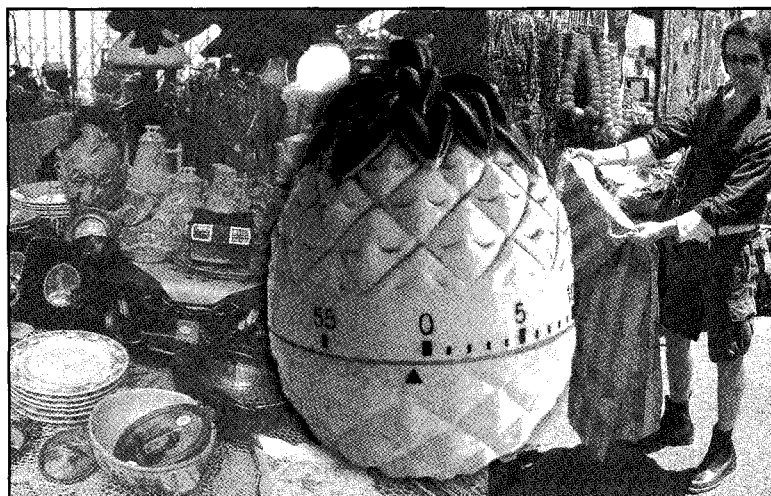


Unpalatable Values

Culture as Gastronomy

by Andrei Navrozov



Melanie Anderson

To American readers the name A.A. Gill may mean nothing, but in England the restaurant and television critic of the *Sunday Times* is a cultural force to be reckoned with. A witty autodidact, with plenty of disdain for the pieties of the moment, to easily deafened ears he is a Jeremiah of the *petit-four* and British journalism's loosest cannon.

To my own callous ears, Gill is a typical New York neo-conservative. What betrays him, I dare say, is the compulsion to appear forever young by espousing opinions that old fogeys are unlikely to hold in order to appeal to the tall blondes in tight jeans and pearly cashmere sweaters whom he vaguely imagines smiling in liberated approval over the morning's skinny lattes. Scratch a neoconservative, and you will find the Nordic dream.

The other day Gill disgorged his frustration on a television program, entitled *From Farm to Pharma*, in which a former food critic from the *New Statesman* by the name of Bee Wilson, apparently neither tall nor a blonde, was found guilty of "a partisan kicking of manufactured food." Gill had even looked up the hapless woman's thesis at Cambridge, "on something like French utopian socialism," as well as a book she had written, "on adulteration, which is like adultery but with cheese." I did say Gill was witty. On the other hand, we all know the type of woman he was talking about.

Though presumably a harridan with highly progressive

views, Wilson made light of the "modern chemical cookery" practiced by such giants of fashion gastronomy as Heston Blumenthal and "elBulli's Ferran Adria." Theirs is a cultural innovation that Gill, with an ethereal kiss in the direction of the smiling mermaids, who, after all, are renowned for eating as little and as expensively as possible, professes to admire. Hence his attack on the very "premise of the programme, that chemists and mass production had no place in our kitchens and had produced nothing but ghastliness and malnutrition." All cooking, Gill wrote,

is chemistry. Every breakfast is science. An apple tree is mass production. And the last century and a half has produced a remarkable cornucopia, a renaissance of industrially produced food. Our palates and our plates overflow with wonderful things nobody had eaten before, ingredients and dishes that are at the heart of our culture.

He concluded by listing a number of these "wonderful things," ending with chewing gum. Mermaids chew gum, don't they? At least the sugar-free kind?

I now recall the piazza in Palermo where I live. On Sundays it is transformed into the city's principal flea market. As Sicily has not a Russian Orthodox Church, it is there that I can be found most Sunday mornings. The merchandise on display ranges from 1850's rubbish to 1990's junk, allowing the visitor to draw broad conclusions and

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to indulge his nostalgic fetishism in relative safety, unlike the patsy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, who, with such memorable consequences, falls for the glass paperweight.

Would anybody fall, I ask you, for the one kilogram of Motorola DynaTac 8900x mobile phone, or for the seven kilos of a Macintosh portable computer, with 1 mb of RAM, even if the seller were giving it away? A glass paperweight, on the other hand, even the shoddy, pseudo-Venetian kind that quickened the pulses of Winston Smith, is an object that I have seen change hands on more than one occasion. Eight-track tapes, sun-warped vinyl 45s, dusty Fuji cameras, paint-splattered Sony Walkmans, scratched Tupperware, faux-wicker-patterned thermoses, children's Armalite rifles with bendy bayonets, all the detritus of technological innovation in the closing decades of the last century is perfectly valueless. It is of less value to civilization than last autumn's fallen leaves, which can at least become compost.

The Russian verb *spurt*, with its sound of milk hitting the pail, is like our word for life. The forcible sundering of the peasant and his cow, no less succinctly, is the abiding aim of authoritarian government, which, abhorring the individual's self-sufficiency that threatens its nihilist absolute, seeks to suppress life itself.

In fact, there is hardly an analogy one can draw from the natural world that is resolute enough to illustrate the cruel uselessness, aesthetic as well as practical, of the technologically obsolete in the present epoch. It is a kind of *étalon* of human failure, a regulatory standard by which all bankruptcy is measured, bringing to mind the scriptural apophthegm about asking for bread and being given stones, except plastic is more indigestible than stones.

Yet pick up a mortar and pestle, and you will find that this is the very thing you need to make Genovese pesto for your Sunday lunch in A.D. 2009. Its value to civilization is exactly what it was when the appliance was first hewn from Sicilian granite 50, 80, or 100 years ago. And if the pestle happens to be missing, never mind, because the mortar alone will make a perfectly charming salt cellar for the coarse-grained sea salt of Marsala.

Sicilians browsing the flea-market stalls do not speak of usefulness. They hold a worthy object up to light—I have seen them do it once with one of those ten-inch white porcelain knobs used as industrial electrical insulators in the 1930's, and on another occasion with a still larger one, cast in greenish-purple bottle glass—stroke it tenderly, and murmur something like, "*Ecco, che bello. Mi piace da morire.*" Their elation is likewise an *étalon*, a measure of human achievement, a regulatory standard by which the cultural value of an artifact is measured.

Unlike Gill, in my youth I was a chemist, winning a prize at the U.S.S.R. Chemistry Olympiad in the Microanalysis

category at age 13. I had spent five years of my childhood chasing "superpure" and "extrasuperpure" compounds, as well as virtually unobtainable apparatus, for my home laboratory. I can confidently say that the hand-blown glass retorts and alembics I was hoarding had more in common with the Sicilian housewife's mortar and the insulators of electrification's early days than they do with "the modern chemical cookery" of Messrs. Blumenthal and Adria. That left-wing harridan, Wilson, was right. It's all just a load of rubbish, and obsolescent rubbish at that.

In his critique, Gill describes another food program as "a Stalinist rant on behalf of salad and peasants." It is no less witty for being historically inaccurate, as Stalin disliked peasants, whom he collectivized and industrialized into efficient cannon fodder until there was none left. Few are left in Europe today, as the result of collectivizations and industrializations no less ruthless, if not always quite as bloody, as Stalin's. If every joke is a fleeting glimpse of the soul of the person telling it, then surely the neoconservative joker glimpsed here, not the authors of the program, is the Stalinist factotum.

A word of explanation. I choose food, with its spectrum of associations that run from agriculture to gastronomy, as a convenient optic through which to view modern culture because cooking is something one understands viscerally. After all, housewives working out their budgets on scraps of papyrus have given civilization the academic discipline of economics, from the Greek words meaning "home governance," and I reckon it still makes sense not to wander off too much from the beaten track that is the alimentary tract.

Language itself seems to support this approach. Consider how often, on reading the first few pages of a critically acclaimed novel, we find it literally indigestible. Consider how instructive it would be, on seeing a show of new paintings in a world-famous gallery, to imagine the million-dollar daubs as a dish on our kitchen table, with crushed glass or petrified guano among the ingredients. Consider, finally, that while the critical metaphor of taste—as in "that imitation Palladian staircase is in execrable taste"—can be extended to most products of art or literature, it can hardly stretch itself to such as are downright unpalatable, like the idiot's staircase in *Anna Karenina* which does not arrive at the landing.

The Russian verb *spurt*, with its sound of milk hitting the pail, is like our word for life. The forcible sundering of the peasant and his cow, no less succinctly, is the abiding aim of authoritarian government, which, abhorring the individual's self-sufficiency that threatens its nihilist absolute, seeks to suppress life itself. Almost incidentally in this process, the artist is alienated from nature, the writer from his audience, the husband from the wife, the son from the father, and man from God. The flea-market stalls in my piazza, like the diachronic circles on a tree stump, provide a record of successive decades of that rapidly escalating estrangement. An acoustic guitar for sale in one

of the stalls reminds my wife, a musician, of the time when it was called a guitar.


When I hear of "chemical cookery," it is not that I want to denounce what I, in concert with the putative harridan Wilson, happen to see as folly. Rather, I fear that Gill's view of all cooking as chemistry is destined to become as historically inescapable as the electric guitar, because, whether or not Gill himself senses it, while sucking up to the imaginary mermaids he taps into a substantially less frivolous source of patronage, one which is, for all practical purposes, omnipotent. For it is as much in the historic interest of global authoritarianism to alienate the Russian man from his wife's borscht as it is to break up the Spanish guitarist with his flamenco guitar, the Sicilian housewife with her mortar and pestle, or this writer with this space in the magazine you are reading.

A single passage of Schubert, which I hear many times over as my wife rehearses his last sonata with the windows open onto the piazza, is a cultural commodity. Like the early electrical insulator, and unlike the obsolete in modern technology, it is an object of apparently everlasting value. In exchange for it, even when merely whistled or hummed with frost-bitten lips, it is possible to imagine a concentration-camp guard increasing the inmate's portion of slop by a life-saving dollop. No such generosity awaits Gill, as the spoiled child of the century strains to recall a tune from the Frank Zappa double gatefold *Uncle Meat*, last seen buckling in the Mediterranean sun upon

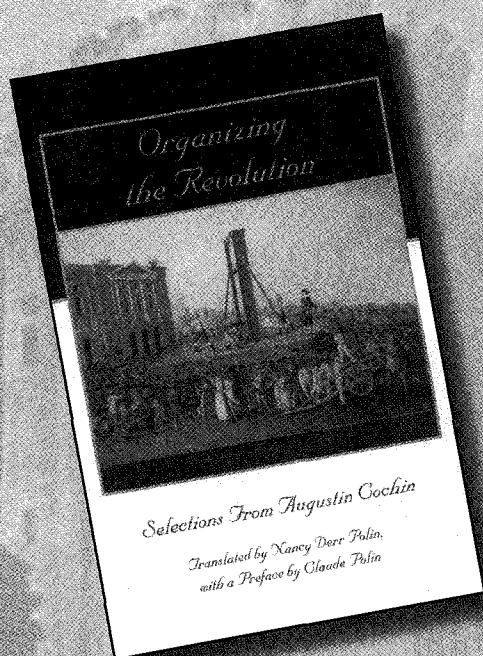
the cobblestones of the piazza. As for trying to whistle something thrown up by the avant-garde of classical music in the West since the 1960's, under these admittedly extreme conditions it would probably get one shot.

To get that extra dollop, and to survive in these last times, an artist will need the ability to produce a likeness and an architect will need to know how one hangs a door. A poet would have to be able to recite verse by heart, and a writer is well advised to make his audience crack up with laughter. Unpalatable, indigestible, valueless rubbish, abstruse theories of space and pretentious slices of life—in every way comparable to the detritus of modernity in my piazza of a Sunday—will get them nowhere. Their chemical cookery is only good as a tool of alienation, subsidized by an evermore authoritarian government out of the pockets of a populace too cowed by culture to cry stop thief.

In a forgotten short story by Ivan Shmelev, set in the Russian Civil War, a band of Muslim guerrillas ambush a Red sympathizer, a distinguished university professor, in a mountain pass in the Caucasus. They trot out a plaster bust of Darwin and, on pain of death, make him spit on it. "Funny," says the guerrilla commander when the terrified savant complies, "we had a White officer here the other day, and we told him to spit on the Crucifix. He's over there in the ravine."

Values are values. I wonder if Gill would not spit on a bust of elBulli's Ferran Adria even if threatened only with indigestion. 

FROM CHRONICLES PRESS



Organizing the Revolution

Selections From Augustin Cochin

translated by Nancy Derr Polin

Preface by Claude Polin

Augustin Cochin (1876-1916) undertook a minute analysis of the role that provincial clubs and societies played in the genesis of the French Revolution. His work shows clearly how the revolution was organized long before the events of 1789. This translation is an attempt to present his unfinished writings in a clear and coherent form.

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Watching the Money

Brought to You by Nokia™

by George McCartney

It's Friday evening, and you have arrived at your local multiplex with your ten- and twelve-year-old boys and two of their very closest friends. You've come to see the best movie \$150 million can make. You cannot remember just when, but it seems you idly mentioned to your wife earlier in the week that you might take the boys to the 11th coming of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. The boys, of course, understood this casual aside to be a solemn promise—a contract tighter than Mr. Spock's paralyzing trapezius pinch. When you reach the ticket counter, you pay the \$38 for admission with your Visa card. Distressing, yes, but not as much as that PG-13 rating you belatedly noticed just inside the theater. Now that it's too late, you recall the small print in the newspaper ad: "some science fiction violence" and "brief sexual content." But the die is irretrievably cast, so you resignedly go where most dads have gone before and will go again.

What are you getting for your money? Not art, certainly. Like other movies of its kind, *Star Trek* is a cleverly packaged commodity. Director J.J. Abrams' real mission was not to tell a story but to manage the consistency of the *Star Trek* product. He didn't direct the movie; he took charge of quality control. Paramount wanted to ensure the franchise's profitability. That meant making something similar to what they had made before. But William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, and Patrick Stewart, now in their 70's, no longer look appealing in the series stretch-cotton uniforms. What to do? Abrams' solution was to remake Kirk and Spock with youthful actors selected for their plausible resemblance to Shatner and Nimoy in their prime. He further had his writers concoct a contorted narrative to reboot the franchise. Using the stale conceit of time-travel discombobulation, screenwriters Roberto Orci and Alex Kurtzman have created an alternate timeline for Kirk and Spock. This way the old adventures can be preserved for continued DVD sales while the new installments can be developed without being overly slavish to the earlier episodes. And as with so many other American commodities, this one's been designed to encourage you to consume still more. For starters, there's the theater's concession stand. That's why you paid admission with your credit card. You knew you would need cash in your wallet to pay \$18.75 for five sodas and \$9.90 for two titanic tubs of popcorn buttered with genuine artificially flavored hydrogenated coconut oil.

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Once you're in your seats, other commodities confront you. Although James T. Kirk lives in the 23rd century, he drives a 1970 Corvette. As the script helpfully explains, it's vintage. Don't worry. You'll probably be able to convince your sons the Corvette will have to come second to their college education. Kirk's Nokia cellphone may pose a problem, however. The Finnish company has made *Star Trek* editions of it complete with *Star Trek* ringtones—models affordably priced at only \$329 to \$529. To keep up with these and the gadgets likely to come, just follow Spock's advice: Live long and prosper.

From the moment *Star Trek* was in production, Paramount set their publicists to work. In the final two weeks before D-Day, the invasion force hit the media beaches. The film's stars began showing up on *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood*. They confided to David Letterman, Jay Leno, Jimmy Fallon, and even master ironist Jon Stewart that, as kids, they dreamed of being in a *Star Trek* movie. What's more, they did their own stunts. Well, mostly. And let's not forget the action figures.

By the time *Star Trek* arrived at your multiplex, it had transcended its origins. No longer a mere movie, it had become an unstoppable, worldwide, cross-cultural, mass-marketing force bulldozing its way into your home.

Like Pepsi, Hollywood franchise movies are ubiquitous commodities. Even if you don't go to see them, you will be forced to notice them by dint of the distributors' relentless promotion. No wonder Marxists used to take offense at such crassly commercial enterprises. In the last century, they would point their ideological fingers and mutter imprecations against "commodity fetishism" and "American cultural imperialism." I recall Michael Keaton giving some color to these Marxist charges, however inadvertently. It was 1989, communism was staggering to its demise, and the first of the big *Batman* movies opened in June. As the star of this comic-book film, Keaton had been doing his capitalist duty, making the usual promotional rounds. Stopping by the *Tonight Show*, he told Johnny Carson how strange it was to find himself suddenly propelled to such an eminent plane of celebrity. While walking in Manhattan he had been startled to see his own face, shrouded in the Batman cowl and blown up to Brobdingnagian proportions, scowling down on him from the side of a passing bus. Never one to say the obvious, Keaton didn't belabor the political implications of his experience, but I will. Marxist moments just don't