the typical evening of the U.S. citizen. At around ten, he and she rise from the couch, having spent two or three hours snacking and watching television. They have done this during their leisure time, the period that is entirely theirs to do with as they please. Is it a sin or crime, what they have just done? No, but on reflection, they feel empty and dissatisfied. Life is slipping by. They have nothing to show for the last two or three hours. They

vaguely realize that mentally they have become more slack and physically they have become more shapeless. They are losing definition of mind and body.[13]

Whenever social scientists inquire into the ways Americans shape their leisure, television is the looming phenomenon, and a vague uneasiness looms above the television culture. The moral misery today is no longer focused sharply on this commission and that omission. It surfaces in the vague apprehension that we are wasting our time and in time our lives, that we have become unfaithful to things out there, to people, and to our best talents. We watch on television what and where we would like to be, outside somewhere, bravely and skillfully facing real challenges, but we never get around to doing and being what we watch. Thus the moral concern that the typical human condition inspires today is not outrage or indignation but the sort of searing regret one feels when something beautiful is being defaced by neglect.

The moral life under premodern conditions was simpler though no easier. Presumably people found it as difficult as they now find it to be good. But then the call to goodness rose more clearly from the tangible circumstances of life. At a time when the family was the economic fundament of life, the basic welfare of children could not be assured outside of, or prior to, the establishment of a family. And since reliable contraception and safe abortions were not to be had, the reasons for sexual discipline were palpable. When leaving one's spouse meant grave economic jeopardy for the remaining spouse and children and servitude the only route to survival for the departing spouse, marital fidelity was strongly advised by material circumstances. At a time of scarce food and expensive liquor, lack of moderation in eating was the cause of someone else's starvation and intemperance of drinking meant abject poverty. Nor did it require courageous resolve to confront reality out there, to keep in touch with the neighbors, or to exercise one's body. Walking was then the primary means of traveling, not to work with one's hands was the privilege of nobility, and interaction with one's neighbors was the very fabric of survival.[14]

Much of premodern morality was the response to tangible demands, and the primary question was not whether but how well one would meet those demands. Today technological devices have disburdened and distanced us from the material exigencies of chastity, fidelity, temperance, courage, charity, and vigor. The reasons of those virtues being remote, we no longer see them but only hear their faint voices. On those occasions, however, when someone prevails on us to answer those voices, the presence and power of those virtues is restored to us. When someone begs us to turn off the television and go to a concert or for a walk in the park, the real presence of oth-

ers, of music, of lawns and trees floods us with grace and restores our vigor. And similarly, when we submit to the discipline of fasting, or at least to abstinence between meals, the life-sustaining force of food comes home to us.

There has been an inversion of the material and moral forces of things. In premodern times, the material presence and force of things issued in moral demands. In the postmodern era, the moral demands of things call us back to the material splendor of reality. It is then mere semblance to see postmodern reality as soft, yielding, and elusive, and it is a mistake to think that, there being no resistance, the normal postmodern condition is to be without character or that masks must take the place of faces.

The postmodern world has a hardness that can restore character to our minds and definition to our bodies. It is a hardness that first meets us as the duress of heeding the call of people and things and of having to cross the threshold of comfort and withdrawal. Hyperactive overachievers, by the way, have to cross the same threshold although from a different angle. For them, the duress lies in letting go of the adrenaline rush, of the blandishments of competition and control, and of the seductions of unam-

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biguous goals and successes. The reality of nature, urbanity, athletics, art, or religion seems as boring to the hyperactive as it seems forbidding to the sullen. In any case, once the threshold of duress is crossed, the hardness of postmodern reality engages us as the firmness of those things that claim and test the fullness of our bodily, spiritual, and communal skills.

But why do we so regularly fail to answer those claims? Broadly put, it is the implicitness and individualism of our moral lives. The official discourse in this society about the ways we order our fundamental material and social relations carefully and inevitably stops short of the ultimate and actual ways we inhabit those relations. We have much to say about Sam Walton and Wal-Mart, but we rarely discuss just how all of the stuff Wal-Mart sells ends up in our homes and informs the moral complexion of our households.

In practice, of course, we must somehow answer these questions. But the answers remain implicit and hence unexamined. We assume, moreover, that however the answers are arrived at, they spring from our individual decisions as consumers. This assumption overlooks the fact that it was not the individual consumer who invented television, refrigeration, automobiles, suburbs, the separation of work and home, etc. These devices and arrangements have been put in place cooperatively and so as to imply a default de-

cision for the evening of a weekday—enter the house, turn on the TV, open the refrigerator.

To regain character and definition, we need to put the final enactment of daily life on the public agenda. We must collectively and cooperatively make sure that interaction with one another and the common devotion to the great things of the city and of the country are the normal response to the way we have laid out our world. Having become more thoughtful of mind and more vigorous of demeanor, we will be able to say goodbye to the Marlboro Man.

Notes

1. Lee Tangedahl and Jackie Manley, "Computer Cowboys," *Montana Business Quarterly* 34 (Autumn 1996): 11-12.

2. Ibid., 14.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., 13.

5. John Locke, *Treatise on Civil Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, Charles L. Sherman, ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), 19.

6. Carey Goldberg, "Admissions Essay Ordeal: The Young Life Examined," *New York Times,* December 31, 1997, p. A1.

7. Ibid.

8. Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies* (New York: Fawcett, 1994), 205-206.

9. Ibid.

10. John Perry Barlow's remark in "What Are We Doing On-Line?" *Harper's,* August 1995, p. 36; D. T. Max, "The End of the Book?" *Atlantic,* September 1994, p. 62, quoting Louis Rossetto.

11. Available at http://info2.ing.univaq.it/ordine/auleinf/filippo/latino.htm on August 3, 1998

12. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 4, chapter 3.

13. Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Television and the Quality of Life* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1990); John P. Robinson and Geoffrey Godbye, *Time for Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

14. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribner, 1984).