

on time becomes an obsession for one character in "The World at War."

Living with my parents in Superior, Wisconsin, I begin to collect time-pieces. In my room are a Sessions wall clock, a Westclox Baby Ben with two alarms, a Sunbeam with a lighted dial to shine the way—these and a few other watches and clocks, all of them wound and running. "Why you don't study time for a living?" [his father] asks.

This is exactly what Bukoski and Weaver have done as artists, study time for a living.

Bukoski's work is dense with allusions and direct references to time, but I shall single out only two more representative stories. In "Tango of the Bearers of the Dead," the principal character is a Polish immigrant, a woman, who has committed adultery and whose memory of this and her 50 years of marriage is blackened by what she has done. Her husband, now dying in a hospital bed in Superior, had suffered great travail when he deserted from the Russian army and worked his way to join her in Wisconsin, and her adultery always stood between them, though he remained a faithful husband and provider. A watch given by her father, to be given to her husband, had been given to her lover who sold it in a pawn shop; now the watch symbolizes that time long ago and the 50 years since her betrayal. She says to her grandson who is insistent on hearing about his grandfather: "I want you to forget . . . all the things that embarrass a family and make it small. Bear your dead some other way. I am done remembering." She considers silently, "Where do things go when they're no longer remembered?"

The title story, "Children of Strangers," is built around a church party honoring a nun who has spent her life teaching the Polish students of St. Adalbert's School. The neighborhood of St. Adalbert's, like many Catholic neighborhoods in America, has declined and been taken over by strangers. One of the old parents wonders to herself, Where do these children of strangers come from—Brule? Iron River? The party is held in the gym, and during it two ruffians enter, ignore the old people, begin to shoot baskets, then help themselves to the food on the tables. For one character in particular, it is a traumatic, vision-changing experience—the two young thugs look right through him.

His thinking about the future . . . changes now. More and more in the coming days, he sees in this vision of a world without depth, riots will be tearing cities apart, and presidents and dignitaries will be seized and put upon. . . . Now he's suddenly becoming frightened of looking ahead.

I did not catch any big fish in Wisconsin (all would have lived comfortably in a goldfish bowl), but I enjoyed canoeing the Brule and listening to its rushing water while my guide abandoned me looking for dragonflies for his collection. However, I fished two big literary talents and listened to them. What we hear in both artists are the clarion sounds of apocalypse. Both wield fine satiric weapons and possess a rollicking comic humor, including ethnic humor, in spite of the speech police. (Recently, an East Coast editor rejected a friend's story because she used Southern black speech for some of the characters—he scolded her by explaining that his magazine does not do that anymore.) Some may find the satire and the action in Weaver and Bukoski dark, a bit much for their genteel tastes, but where shall they turn? To Eastern European history of the last hundred years, or the transcript of the impeachment of our current President? Each of these artists has tracked the spoor of those in his neck of the woods, and from the detritus of crudity and cruelty, hate and love, each has fashioned fables that may lead to our redemption.

William Mills, a novelist and poet, is the editor of Images of Kansas City. His latest work of fiction is Properties of Blood.

EDUCATION

Computer Cult

by Marian Kester Coombs

Forget Back to Basics, language immersion, New (and newer and newer) Math, the seven types of intelligence, Learn by Doing, the Great Books, discovery learning, arts-based education, Core Values, self-esteem, and even phonics. American parents have found a new savior for their children's imperiled educa-

tion: the computer.

All across the country, parent-teacher associations and *ad hoc* parent groups are feverishly raising money and/or jawboning education budgets to install banks of computers in the public schools, wangling space away from other school uses to accommodate such installations, systematically hooking up every classroom to at least one computer, and diverting textbook and other monies to purchase software. PTA meetings resound with the clamor for "computer literacy," "21st-century information skills," and the like. With a spirit not unlike that of their stoic pioneer ancestors, these parents have accepted what appears to be the inarguable, lowered their heads, and pressed their shoulders resolutely to the new wheel.

Whether this craze for getting schools "on line" will pay off in better educated students is almost never debated. Parents have been instilled with a raw terror of their children being left behind by the economy of technological imperialism—which, after all, is not a futuristic scenario but a palpably brutal ongoing process. Anything promising to lessen this terror is embraced with hot relief.

Parents nationwide are pouring millions of their own money into school computerization. The federal government's response has been to cry, "No fair!" and point fingers trembling with indignation at school districts where lower incomes (and lower parental commitment) mean less outside money to fund the new cult. And the feds' solution, of course, has been to create a typical boondoggle with two billion dollars (so far) in taxpayers' money, called "e-rates," to subsidize poorer districts.

The two major problems with the computer cult are, first, the notion that computers can teach something that traditional teaching cannot; and second, the notion that the Internet is an information resource above and beyond anything human society has ever possessed before. Both notions are risibly false.

The uses to which computers are put at the grade-school level are particularly self-defeating. Large amounts of money are spent for software like interactive books, *KidPix*, *Kid Works*, *Oregon Trail*, and *Storybook Weaver*. *KidPix* and *Kid Works* are used to get the students to "read," "draw," "write," and "do math." After all the "high-tech" folderol is dispensed with, each of these activities would have been more profitably conducted with paper and pencil and a good

book. Example: Children are asked to “draw” a line segment onscreen and label it “AB.” Because they do this electronically, it is considered superior to a manual exercise. In what way? Quite apart from the extra time involved in lining up and marching down to the computer lab, logging on, opening the program, etc., there is far less teacher supervision of what is supposedly being learned.

Some, such as Clinton apparatchiks, would argue that the computers ought to be in the classroom already, not “down the hall.” When that is the case, however, we witness an even further breakdown of classroom coherence, as kids line up to play at the terminal(s) while the teacher struggles to keep a general lesson going. In other classrooms, volunteers pull small groups of kids out of class for special computer sessions in a continuous pattern of disruption reminiscent of Short Attention Span Theater.

This suggests another problem with the whole cult: the sheer amount of teaching time being sucked into the sacred black hole of Technology. Across the country, teachers are using instruction time not only to be trained on computers but to plan activities, lessons, pedagogy, and “integrated curricula” around them. Computer systems are constantly changing, being updated and upgraded; bright ideas for transforming pencil-and-paper lessons into “electronically enhanced” exercises are being lobbed fast, furious, and nonstop at the teaching profession. Many teachers feel they are on a treadmill, losing ground no matter how they speed themselves up. Welcome to the workforce of the New World Order!

To return to the contradictions inherent in grade-school computer use, interactive books are not interactive. All the term means is that children can click onscreen icons as the computer reads the book to them and watch programmed pixelations or hear sound effects. The *Kid Works* program reads your own words back to you like an *idiot savant*, but at least they are your own words. With *Storybook Weaver*, the child is also supposed to type in his own story, but all the illustrations are provided from a menu of backgrounds and figures. The *KidPix* program offers such a dazzling array of graphic elements and ways of manipulating them that no creativity whatsoever is required; yet art, math, social studies, and language-arts classes all do “units” on *KidPix*. The various math programs, minus the bells and whistles, provide nothing

more profound than a traditional arithmetic lesson would. And computer math is made to order for students already primed to get the answer by asking a calculator rather than their own brains.

The one grade-school use of computers that conveys an actual skill better than traditional means is the teaching of how to type. In the meantime, however, the teaching of how to write—not to mention how to draw—is heading toward extinction. Typing, which used to be a high-school elective, will be of use to these students when they have to type papers for high school and college, and for future jobs in the “cube farms” of TechnoCo, Inc. But what is lost by bypassing the ancient interaction of hand and eye is almost never considered.

One who has considered it is Gary Chapman, director of a technology and society research project at the University of Texas and former executive director of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility. In a speech delivered in May 1999 to a conference on federal education policy at the Brookings Institution, Chapman noted, “It’s very, very rare for me to run into a [graduate] student who is totally incompetent with computers. But it is, unfortunately, not rare for me to run into students who can’t write or speak well, can’t spell and have huge and alarming gaps in knowledge. I don’t think computers will solve that problem.” Indeed, the computer cult only exacerbates these problems.

The cult’s harmful ideology spills over into everyday life whenever parents, blinded by techno-faith, allow or encourage children to play endless video and computer games. Among the effects of overexposure to this medium: hyperactivity, distractibility, impulsiveness, withering of social skills, poor nutrition and exercise habits, and atrophy of motor skills.

The mantra parents cling to is that such play is good training for the jobs of the future. That’s true chiefly if the job you have in mind is desk jockey for the new push-button military or desensitized executioner of fellow students. In any case, particular job skills should be taught on the job, not in the schools, whose task is to convey cultural literacy. The abilities to read with understanding, to think analytically, to compute and calculate accurately, to write cogently, and to speak expressively are what employers are begging for in job applicants; with those abilities as a foundation, all else can be added as needed. Unfortunately, the

government and its schools aren’t generating this kind of “product”—the feds are much more afraid of an educated populace able to think critically than of letting the U.S. economy slide down to Third World status.

The *Dallas Morning News* reports (May 25) that, “At some schools, vocational programs are so elaborate that calling them ‘shop class’ is like calling a Boeing 747 a glider. There are full-bore auto shops, greenhouses, airplane hangars, day cares, photo labs, and on and on.”

“I teach them things besides photography,” one shop teacher is quoted as saying. “I teach punctuality. I teach honesty. I teach dependability.”

That’s nice, but such virtues should be taught in the home, and job-related skills should be taught on the job. If they can’t be, why don’t we just drop the fiction of higher education for all, revert to the European system of academic versus vocational tracks, and quit pretending that most kids are getting anything more than a grade-school-level preparation for the labor force?

Now for the second major problem: World Wide Web worship. Computers as “channels” of the fabled Internet are believed to grant instant knowledge to web surfers.

Have you ever tried to research something on the Internet? You choose a search engine, enter your keywords, and wait as thousands of pages queue up for perusal. Sometimes, more than half of the items are duplicates under slightly different listings. All times, many items have nothing to do with the object of your search, although you usually only discover this after waiting for the irrelevant page to load. Many sites that look promising either cannot be found, have moved with no forwarding address, or simply are not as advertised: Either they deliver only a disappointing smidgen of what was promised, or they are masquerading as something they are not. Many a site turns out to be the excruciatingly boring homepage of some poor *citoyen mondial* who, in the course of his virtual life, happens to mention one of your keywords. Many sites are commercial and thus only very selectively informative. And perhaps most important, an enormous number of sites contain documents whose provenance and credibility you have no means at all of judging.

In brief, you would have done better to visit the library. A mere fraction of the knowledge of mankind has been scanned

into cyberspace, and too much of that fraction is fragmented, diluted, or vitiated by highly questionable persons for entirely inscrutable or unscrupulous reasons. The published books and magazines available at libraries or bookstores represent a much broader range of views and are far more reliable sources since the process of their production has been juried, refereed, peer-reviewed, and vetted to an extent impossible with Internet postings.

It is, admittedly, convenient to use electronic encyclopedias such as Compton's and Grolier's. But online encyclopedias are often abridged and abbreviated compared with their printed editions—and with each update more politically corrected material replaces the telling wisdom of the past. Advice: Get hold of an early-20th-century set of the Americana or Britannica and guard it with your life.

It's true that the Internet makes getting in touch with like-minded persons much faster and easier, but (for example) efforts to conduct campaigns on behalf of various political and social issues via cyberspace have, so far, failed. E-mail bombardment doesn't faze lawmakers; letters, phone calls, demonstrations, and bad p.r. do.

The worst fallacy of Web worship is the idea that "information" is somehow at one's fingertips and therefore need not be lodged in one's head. Schoolchildren are being taught that "it's just as good to know where to look something up as to memorize it." This theory renders the attempt to think rather like waving a wand over an empty top hat—if no rabbit's in there to start with, no rabbit's going to pop out. Storing facts (or whatever you want to call the mental representations of knowledge) in memory enables association, comparison, cross-fertilization, and development of ideas. Memory is the food of thought. The greater the remembered store, the richer and more complex the mind's creative process.

This is what critical thinking is all about, ladies and gents of the National Education Association. But we don't train for that anymore. Distracted from distraction by distraction, our children are the first generation in American history to be less human than the one that came before it.

Marian Kester Coombs writes from Crofton, Maryland.

FILM

In the Toyshop of the Heart

by George McCartney

The Thomas Crown Affair

Produced by Irish Dream Time and United Artists

Directed by John McTiernan

Screenplay by Leslie Dixon and Kurt Wimmer, original story by Alan Trustman

Released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

The Blair Witch Project

Produced by Haxan Films

Directed by Daniel Myrick and

Eduardo Sánchez

Screenplay by Daniel Myrick and

Eduardo Sánchez

Released by Artisan Entertainment

The Iron Giant

Produced by Warner Bros.

Directed by Brad Bird

Screenplay by Brad Bird and

Tim McCanlies, based on

The Iron Man by Ted Hughes

Released by Warner Bros.

The original *Thomas Crown Affair*, a 1968 Faye Dunaway/Steve McQueen vehicle, wouldn't seem a likely candidate for a remake. It was a slight, stylish entertainment that floated on the glamour of its stars and had all the impact of a soap bubble. Fortunately, the new version doesn't rely on the earlier's weightless cachet. Director John McTiernan, producer Pierce Brosnan, and their writers have re-thought the original, retaining its high-flying style but adding just a pinch of gravity for ballast.

This time the film begins with, of all things, a lesson in values. Minutes after the credits have run, we find ourselves in New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art being introduced to a Claude Monet painting from his haystack period. A teacher is lecturing her fourth-grade class on its aesthetic merits. Finding her

nine-year-olds unimpressed, she shrewdly cuts to the cash. This painting, she tells the kids, is worth \$100 million. Instantly, their faces ignite with interest. And so the film raises its major concern: the confusion of price with value, appearance with reality.

Enter Pierce Brosnan as Thomas Crown, the bored billionaire who will lift the Monet not for its price but for its inherent worth. His act is an implicit lesson in making value distinctions, a lesson he will pursue from the public space of commodified art to the private one of compromised relationships. And like any good teacher, he will not pretend to have the whole answer. He is wise enough to learn from his prize pupil, the insurance investigator (played by Rene Russo) commissioned to recover the painting so her clients don't have to pay its preposterous price. She is a professional who has developed her cunning at the expense of her soul. This allows her to hunt Crown, ruthlessly using passion as her weapon of choice until it unexpectedly takes aim at herself.

McTiernan is working Hitchcock territory. As in many of the master's films (most notably *North by Northwest*), crime, dishonesty, and betrayal are tropes for the endless plots and counterplots endemic to the battle of the sexes. McTiernan makes no bones about this. The pre-credit introduction shows Brosnan in the office of his psychiatrist, played (in a nod to the original) by Faye Dunaway. She wants to know if he trusts women. He makes an ironic moue and answers, "I enjoy women." She then asks him if a woman could trust him. His reply is more measured, his smile more reflective: "A woman could trust me as long as her interests didn't run too counter to my own." Then the credits roll against a stylized landscape of sinuous curves in beige, yellow, and ochre, undulating femininely across the wide screen. The stage is set. It's sexes *en garde*.

If Hitchcock is McTiernan's cinematic influence, could Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* be his literary source? Here, instead of Belinda's mischievous curl, it's the misvalued Monet that gets clipped. But the effect is much the same. In both stories, a breach of propriety serves to unmask a man and woman to one another and to themselves. Shot in the precincts of Manhattan's privileged, the film's key scenes have a deluxe ambience not unlike Pope's stylized drawing-room world in which spoiled co-