

By Murray L. Bob

New Age just new page in old book

I HAVE THE SENSE THAT THE NEW AGE IS slowing down," Says Davis Dutton, co-owner of a Los Angeles bookstore that carries New Age materials. Peggy Taylor of Webster's of Milwaukee agrees: "Five years ago most bookstores renamed their occult section 'New Age.' Probably in a year, New Age as a term will die and we'll have an occult section once again."

The Nov. 3, 1989, *Publishers' Weekly* includes an essay by Jeremy Tarcher, pioneer New Age publisher. Entitled, "Here's to the end of New Age," it concludes: "This decade has offered such a thorough exploitation of all that is classified as New Age that there is little fresh to say. We've cooked the New Age chicken 1,001 ways, and it is increasingly difficult to come up with exciting, fresh recipes."

What was—or is—New Age? Most observers agree that its roots are found in the '60s quest for fresh options. While some young people sought political alternatives, others tended toward personal alternatives. The hippie who began by meditating and demonstrating found himself, after the end of the Vietnam War, focusing on changing himself rather than his society. It seemed a lot easier to do.

Critics labeled this variously as narcissism, me-generationism, escapism or surrender. Fasting, meditating, yoga, macrobiotics, the cultivation of "higher powers," Eastern mysticism, channeling, curative crystals and the rediscovery of past lives increasingly occupied the time of many of the grownup flower children.

Dogmas run over by karma: The New Age mingled hope, hype, holiness and hucksterism—the 4-H Club of the Reagan era. Nowhere was this more evident than in publishing, where many new imprints were established to fill the demand for books on personal growth and "transformation." Because New Age grew out of dissatisfaction with the status quo, it needed unconventional dogmas. For new ideas the publishers seeking New Age new revenues turned to—where else?—old belief systems.

Dutton says, "I feel that there is a kind of cynicism on the part of some of the publishers who just spew this stuff out, much of it regurgitation of what's been around 100 to 200 years, just to make a buck."

Philip Sansone of Book People in Austin, Texas, puts it this way: "New Age is just a category that publishers have latched onto in order to market a certain segment of society."

What segment? First the college-educated baby boomers who came out of the protest movements. Their numbers were increased by more conventional types attracted to metaphysical moonshine by the popularity of Shirley MacLaine's books—as well as by her glamour—especially after more of the rich and famous confessed to being devotees

of channeling, astrology, reincarnation, etc.

Dabbling in the dubious: A herd instinct took over as it became first "safe" and then chic to "disclose" one's fascination with various cult and occult notions and practices. Atavism, barbarism, superstition and simple stupidity all "came out of the closet" at about the same time. It had become respectable to dabble in the dubious.

But there is more involved in the

PUBLISHING

wide acceptance of New Age, and Dutton may have put his finger on it when he said, "The popularity of New Age is due to the failure of our educational system to instill rational thinking." New Agers are educated, even college-educated. They can read. But whether they read critically is a separate question. We have made so much out of learning the mechanics of reading that the need for evaluating what one reads has become neglected.

If New Age fades, what will happen to those whose need to believe made it so successful in the first place? Not to worry. There will be new (old) cerebral sanctuaries for the superstitious. What has yet to be determined is the new term under whose rubric the warmed-over wisdom of the ages will be served up as "the latest thing." It has to be broad enough to encompass such old chestnuts as alchemy, astrology, cabala, *I Ching*, Tarot, black magic, white magic, witchery, Earth religions and Tibetan and Tantric Buddhism.

More important, it must include recent tendencies, which will give the next stage of New Age its distinctive flavor and probably its new name. The most popular "new" currents are: holistic health; mythology, with subsets for goddess and Native American religions; 12-step recovery programs; and visualization, or imaging.

• **Healing.** Insofar as the marketing of literature is concerned, holistic health and alternative healing have the inestimable advantage of being marketable not only through traditional bookstore channels but also in the thousands of health-food stores where the faithful graze. If there is an "in" word today, it is surely "healing." Consider the titles of the following runaway bestsellers: *You Can Heal Your Life*, *Healing the Shame*, *Healing Your Sexual Self*, *You the Healer*, *The Dancing Healers*, *Where the Healing Waters Meet* and *The Healing Zone*.

The appetite for miracles being what it is, the interest in such modalities as Ayurvedic medicine, crystals, therapeutic touch, homeopathy, acupuncture, radionics, psychic healing, naturopathy, chiropractic, aromatherapy (something about this

smells) grows by leaps and bounds.

• **Mythology.** What Shirley MacLaine and her 35,000-year-old former self, Emmanuel, were to channeling, Bill Moyers and the blissfully defunct Joseph Campbell are to mythology: 35 million viewers saw the program, and 100,000 bought videocassettes of *The Power of Myth*. The goddess religions occupy the spiritual penumbra of feminism: every mundane movement has its extramundane reflection. Native American religions that grew out of matriarchal cultures have the same attraction—although their revival also has to do with the growth of ecological consciousness. A prominent German member of the Green Party said, "In Germany, ecology is the basis of a political movement; in America, it seems to be the basis of a religion."

• **Twelve-step recovery programs** from addictions are patterned on Alcoholics Anonymous. Every habit, sin and personal problem is now seen as an "addiction." Thus we have sexual addiction, drug addiction, compulsive gambling, alcoholism, overeating, smoking, sleeping too much, undereating, dependency, co-dependency, shopping, overuse of credit cards, hand-washing, housecleaning and cyclothymia. These have called forth a flood of addiction and recovery books, tapes, lectures

and workshops by recovered or lapsed addicts (self-diagnosed).

There is glamour and money in the A and R (addiction and recovery) business: athletes, movie stars and wives of famous politicians grace the boards with gripping testimonials, public confessionals, breast-beating and self-flagellation. Not even our elementary schools are safe from the maudlin confessions, hand- and heart-wringing, dire warnings and threats of those who have "done wrong and seen the light." Sinning and saving are back in style.

• **Visualization, or imaging,** is especially big among the holistically healthy who believe that if you picture white blood cells fighting cancer cells it will kill them. It is equally big in big-business circles, where the ultimate encomium these days is to be thought a "visionary"

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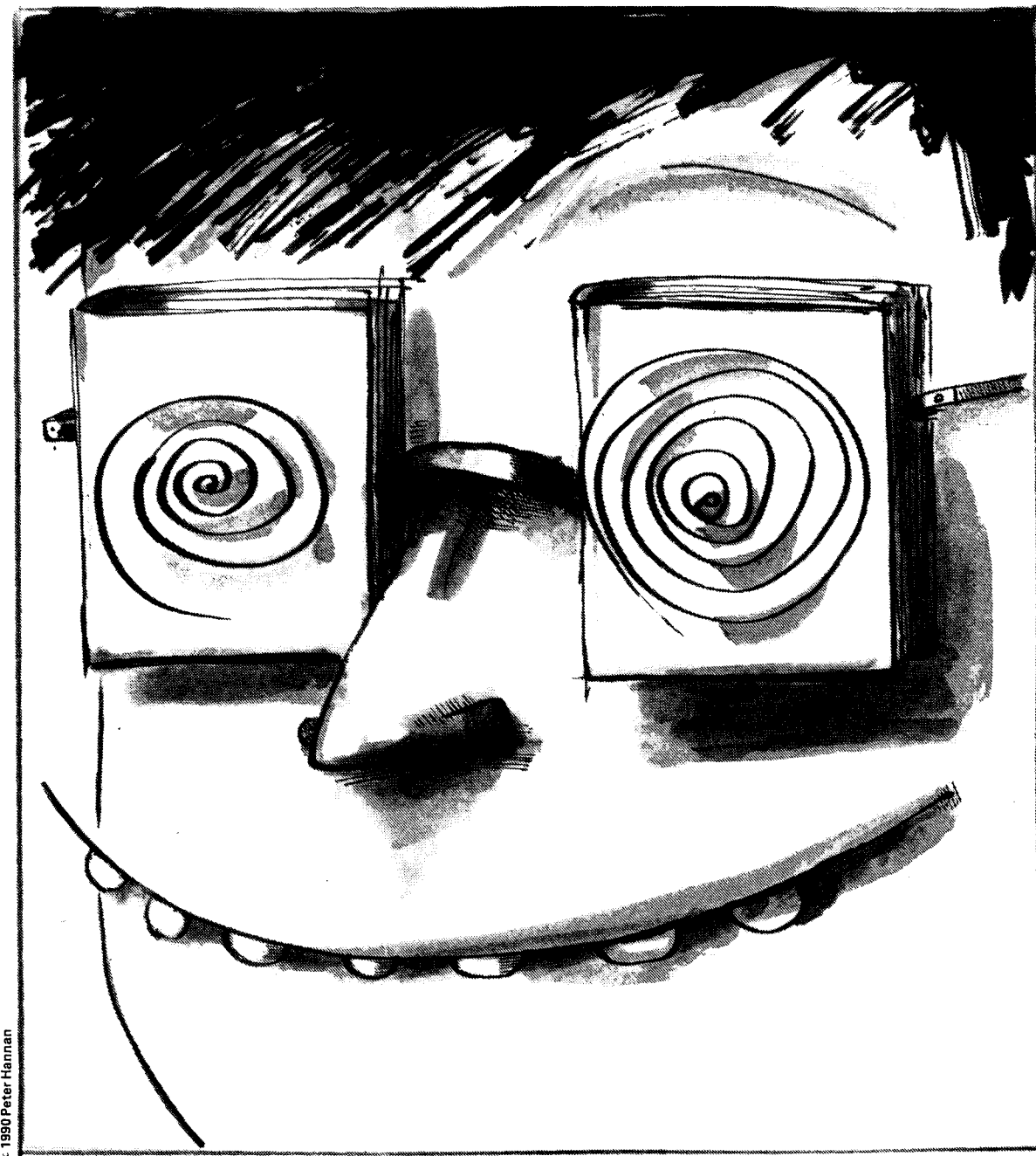
and where "visioning" is the apogee of commercial creativity. Popular book titles are: *Creative Visualization*, *Healing Visualization*, *Creative Imagery* and, for those so insecure they need to have all the bases covered, *Creative Visualization: The Power of Myth*.

The words "creative" and "power" are power words these days. Primitive people used to think you got smart by eating the brains of animals. A lot of "smart" people today seem to think that if you use the word "power" you become powerful.

We are assured by Robert Hall, executive editor of the New Age publisher Humanics, that the firm's books are in use by DuPont, IBM, Tenneco, Texaco and the Mitchell-Bradford Chemical Corporation. Is this the reason why the nation's industries seem to be losing...power?

Fifty years ago a publishing joke was that if you wanted to produce a bestseller you had to cover three burning interests of the public: Lincoln, doctors and dogs. Thus a sure-fire winner would be titled *Lincoln's Doctor's Dog*. Today a bestseller is more likely to be called *Creatively Imaging Power Sex with a Goddess While Recovering from an Addiction to Visionary Healing*. ■

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Czechoslovakian filmmaker Jan Nemec's *Diamonds of the Night*: formally complex, stylistically audacious and virtually forgotten.

By Patrick Z. McGavin

Forman and Nemec: up and down in Czech New Wave

THERE'S A JOKE," SAYS JAN NEMEC, the Czech-born filmmaker. "What's the difference between Dubcek and Gorbachov?" "About 21 years," he laughs. "It's just the time. Sometimes it works for you and sometimes against you," he says, laughing again, but nervously. Time, it seems, has repeatedly worked against him.

Unlike his celebrated compatriot Milos Forman, Nemec is virtually unknown in the U.S., his adopted country since his forced exile in 1974. Nemec's formally complex, stylistically audacious works such as *Diamonds of the Night* (1964) and *The Report on the Party and the Guests* (1966) revealed a brazen, hallucinatory talent. Both Nemec and Forman borrowed freely from the radical structure and technique of the French New Wave, allowing for a shocking and frequently exhilarating merging of the political and the personal.

But in the wake of events of Aug. 20, 1968, when five Warsaw Pact nations invaded Czechoslovakia and crushed the democratic rebellion of Alexander Dubcek's "Prague Spring," Nemec was kicked out of the film industry after completing his third feature, *Martyrs of Love*. By chance, Forman was already out of the country, at work on the script for *Taking Off* (1971). "When Dubcek was completely ousted from power in the fall of '69, they confiscated my passport," says Nemec. "I completely wasted five years of my life. I wasn't allowed to travel or to do anything.

Finally I was forced out in '74, and a few years later I was stripped of my citizenship, which was considered the highest form of punishment."

Westward no: He subsequently spent five years near Los Angeles trying to find work as a writer and director. "It completely failed," he says. "I was never able to go through the system, the agents, the presidents. I was never in the right place at the right time." He doesn't even have American citizenship, after 12 years. No wonder he considers himself "absolutely misplaced." A line from Polish-born poet Czeslaw Milosz, on whom Nemec recently finished a documentary for KQED-TV in San Francisco, might easily apply to the filmmaker: "Ill at ease in the tyranny, ill at ease in the republic/ In the one I longed for freedom, in the other for the end of corruption."

Of late Nemec has found work at Facets Multimedia Center in Chicago for the Dreiske Performance Company, an avant-garde theater collective, shooting video and film pieces that are integrated into the works of director Nicole Dreiske. "What I'm doing now for Facets I like, but this job could be done by any student of film."

"What is going on now in Prague

is fascinating," Nemec says. "I witnessed German invasion in '39, their defeat in '45, Communist takeover in '48, and I was involved in the activities of '68. I was there for all important events in our contemporary history. I am just sad and angry that I am ... in Chicago. I know that I could be useful."

If you saw Philip Kaufman's film adaptation of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, then you know Nemec's work indirectly. Nemec was the technical adviser and had a small role in the film. Most significantly, Kaufman seamlessly juxtaposed into the film footage secretly shot by Nemec the night of the '68 invasion. Nemec was preparing a documentary on a Czech Jew who emigrated to San Antonio when the Russian tanks entered Prague. With a professional crew and cinematographer, he surreptitiously recorded the invasion and smuggled the footage into Vienna, where the first uncensored coverage of the invasion was shown via satellite. (The material was later assembled into a 22-minute film, *Oratorio for Prague*.)

Yet the work on Kaufman's high-profile film didn't advance Nemec's own career. I asked him if there is any difference between the apparatchiks in Czechoslovakia and their Hollywood equivalents. "There's

no difference. They all lie the same, only in California they don't smell as bad and they wear better clothes." Nemec's Hollywood profile is so low that one woman he met exclaimed, "Jan Nemec! I thought you were dead."

A rude assault: The ascent of the Czech New Wave, or "New Czech Miracle," was brief and elliptical. The cultural centerpiece of Dubcek's am-

bitious plan to institute democratic reforms, this movement rudely assaulted the rules and forms of Eastern European cinema. Trained and educated at the Prague Film Faculty (FAMU), and benefiting from the Barrandov studios, the most advanced production facilities in Eastern Europe, the Czech New Wave held out the promise of a vital new direction.

The explosion of talent was virtually unmatched in post-war Eastern European cinema: Nemec, Forman, Ivan Passer, Vera Chytilova, Jaromil Jires, Vojtech Jasný, Jiri Menzel and Evald Schorm. The other important figures were the two great cinematographers Miroslav On-

Milos Forman in a PBS profile directed by Vojtech Jasný.

