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La civilización del espectáculo by Mario Vargas Llosa
(review)

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This leads to a further concern with Powe's study, a criticism that readers of this journal may find especially important. While his writing makes evident a deep admiration for McLuhan's ideas and an uneasy tolerance for McLuhan's Catholic faith, Powe goes to great lengths to drive a wedge between the two. Hence, just where one might expect a connection to be made between McLuhan's "sacramentalist" (Powe's word choice) view of the world and McLuhan's increasingly well-known identification with Roman Catholic Christianity (by definition, *sacramentalist*), Powe balks, implying that no serious consideration of Catholicism is necessary when attempting to comprehend McLuhan's insights. Fair enough. But what else, if not his faith, could serve as the basis for McLuhan's thought? Powe never says. If some other grounding does exist, readers are left to discover it on their own. Similarly, concerning the overlap of Frye's faith and scholarship, Powe agrees with McLuhan that there is more than a tinge of Gnosticism and heresy there. In fact, Powe himself labels Frye a "Gnostic" and a "heretic" throughout his book, but these become terms of endearment in Powe's mouth. The early Church certainly had its reasons for resisting Gnosticism, but one will not know those by reading Powe's uncritical celebration of Frye's embracing of the heresy and dismissal of McLuhan's resisting it. The closest Powe comes to acknowledging the elephant in the room—that is, the influence of religion on the two scholars—is in his call for a more thorough study of the relationship between McLuhan's faith and thought (195). (Attempts to explore this issue do, in fact, exist; several articles and at least one graduate thesis, Tina Edan's *St. Marshall, Mass, and the Media: Catholicism, Media Theory, and Marshall McLuhan* [Concordia University, Montreal], completed in 2003, preceded the publication of Powe's book.) No similar study exploring possible connections of Frye's Protestantism to his Gnostic leanings is called for by Powe.

This leads me to my final quibble with Powe's illuminating work. In both his reluctance to take seriously McLuhan's Catholicism and his desire to embrace Frye's Gnosticism, Powe grants himself too much latitude, allowing his critical work to become a personal account. His evident respect for McLuhan and Frye is diluted by his failure to talk back to his teachers—to offer a counter to McLuhan's sacramentalism and to point out the potential hubris of Frye's criticism. In the final analysis, this book's merits are unnecessarily put at risk by arguments, or their absences, that reveal more about Powe than about his two great teachers.

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Mario Vargas Llosa, *La civilización del espectáculo*, Madrid: Alfaguara, 2012; 225pp.: ISBN 978-84-204-1148-4, E-ISBN 9788420402673, €17.50 (pbk), € 6.99 [e-print].

This essay by Nobel Prize Winner Mario Vargas Llosa, still to be translated into English, describes that state of current times in which high culture has become

almost invisible and has been substituted by a culture which is basically mass consumer oriented. In a way, Vargas Llosa falls into one of the categories that Umberto Eco stated in his 1964 book *Apocalittici e integrati*. “Apocalittici” would be those thinkers who feel that real culture should always remain elitist, and serve as the main reference for defining a specific historical period, while “integrati” would be those who consider popular culture as the real reference point for modern times. If one accepts Eco’s division, Vargas Llosa is part of an apocalyptic - even post-apocalyptic, group, since his view is mostly pessimistic and does not offer many options to reverse the situation. Still, his essay is a solid and refreshing vindication of high culture, and especially of serious literature for being a resource of hope and freedom as well as a unique vehicle for all human longings.

The book is organized into six chapters, all of them beginning with a meditation on a particular cultural issue and ending with one or two shorter pieces previously published in *El País*, a Spanish newspaper. These pieces comment on some real-life experiences that illustrate the ideas of the first part of each chapter. The book concludes with a “reflexión final” (*closing meditation*) that contains an interesting passage dealing with the connections between serious literature and human freedom. The book itself is well written and enjoyable to read, even if sometimes its tone is more emotional than reflective. Additionally, it cannot be considered a deep philosophical treatise, and is more a piece of a cultural debate. Nonetheless, most of his ideas are intellectually well supported and appropriately illustrated, with eloquent examples from the social and cultural life of the West.

The long introduction is titled “Metamorfosis de una palabra,” and describes the change of meaning of the word “culture” through contemporary history as shown in essays by T. S. Eliot, George Steiner, Guy Debord, Gilles Lipotevsky, Jean Serroy, and Frédéric Martel. According to Vargas Llosa, that meaning would have suffered a chronological degeneration. For Eliot, culture still remained linked to an intellectual elite and was identified with high culture. This was also a way to preserve and transmit the most valuable human achievements. For Steiner, though, Elliot’s concept of culture was not valid anymore. First, because it was insufficient to explain historical tragedies such as the two world wars, the Holocaust, or the gulags; neither could it elucidate cultural or spiritual consequences such as *ennui* or the avant-garde movements. And second, the culture of present times would rather be a post-culture, as indicated in the increasing auto-seclusion of high culture, and in the realization that progress does not necessarily run parallel to History. From different perspectives, Debord, Lipovestky, Serroy, and Martel explain that because of the multiple forces of capitalism, culture has gradually lost its *aura* and has alienated not only the producers and consumers of cultural goods, but also art itself. Technology and media have produced a mass culture characterized by frivolity, anxiety for pleasure, and the dominion of the screen over the ideas of the written word. Finally, this mainstream culture is reducing culture to entertainment, economic success, and popularity. This reduction is what really defines today’s culture and, sadly, the way to be modern.

In this review, Vargas Llosa identifies himself with Eliot's concept of culture, and does not spare criticism of those thinkers (especially Martel) who assume that mainstream culture is the key manner in which to define it. Although this metamorphosis is real, one feels that Vargas Llosa should have devoted more space to explain the polysemic dimension of the word. By doing this, he would have had more arguments for his later vindication of high culture as something essentially different from low or popular culture, and provided arguments for the real question behind this debate, that is, the substitution of the intellectual discourse with the anthropological one.

In the first chapter Vargas Llosa affirms that the main purpose of today's culture is not to educate or stir our consciences but to help us to escape from boredom and the epochal sense of emptiness. This aim would not be bad in itself, but it also has become a priority and has produced a general sense of frivolity, as well as a banalization of literatures and plastic arts. Equally, the democratization of culture and the welfare state has lowered the standards of writers, artists, and culture consumers. The contemporary world has a light literature but no ambitious endeavors such as Joyce's, Borges's or Faulkner's. On the other hand, professional literary critics have less impact than readers such as Oprah Winfrey, and serious intellectuals have almost disappeared or have become sophists, celebrities, or both (Derrida). By the same token, cinema no longer can produce directors such as Bergman or Visconti and has substituted deep personal conflicts with special effects. For its part, sex—an important element in Vargas Llosa's idea of culture—is no longer about human sexuality but about physical intercourses, and the plastic arts have lost their *techné* and become simple provocateurs.

The following chapter is more theoretical, and explains how the old concept of culture was linked to an elite defined mostly by their intellectual capabilities and their works on the highest realms of the human soul, such as religion, philosophy, law, or literature. In the present, however, massive "culture" suggests that everyone is a "cultivated" person, and political correctness makes sure that all cultural hierarchicalization is understood as ethnocentric, oppressive, and unjust. According to Vargas Llosa, Bakhtin is one of the main culprits of this situation, because of his vindication of popular culture and his view of subversion as one of the key epistemic frames for all cultural products. Vargas Llosa also adds an interesting reflection on how classic literary and artistic works, and all humanities in general, are permanent nourishment for the spirit, and how, by contrast, most of the past accomplishments in technology and sciences are rather exotic or useless museum pieces.

In the third chapter, Foucault is the intellectual who receives most of Llosa's criticism, not for the intrinsic quality of his studies but for their unintended consequences for education. In this regard, Vargas Llosa questions Foucault's view of education as a tool for repression and blames it for the subsequent collapse of any serious education system. Likewise, current academic literary studies are condemned by Vargas Llosa because—Derrida again—they have emptied literature of its content and connection with reality, and have reduced it to mere wordage, to a cloistered

self-referentiality. Such a view of literature is the opposite of Vargas Llosa's, who in *La verdad de las mentiras*, his main book on literary criticism, considers fiction as one of the best ways to understand and explain all aspects of human nature.

Chapter 4 deals with eroticism, one of the most recurrent topics in Vargas Llosa's novels. He understands *eros* both as a tool of freedom from political, moral, or religious constraints, and as a way by which each person can unfold his or her identity. Thus, eroticism is a key component of any given culture but also something radically different from animal sex or trivial sex, which is the way modern culture considers it. Vargas Llosa complains about public exhibitions of sexual activities, since they belong to the private sphere, the real enriching one. In my view, however, although Vargas Llosa justifies his discourse by reminding us that sex needs some formality to keep its *aura*, he fails to show a solid philosophical foundation for his argument. He also seems to ignore the large literature recently generated by Christian thought on this issue, Karol Wojtyła's personalist theology of the body being perhaps the most systematic corpus.

The fifth chapter explains the degeneration of political and public service careers in liberal democracies. If dictatorships from both sides transform culture in mere propaganda, current democracies are producing both politicians led by a celebrity complex and citizens without idealistic ambitions. Gone are the days in which politics and all kind of public service were considered reputable and respectful jobs. Gone are also the days in which serious journalism knew the limits between public and private spheres and respected the right to privacy. Finally, if previous historical periods had culture—high culture—as a successful substitute of religion as well as its main cohesive force, current culture—low culture—is so deliquescent that it can barely sustain itself. This is why the future of our own civilization is seriously at risk.

The final chapter deals with religion. Vargas Llosa describes himself as agnostic (not as atheistic) because both belief and unbelief would be in the end attitudes of blind faith. He also assumes the successful survival of religion in contemporary and future societies, being an answer to some of the deepest human issues, such as the fear of death or the need for social cohesiveness. He recognizes the positive contributions of religions in general, and those of Christianity in particular. The latter has brought the foundations of democracy through real-life concepts such as fraternity, equality, and forgiveness. On the negative side, he tends to repeat the accusations from the typical anti-religious stance of the secular agenda. Some of them are, in my view, properly evaluated, but some others are just monotonous proposals coming from the standards of political correctness. In the same way, secularization and separation between church and state are a guarantee of freedom in modern societies, but they have only been accomplished in Christian countries. Still, governments have to keep vigilant so that religions do not become realms of intolerance and repressors of human (liberal) rights. Although Vargas Llosa defends the right to belief and what McClure and Taylor have called open secularism, one gets the impression that at the end he considers believers as second-class citizens or second-class intellectuals. If this is so, it is clear that an enrichment of social dialogue is seriously hindered, and secularism—another

blind-faith attitude—ends up being the only religion accepted in the public square. But Vargas Llosa does not go into these consequences.

It can be said that this is an interesting essay for public debate, and that its author solidly questions many manifestations of today's culture. Such manifestations are not bad in themselves but become seriously threatening when they tend to substitute real (high) culture, which is mainly characterized by its capacity to give cohesion to social life. By contrast, today's culture is rather a narcotic that precludes citizens from developing a serious intellectual life and from seeing beyond the frivolity created by the market, the media, and intellectuals themselves. It is true that some of Vargas Llosa's proposals sound Manichean or simplistic. He, for example, seems to forget that literary works we now consider high culture were mostly mass-oriented in their times. By the same token, authors such as Cervantes, Dumas, or Poe also wrote works for massive consumption. In this regard, one misses some considerations about how history and the passing of time can render *aura* to almost any cultural manifestation. Also, Vargas Llosa's considerations of moral and spiritual issues come from a secularized perspective, thus showing some weakness when evaluating the role of religion and believers in public life. Nonetheless, his book is an overall positive contribution to a serious debate that should produce more responses, engage the brightest intellectuals more frequently, and keep vindicating the unique role of high culture and the best literary works.

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Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality.

Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. ISBN 9-781-4094-5515-8. Pp. xiviii + 215. \$39.95.

The Diviners are a self-titled group of five poet-theologians who have met a few times a year for slightly over a decade. (Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, is a former member, and contributed the Foreword.) Their name plays on "The Divine" and on poetry as "a form of divination, a means of searching for the sacred, but also the means whereby we ourselves are searched out and our lives become the sacred ground in which the holy is discerned" (4). All the poets are within the "Christian faith (generously understood)" (1), a qualification that gestures at the heterogeneity of the group—two Anglicans, two Roman Catholics, and a Quaker—and at some theological explorations that are outside of strictly orthodox understandings of Christianity.

Making Nothing Happen is a collection of essays and poems in response to W. H. Auden's famous assertion, in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," (*Collected Poems* 2007), that "poetry makes nothing happen." The Diviners posit that the "nothing" that poetry makes happen is the opening up of "creative, empty space" in which