


The Saturday Review

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Smudging the Subconscious

WELCOME to 1984. A new company has just been formed with offices in New York for the purpose of promoting a new invention designed to get at the sources of human motivation. The invention, for which a patent has been applied, is supposed to bypass the conscious intelligence and deal directly with the subconscious. The device thrusts images or messages onto a motion picture screen or TV grid. The images are invisible to the human eye. They are "subliminal"; that is, they are beamed into the mind below the threshold of awareness.

The precise workings of the mechanism are being kept a secret, pending the issuance of a patent. Its inventor has revealed, however, that the device is based upon high-speed projection of messages that are superimposed upon regular film. The device is not able to transmit elaborate messages; it is limited at the present stage of development to a slogan or the name of a product. A message is flashed at five-second intervals throughout the entire length of a performance.

The promoters hope to be able to convince television sponsors of the feasibility of invisible commercials. The advertiser is offered substantial advantages over the present system: He can flash his sales message throughout an entire program instead of being confined to the customary spots. He can come before the public with supposedly painless advertising that the individual doesn't even see—advertising that does not interrupt the course of a play or a sports event or whatever.

The promoters of subliminal projection claim they have proof that their invention works and is ready for commercial use. They point to several tests, for all of which they claim success. In one instance, they operated the device over a period of weeks in a motion picture theatre. The invisible message told the audience to eat popcorn. Popcorn sales jumped sharply during the period of the test without the audience being aware that its subconscious had been prodded. Another significant test, carried out by another firm, involved an attempt to affect judgment. A man's face was shown on a movie screen before two different audiences. His expression was neutral. Before the first audience, the word "happy" appeared invisibly underneath the man's face. Before the second audience, the invisible word was "unhappy." Each audience was asked to vote whether the face it had seen was happy or unhappy. The audience voted preponderantly in accordance with the instructions that had been rifled into its subconscious.

Question: if the device is successful for putting over popcorn, why not politicians or anything else? If it is possible to prompt the subconscious into making certain judgments of human character, why wouldn't it be possible to use invisible messages for the purpose of annihilating a reputation or promoting it? The sponsors of the gadget are not unaware of the dangerous uses to which it might be put and they themselves have suggested that an audience be informed when it is being subliminated and also that the nature of an invisible

message be made known before or after a program. They have also suggested the possibility that government regulation of one sort or another might be useful.

There is only one kind of regulation or ruling that could possibly make any sense in this case; and that would be to take this invention and everything connected to it and attach it to the center of the next nuclear explosive scheduled for testing. At the very least, the Federal Communications Commission should act in the public interest to prevent the device from being used on television, even though the owners would promise to inform viewers when and how they were being subliminated. As for motion-picture audiences, specific Federal laws may be necessary.

No doubt the inventor of the device and his business associates are sane, decent, pleasant, family men. They would not knowingly stick their fingers into a neighbor's eyes or put ground glass in his food. But they coolly propose to break into the deepest and most private parts of the human mind and leave all sorts of scratchmarks. The subconscious mind is the most delicate part of the most delicate apparatus in the entire universe. It is not to be smudged, sullied, or twisted in order to boost the sales of popcorn or anything else. It does not exist for the convenience of ingenious and invisible pitchmen.

NOTHING is more difficult in the modern world than to protect the privacy of the human soul. We live in an age where what we don't see and don't know can hurt us. It's serious enough to have to contend with the submicroscopic radioactive bullets flying crazily through the air without having to worry about contamination by sublimination.

Our predicament is not the fault of the scientist or the promoter alone. The stain is on all of us. We have made the mistake of adjusting ourselves to all sorts of intrusions, violations, and assaults. We have surrendered our privacy without a fight. We have made our peace with artificial thunder and permitted ourselves to be pock-marked by hobnailed nonsense. Distraction is king. Yet surely the mind must have enough respect left for its own sovereignty to bar the way to further invasion. An open declaration of war can no longer be delayed against those who view the integrity of the inner self largely in terms of the movement of merchandise. The individual who is the target of the motivation manipulators had better look to his artillery.

—N. C.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHY THE TIMIDITY?

THE ANSWER to the question in the title of Bruce Catton's article, "Is America Hospitable to Writers?" (SR Sept. 7) seems to be no. The author in his revelations pictures conditions exceedingly difficult for a writer today. Why, then, does he conclude his essay by the assertion that "the American writer today operates in a fairly hospitable environment?" Why the happy ending? Why the timidity? Why does Mr. Catton feel it necessary to be gentle with the age we live in?

THOMAS H. UZZELL.

Stillwater, Okla.

MR. FAITH McNULTY

I HAVE JUST read Sam Boal's captivating review of "The World of John McNulty" (SR Sept. 14) and am reminded of an experience I had with McNulty a few years ago when, as managing editor of the *Ford Times*, I was in New York visiting author's agents in the hope of finding a writer who could do us a short piece on South County, Rhode Island, in a hurry.

In the office of Harold Ober Associates, Anne Louise Davis suggested Faith McNulty, who is John McNulty's wife (now his widow). Miss Davis suggested that I telephone Mrs. McNulty at five that afternoon, when she would return to her home after her day at *The New Yorker* office. This I did, and a man with a fine, unmistakably Irish voice answered the phone.

"May I speak with Mrs. McNulty, please?" I asked.

"This is Mrs. McNulty."

"I want to speak to Faith McNulty," I said.

"This is Faith McNulty," said the man. "I hear you want a piece for the *Ford Times* on Rhode Island. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Is it true that you will pay \$250?"

"Yes, I would like to ask Faith McNulty if she will do the story for us."

"This is Faith McNulty, and I have just written the piece. Do you want it?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it."

"I'll read it to you over the phone."

"No. Send it to me."

"Do you want the piece, or don't you want the piece?"

"I have an idea I do, Mrs. McNulty," I said. "But if you read it over the phone, I will be buying a voice, not a manuscript."

"Very well. I shall now read the piece."

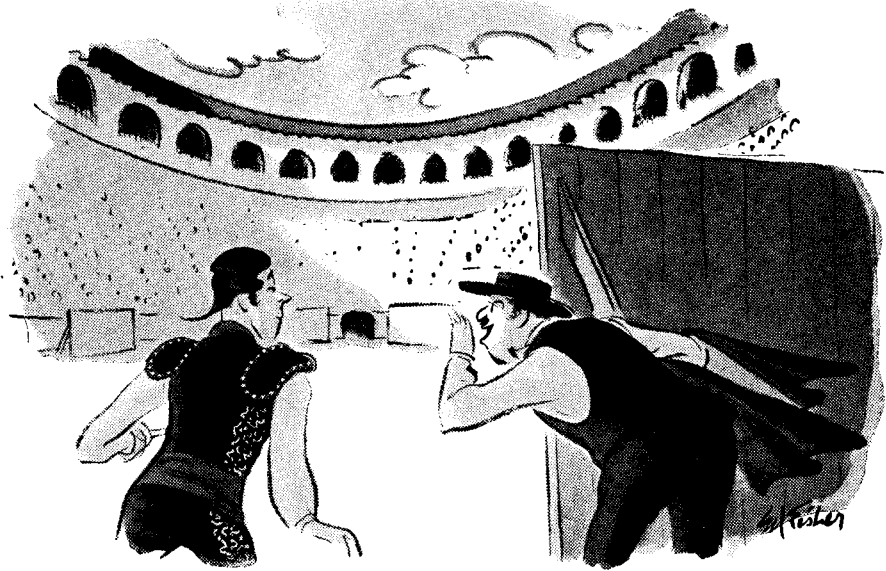
There was then the sound of "Mrs. McNulty" shooing children away from the phone at the McNulty end, and then the voice reading the Rhode Island story. At the conclusion of the reading, "Faith McNulty" said:

"Well, how did you like it?"

"It sounds swell. But I don't know how it will read."

"Do you want it, or don't you?"

"Yes. I want it, Mrs. McNulty."



"Psst!—Pepe—everything's been fixed—the bull's on' tranquilizers."

"For \$250?"

"Yes. To whom shall I have the check drawn?"

"John McNulty. And I'd like to get it soon. I have been playing the horses."

"Mrs. McNulty," I said, "from now on, why don't you bet on editors instead of horses?"

"Horses," said the impersonator of his wife, "are more reliable."

I never met John McNulty, except through this phone call. The Rhode Island piece was duly published, and I can still hear the voice of its author. I have always regretted that I had to decline his invitation to "come on over here and have a drink."

EDMUND WARE SMITH,
Managing Editor,
Ford Times.

Damariscotta, Me.

SR SELF-DEFEATING

Is *SR* (Sept. 14) justified in deploring the conditions (bad schools, low pay for teachers, conformity, "beat generation") which inspire nearly all of its copy? If these conditions did not exist, *SR* would have no more to offer than the book and record reviews. Were the choice of topics for this issue atypical, I would not complain, but every *SR* that I chance to read seems to contain the same remarks about the American scene. It is not the truth of these remarks that I question. I only wonder whether it is worthwhile to repeat them so often to your audience.

ELIHU RICHTER.

Paterson, N.J.

BARGAINING TEACHERS

THE FAILURE to pass the Federal Aid to Education bill is just another example of society's refusal to foot the just bill. Unlike doctors and lawyers, teachers do

not set their own salaries or working conditions. As professionals they are closer to the needs of professional musicians, actors, and engineers. And more and more teachers are feeling that advantages which head in the direction of making teaching more effective and attractive will have to be won over some kind of bargaining table.

ISRAEL KUGLER,
Vice President for the Colleges,
Local 2—New York Teachers Guild,
American Federation of Teachers,
AFL-CIO.

Long Island City, N. Y.

IMPOSSIBLE WAR

You MIGHT care to reprint this:

I hear that Sir Hiram Maxim is dead. That news recalls to mind my only personal impression of the man to whom we owe the deadliest of all deadly machines which are now destroying the populations of Europe.

It was more than thirty years ago and we stood around Maxim as he explained the mechanism of his gun and demonstrated its marvellous qualities. I still see the mild and childlike air, so often marking the man of genius, the modest yet self-satisfied smile, with which he deftly and affectionately manipulated his beautiful toy. As we looked on, one of us asked reflectively: "But will not this make war very terrible?" "No," replied Maxim confidently. "It will make war impossible."

So it is the dreamers, the children of genius, who for thousands of years have been whispering into the ears of Mankind that insidious delusion: *Si vis pacem para bellum*.
—HAVELOCK ELLIS, in "Impressions and Comments."

ROBERT ARMSTRONG ANDREWS.
Edisto Island, S. C.