UP FOR GRABS
The Supreme Court and The Election
Holy Joe! A Culture War!

Instead of kissing babies, this year the pols are bashing youth culture and the companies that promote it. "The culture of carnage surrounding our children" is "turning some of them into killers," Joe Lieberman thundered at the Senate Commerce Committee's September 13 hearing on the marketing of violent entertainment. Al Gore and Lieberman want to sanction companies for targeting "adult-rated" music and movies at young audiences, as if rough lyrics were as measurably toxic in their effect as tobacco.

Politically, the Rev. Al and Holy Joe made a deift feint to the right, enlisting the Federal Trade Commission for blatantly partisan purposes and leaving the GOP scrambling to secure second billing at the hearing for its own sputtering culture czar, Lynne Cheney. But it's a dangerous way to milk votes, eroding the First Amendment while unleashing incendiary anxieties about teenagers with little basis in reality.

A few facts are in order. While the FTC charges in its recent report that entertainment companies have marketed inappropriate material to young people, it concedes that there is no concrete evidence linking violent content in the popular culture with violent actions of teenagers. No one at the Senate hearing pointed out that juvenile homicide and most other violent juvenile crime is down nationwide. Deaths in schools are fewer than half what they were in 1993, and between 1991 and 1997, students who reported being in a fight declined 46 percent. Young people, in other words, are at less risk of participating in violence than any time in a generation.

Gore and Lieberman's culture war—to which George W. Bush and Pat Buchanan added their self-serving spin—in implicitly portrays American teens as empty vessels at the mercy of corrupting entertainment. The only candidate talking sense was Ralph Nader, who said the way to deal with violent entertainment is to "fight the First Amendment with the First Amendment"—in other words, more speech, which in this case means more public-interest networks financed by "rent" charged to the big media companies for using the public airwaves.

It's hard to cheer for the entertainment industry, whose evermore-concentrated corporate ownership threatens democratic culture. But democratic culture—which has shown considerable capacity to sort out the enduring in popular music and films—isn't the point. Gore and Lieberman want, in effect, to encode the entertainment industry's voluntary ratings into law, using the FTC to police marketing departments' compliance. Gore says he avoids censorship by concentrating on marketing strategy, but his proposal still amounts to punishing the purveyors and would-be consumers of controversial, abrasive art. The plan is also a significant abuse of the FTC.

The real danger to society isn't imaginary violence in music or movies. Youth violence is nearly always a response to brutalization—by families, by peers, by police or by punitive "zero tolerance" juvenile-crime laws like those promoted by Bush in Texas, which have more than doubled the imprisoned teenage population there. It is also a cry against neglect. But that is reality, not politics. When it comes to exploiting fear and selling fantasy, Gore and Lieberman have learned Hollywood's lessons all too well.
They need lots of information, lots of memorizing, plenty of facts, traditional schooling, if you please. Sometimes, it seems, social scientists envision the kind of society they want—in this case, one in which there’s more respect for facts, more obedience to authority—then design a story about human nature, highly scientific, of course, to fit that vision to a T.

In fact, a lot of current childrearing resembles a sloppy, loving dialogue. You offer your child various possibilities, enforce various rules. Then you watch the results. Is he happier, smarter, wiser? But you’re also cautious: You suspect that he may have a nature—maybe even a nature based on his gender—and you take pains not to outrage it. You steer a course, in other words, between the two belief systems. And the effects of this course-steering can be genuinely freeing. I remember how my 10-year-old heart swelled when a teacher looked at my skinned knees and bruised face and declared me “all boy.” My own sons—and most of their friends—would pull a look of cartoon puzzlement at that accolade. All to the good.

What a literalist like Sommers usefully reminds us of is how badly this grand experiment could go awry. For if nature does insist that the boy be aggressive, and he bottles it up, we don’t need a psychoanalyst to tell us that there will be a cost down the line. And if we raise a little girl to conquer the world, when what nature really demands is that she bank feathers in a comfy nest, then she’ll no doubt suffer a more than common unhappiness. The result of too many choices, too open a field, can be fear, confusion, rage. The French Revolution convulsed its way back toward tyranny when it seemed suddenly that too much was up for grabs. In the gender revolution, a great deal now is indeterminate, and it makes us uneasy: We may well be collectively flying in the face of nature.

But almost every dramatic gain for civilization has occurred when people challenged what previous generations took to be the natural order of things—whether it was the rule of the aristocracy or the supremacy of the white race. In the future, old assumptions about nature and gender will probably look the way essays on the divine rights of aristocrats or treaties on the inferior brain structure of dark-skinned peoples do now.

Sommers wants the quiet, complex gender revolution to stop. She’s here with all the answers, all the facts. And people will no doubt pause for a bit, mull the old truths over, give them their due. But the gender revolution has opened up too many possibilities for most of us to give up now. Conservatives like Sommers and the all-nurture feminists, supposed experts, are going to have to look on from the side-lines while the amateurs, actual parents who never conducted a survey or compiled statistics, keep all the rich uncertainties, mysteries, doubts—and hopes—alive.

‘The Big Discourse’

JOHN SUMMERS

The man who makes his entry by leaning against an infirm door gets an unjustified reputation for violence. Something is to be attributed to the poor state of the door.
—John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society

Loneliness burdens most college freshmen, though precious few find lasting relief from it in the realm of ideas. So it happened for one freshman in 1935, when he left behind the isolation he had experienced at Texas A&M for the University of Texas and “the big discourse,” his term for the Enlightenment humaneism that extended him both refuge and inspiration. Once a diffident student who reserved his compositions for private display, he quickly gave to this tradition the allegiance of an apostle. At age 20, he wrote his father: “I work and live very rapidly these days. Mine is a pen from whose point much ink will flow and some day into the brains of the populace. But let that be.”

Much ink did indeed flow from the pen of C. Wright Mills. As a professor of sociology at Columbia University, Mills wrote prodigiously throughout the forties and fifties, publishing in major newspapers and journals of opinion and in “little magazines” in equal measure. Two of his books, *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956), sold widely outside the academy, exerting a profound influence on the early New Left. A heart attack in March 1962 cut short his life at 45 years. But ten books and nearly 200 articles, essays and reviews had already won him an international reputation. His books, now translated into twenty-three languages, remain widely circulated, as these anniversary editions and a new book of letters and autobiographical writings indicate.

Mills departed Austin in 1939 for doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin. Two years later, he completed a dissertation that fused the pragmatic philosophy he had learned at Texas with his new métier, sociology. “A Sociological Account of Pragmatism” disappointed him. Yet that dissertation, and particularly three innovative articles on the sociology of knowledge that preceded it, impressed influential members of the profession. In December 1940 Robert Merton, himself a theorist only six years Mills’s senior, privately named him one of the three most promising sociologists in the nation.

A young prince in a rising discipline, Mills accepted an associate professorship of sociology at the University of Maryland, but he turned much of his attention to the lonely task of left-wing political agitation. In these years, whispers of a “permanent war economy” traveled among New York’s Trotskyist community, to which Mills began to appeal for contacts, and his political writings expressed fear that monopoly capitalism was generating a proto-fascist domestic apparatus underwritten by cultural insensitivity and mass discipline.

Unusually sensitive to the fast-changing character of liberal social structures, Mills

IN THIS ESSAY

C. WRIGHT MILLS: Letters and Autobiographical Writings.
Edited by Kathryn Mills, with Patricia Mills. California. 457 pp. $34.95.

THE POWER ELITE.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION:
Fortieth Anniversary Edition.

John Summers, a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Rochester, is writing a biography of C. Wright Mills.
proved impervious to the bitter ironies of reform. Unlike so many of his elders, he did not know firsthand the capacity of entrenched power to co-opt and redirect dissent; nor had he suffered the lost promises of international Communism. "I did not personally experience the thirties. At that time, I just didn't get its mood," he explained in one of the 150 letters published in C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings, a beautifully edited volume by Kathryn Mills with Pamela Mills (his daughters). "Only with the onset of World War II did I become radically aware of public affairs."

Released from military duty because of hypertension, Mills viewed the war as a "goddamned bloodbath to no end save misery and mutual death to all civilized values." He harbored no sympathy for the fresh scars of erstwhile agitators. In an essay published in 1942 in the New Leader, he observed that their chastened radicalism belonged to a more thoroughgoing "crisis in American pragmatism," in which private religious introspection, not political action, now served as the preferred sphere for the full development of the human personality. This kind of retreat into religion, Mills complained, neglected a "social theory of the self" (which he had explored in his early writings on the sociology of knowledge). Thereby, it left individuals intellectually powerless to affect the massive secular forces that increasingly overwhelmed them. The move away from politics "offers a personal and accommodative celebration of the modern fact of self-estrangement." (Similarly, he would later christen the "cult of alienation" that enveloped postwar literature merely as "a fashionable way of being overwhelmed.") Already by 1942, he had come to regard commitment to humanist politics and ideas as a spiritual enterprise that demanded steadiness of public purpose in the face of illiberal forces. This disposition, part evangelical, part stoic, would thereafter guide his criticism of US institutions.

Mills published widely during the mid- and late forties, furthering his formidable reputation for precocity even while shifting his research interests from the sociology of knowledge to stratification, labor and social psychology. In 1945, an invitation arrived from the empiricist Paul Lazarsfeld to join the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University, and he left College Park for New York.

The New Men of Power appeared three years later, the first fruit of Mills's work for the bureau. Surveying the origins, attitudes and party affiliations of 500 labor leaders, the book aspired to an objective, collective portrait that would also become "politically relevant." "The most democratic societies of their size in the world," labor unions, he concluded, nonetheless possessed the tendencies of the political economy that had shaped them: the elaboration of hierarchy and bureaucracy, the exclusive reliance on the major parties, the nervous impulse to conserve recent gains, the demotion of labor intellectuals to the role of gadfly or technician. Could labor leaders, Mills asked, a new "strategic elite" in the contest for power, successfully resist such trends of "the main drift"?

Somewhat like the labor leaders he studied, Mills was managing a host of positions and influences in his thoughts. The New Men of Power contained traces of Wisconsin progressivism, Trotskyist socialism, a concept of "publics" imported from John Dewey, the standard implements of social science research—even the rebellious spirit of the Wobblies. This pluralism made possible a salutary absence of dogmatism, and the book garnered reviews appreciative of its political energy and broad vision. He finished, though, with an uncertain consideration of prospects for an accord between labor leaders and labor intellectuals, which he thought vital for any recrudescence of independent politics: "Never has so much depended upon men who are so ill-prepared and so little inclined to assume the responsibility."

White Collar signaled a rapidly maturing social theory. It also commenced Mills's rise to a peculiar place in American intellectual life. Although many professional sociologists greeted the book with indifference or distrust, others hailed it as a brave, provocative examination of the psychology of class. It became a bestseller, evidence that independent radicalism could find a place even during the dark nights of McCarthyism.

Mills, in turn, looked with growing confidence outside his profession for authority as a critic. Over the course of the decade, cold war dissidents and uneasy students repaid his efforts in direct proportion to his escalating boldness. "I can no longer write seriously without feeling contempt for the indifferent professors and smug editors of the overdeveloped societies in the West who so fearlessly fight the cold war, and for the cultural bureaucrats and hacks, the intellectual thugs of the official line," he announced in The Causes of World War Three (1958), an antirwar pamphlet that sold a remarkable 100,000 copies. In Listen Yankee (1960), a pro-Castro polemic that sold more than 400,000 copies, Mills called the United States a "reactionary menace" and proclaimed his independence even from the growing student movement that drew inspiration from his example. "I cannot give unconditional loyalties to any institution, man, state, movement, or nation. My loyalties are conditional upon my own convictions and my own values."

As the New Left gathered momentum, Mills seemed the man for the moment. Agitating for "our own separate peace," with Communist intellectuals, he made official visits to Cuba and the USSR, traded counsel with Sartre in France, talked up E.P. Thompson to the Cubans and Carlos Fuentes to US publishers. One year before his fatal heart attack, he wrote to his parents about the obligations he supposed his writings had brought him. "I know now that I have not the slightest fear of death; I know also that I have a big responsibility to thousands of people all over the world to tell the truth as I see it and to tell it exactly and with drama and quit this horsing around with sociological bullshit." A self-proclaimed "permanent stranger" in a nation he could not leave, Mills died a triply distinctive figure of US culture: a radical intellectual celebrity.

The body of literature that now surrounds Mills is generally distinguished only by its tendency to respond to this outsized reputation and audacious personality, rather than to the ideas they embroidered. To many of his colleagues, he appeared an abrasive and even irresponsible sociologist, his contentious manner hardly worthy of the detached, scientific ideals to which their discipline aspired.

Such is the guiding spirit of last year's Collaboration, Reputation, and Ethics in American Academic Life by Guy Oakes and Arthur Vidich, professional sociologists. Oakes and Vidich recount the bitter disputes between Mills and the refugee sociologist Hans Gerth, his friend and collaborator on two books, Character and Social Structure (1953), a textbook, and From Max Weber (1946), an influential collection of Weber translations. Mills and
Gerth quarreled incessantly over credit and control of these works. Theirs was a complicated relationship that these authors reduced to a cynical, one-dimensional interpretation. Soon more than proving Mills a charlatan and misanthrope. Though the book claims to offer a minor advance in "the history of academic ethics," it fails to discuss prevailing standards of scholarly publishing in a fast-changing academy, against which we might most clearly perceive the genuinely difficult issues involved. Instead, Oakes and Vidich draw inferences from a batch of letters, some of them missing pages, and from an incomplete account of Mills' swift rise to prominence. Placing him in the worst possible light at every turn, they refuse to offer readers the opportunity to reach conclusions contrary to their own.

The competing portraits of Mills as leftist hero and Mills as academic villain each tend to caricature a stubbornly complex man. They fix his character within the very roles he constantly tried to elude or combine, imposing evaluative criteria that disregard his own terms and habits of self-understanding. Insofar as they attribute his ideas to his eccentric personality, moreover, they deradicalize the work. What remains to be explored, among those who would take his books with their intended seriousness, are the foundations of his undeniable popularity.

Throughout the fifties, Mills, borrowing freely from Dewey, Lippmann and Mead not less than from Veblen, Marx and Weber, always returned to a theme that connected him to the decade's subterranean rumblings: the abstracted character of postwar life. Society, culture and politics, he insisted, had grown bloated by the conceits of formalism. An "overdeveloped" supersociety, the United States had fattened on a feast of decayed symbols, which offered only outdated fragments of the "whole of live experience." Public life therefore yielded not morally relevant ideas but tremulous moods and slogans. It produced not craftsmen but "cheerful robots," not the means to use civil liberties but a rhetoric in their abstracted defense, not leaders of reason but paeans to the reasonableness of leadership. Massive, centralized institutions had arisen ("big, ugly forces"), by "drift" and by "thrust" alike. Yet corresponding pictures of reality failed to amplify what terrible challenges these institutions posed to "genuinely lively things."

Mills argued that white-collar workers and other Americans, bereft of reliable firsthand portraits of everyday reality, suffered confusion and powerlessness, trapped by the detritus of outworn images fixed in the social worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In national politics, a dominant liberalism did not suffocate alternatives, as some Marxists believed. Rather, a "liberal rhetoric" diverted attention from a more important consideration: There existed no coherent ideologies of any sort to connect the universalist ideals transmitted by liberalism and Marxism to the colossal social structures that now threatened to overwhelm them. Reason and freedom did not inevitably increase, as the progressive teleologies had assumed. But no satisfactory projects for the modern realization of these ideals had evolved accordingly. Now, they suffered eclipse before the impersonal forces of bureaucratization, centralization and rationalization so characteristic of a mass society. The "big discourse" stood homeless.

Alive to this gap separating experience and consciousness, he suggested, opportunistic elites appropriated and managed "second-hand worlds" in the service of a pecuniary standard of value. The money standard, the only measure of value permitted to flourish, in turn made possible...
the commodity culture that spun ever faster around the axis of the US class structure. "Images of American types have not been built carefully by piecing together live experience," he remarked in White Collar. "Experience is trapped by false images, even as reality itself sometimes seems to imitate the soap opera and the publicity release." The "tang and feel" of American life meant "shrill trivialization" of culture by the mass media and hypnotic manipulation of psychic existence by moneyminded elites. Workers had become possessed by the logic of "personality markets." Citizens were "strangers to politics. They are not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it." Even leisure, where people might expect to re-vivify their creative instincts, betrayed its promise. For the absence of pictures of reality autonomous from the commodity nexus allowed only formal options emptied of real substance. "The most important characteristic of all these [leisure] activities is that they astonish, excite, and distract but they do not enlarge reason or feeling, or allow spontaneous dispositions to unfold creatively."

Much the same attack on formalism propelled The Power Elite, Mills's "good loud blast at the bastards, one they can't ignore maybe." The selection and formation of leaders in government, business and the military, he argued, occurred within social worlds narrowly circumscribed by the values of money and militarism. The prep school, the corporate hierarchy, the "total way of life" of the military regimen: Each of these transits to power lacked clearly articulated, open rules of advancement, instead fostering social and psychological affinities "designed to form members that will tacitly accept and trust and respect one another." Thus imbued with class consciousness, this power elite pursued the major "command posts" of modern American society.

to Mills, the "tang and feel" of America was "shrill trivialization" of culture by the media and public life co-opted by moneyminded elites.

vailing values linked war and profit. Within the "second-hand worlds" that determined public consciousness, that is, the requirements of America's "permanent war economy" foreclosed alternative views. Pluralism, the dominant but now outdated picture of US democracy, only muddied the origins of the "moral uneasiness of our time": the dimly perceived understanding that the power elite adhered to a "crackpot realism," "a paranoid reality all their own" that might produce the most terrible of results: a third world war.

The Sociological Imagination (1959) continued Mills's assault on bourgeois formalism, focusing attention on prevailing models of social science. "Until now I have not really fought these people in American sociology," he wrote the British socialist Ralph Miliband late in the decade. "I've ignored them and done my own work; but they've been fooling around behind the scenes and now I declare war: I am going to expose their essential bankruptcy." By "behind the scenes" Mills was alluding, one supposes, to his own department. For his book expressed and then sought to surround the major fault lines in professional social science at Columbia and other leading departments.

"Grand Theory," said Mills, offering a witty "translation" of the jargon-laden prose of Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons, was afflicted by a formalist withdrawal from actual problems of the world. The grand theorists trafficked in a self-referential realm of reflection dominated by minute distinctions and interminable elaborations of basic concepts. In ascending to their "useless heights" they presupposed a natural harmony of ideas—their "metaphysical anchor point"—and so regarded conflict as a deviant phenomenon to be explained, not assumed. Yet because Parsons "has fetishized his Concepts," the

exercise of power in real-world situations could not very well make its way into his work in the first place, nor into that of other grand theorists. "The basic cause of grand theory is the initial choice of a level of thinking so general that its practitioners cannot logically get down to observation. They never, as grand theorists, get down from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts. This absence of a firm sense of genuine problems, in turn, makes for the unreality so noticeable in their pages."

"Abstracted Empiricism," too, constituted a withdrawal from substantive problems. Possessed by method often at the expense of clear-eyed content, the empirical studies of Paul Lazarsfeld and others yielded a great many details about attitudes and opinions of social life. But such studies "do not convince us of anything worth having convictions about." Their frame of reference, according to Mills, usually remained so narrow and precise as to deny the fruits of empirical data any larger connection to social structures. "There is, in truth, no principle or theory that guides the selection of what is to be the subject of these studies," he remarked. Abstracted empiricism, an approach that aspired to put sociology on a particular type of scientific basis, shrank from the task of moral and political judgment. The "formal and empty ingenuity at its center," not to mention the basic requirements of its processes—large, well-funded research institutes—that turned sociologists into mere technicians, solicits of only the most immediate questions of the day.

Throughout his career Mills offered figures such as Veblen, Balzac, Agee and Huizinga as models of inquiry, because they "took it big"—took in the "whole of experience" and thereby sought to stand apart from their milieu. In The Sociological Imagination, Mills lamented that modern social science was, in the first and final instance, connected only to the upper reaches of American society: From there came the funding for the research institute, the bureaucratic organization and specialized character of the university; from there, he said, came the very definitions of the problems of study. Mass society had rendered equivocal reason and freedom. Now, without an intellectually autonomous class of thinkers who made plain the political and ethical features of this condition, society promised only to continue its fearful trajectory toward a postmodern epoch. Thus Mills imploring his colleagues to connect
history to biography, the private troubles of ordinary folks to publicly relevant issues, and the trusted intuition of their own experience to historically situated, interdisciplinary questions for research.

Mills left precious little opportunity in much of his work for the formation of private consciousness, and his sociological portraits frequently appeared overdrawn. Today, his white-collar man implies a comparison not to George Babbitt but instead to Hannah Arendt’s Adolf Eichmann. The Power Elite, too, concluded darkly, shadowed by the specter of US totalitarianism. To the extent that these books stimulated the impulse to act, such inspiration owed not to precept but to example, to the fact of their existence.

So it was for Mills’s criticism of his colleagues: his moral psychology and political hope outran his sociology. Much of his sociological work situated the creative individual within a terrible web of psychic manipulations and centrifugal forces. Thus when he denounced his fellow intellectuals as “futuritarians,” his complaints seemed mere hectoring. Late in the fifties he began to write more positively about “cultural workers” as agents of change and “the cultural apparatus” as a site of progressive advance. But he never developed these sentiments, and left important questions unanswered. In challenging the monopolization of secondhand worlds by class-conscious elites, for instance, why should intellectuals be trusted to contain their own predatory instincts?

Might Mills’s calls for the transcendence of distinctions between culture and politics trivialize public life? He did not live to answer such questions fully. What is clear is that an elitism stood behind his writings on the topic. “Who wants to be loved by masses, or by mass-like minds?” he asked his longtime friend William Miller in 1954. In the end, his belief in intellectuals as an advance guard of social change became a modern version of the “labor metaphysic” he rejected in Victorian Marxism, as historian Michael Denning has recently noted.

Yet the tenuous exhortation for intellectuals to seek “publics” over masses constituted a strength, too. It belongs to his venture to make “reason democratically relevant,” as he put the matter in The Sociological Imagination. Appreciating Mills’s achievement in this respect does not require a sacrifice of the intelligent, as his most parsimonious critics insist. Nobody did more to revive popular discussions of class and democracy in a postwar period darkened by formalism. Nor did anyone make a more compelling bid to connect politics and ideas and “the whole of live experience” at a time when none of these seemed very compelling.

Mills refused to abandon universalist values even when his investigations disclosed ample reasons for doubting their continued relevance. If this grim perseverance could lead to a kind of elitism, it could also imbue his books with rhetorical force. Much of the power of his books and essays owes to the way in which he mined various traditions and impulses—liberal progress, Weberian irony, Texas populist, modern views of the sociology of knowledge—in the service of a near-missionary rhetoric of humanist redemption. In a sense, a conservative kind of radicalism anchored his life. He reported himself a member of the “classic tradition,” a “plain Marxist” and especially an intellectual craftsman who sweated over his prose, which became less academic and

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**EVENTS**

**CALIFORNIA**

**Huston Smith on Evolution**

Huston Smith lectures at Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, 1 Lawson Rd., Kensington. Smith examines the worldviews behind the controversy and seeks a middle way, Friday, October 13, 8 PM. Following-up seminar, October 14, 9 AM. $10 each, $7 students and seniors. Call Martha Helming, (510) 528-3417.

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more vernacular over time. "Isn't there room for just plain solid stuff, workmanlike stuff by an artisan stratum?" he wondered to his friend Lewis Coser at mid-decade. "That's my ideal kind of production and reception."

Other correspondence records his wide-ranging amateur interests: in music, movies, motorcycles, photography, art and architecture. They indicate an approach to reflection not as the highly technical endeavor so characteristic of the twentieth century but instead as a deeply personal, occasionally aesthetic way of realizing older notions of selfhood in a world now constrained by impersonal institutions. To Dwight Macdonald, Mills defined White Collar as a series of "prose poems" toward such a realization. "The book is my little work of art," he wrote elsewhere. And the "politics of truth" which so exercised Mills's evangelical imagination implied "the act of a free man who rejects 'fate'; it is an affirmation of oneself as a moral and intellectual center of responsible decision." Even his idiosyncratic style seemed a response to the sterile rituals of professionalism. He wrote in a 1948 letter, "About flamboyance: don't you love it? God, the only way to live: the only personal answer to bureaucratic precision and form which, part of the managerial demiurge, would stultify everything we do and do."

In a 1956 letter to novelist Harvey Swados, his neighbor and confidant, Mills claimed that "what these jokers—all of them—don't realize is that way down deep and systematically I'm a goddamned anarchist." Yet this best describes his own view of his temperament, at the center of which stood a visceral determination to avoid the "sense of the trap" that he seemed to see around every American corner. The actual substance of his concerns points toward a far more traditional conclusion. He opposed promiscuous mingling of Freud and Marx, defended liberal education and promoted a national civil service as well as a "genuine bureaucracy." He defined the "cultural apparatus" as "the seat of civilization," invoking no less an apostle of sensibility than Matthew Arnold. And when he sent a telegram of support to a rally protesting American policy toward Cuba, he made the most familiar of distinctions: KENNEDY AND COMPANY HAVE RETURNED US TO BARBARISM.

Perhaps since Mills came to believe that the freedom and reason embedded in the "big discourse" he first learned in Texas would now require the radical subversion of the prevailing order, he properly insisted

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On Painting Reality

STUART KLAWANS

GOGO IN BORDEAUX

In a psychological level, film is related to the art of embalming—or so André Bazin wrote half a century ago, in an essay that’s still being chewed over. Bazin proposed that people feel a deep need to represent their world, as the next best thing to preserving it, and so the arts have struggled over the centuries toward an ever-higher degree of illusionism, till reaching the level of the sound-and-color film. This theory rests on an observation that seems to me unchallengeable: The cinema’s early viewers experienced great satisfaction in seeing that pictures at last could capture not just the shape and surface texture of an object but also its motion, the visible essence of life. And yet, from the early years of cinema until now, certain directors have also felt the need to arrest motion, as if yielding to a psychological tendency to make film imitate the condition of painting.

These tableaux vivants served at first to dignify the raffish new medium of film. (They also saved directors and production designers a lot of work—as when D.W. Griffith, wanting to mount an ancient Babylonian feast for Intolerance, cribbed from a Salon painting that hung in a New York restaurant.) Later, frozen art-historical moments have figured prominently in stories about painters, who in the movies rarely have to go through the brain-wracking work of developing a composition, sketch after sketch. More often, these movie painters reproduce scenes that magically appear to them, all nice and finished—either in the real world (if the artist is van Gogh in Lust for Life) or in an inspired inner vision (such as the one that strikes the maestro in Pasolini’s The Decameron).

There is also a strong, though less popular, tradition of making paintings-on-film for purposes of comedy, satire or critical commentary. Having been translated out of context, the original image becomes, in Marcel Duchamp’s terms, a reverse ready-made (meaning, for example, a Rembrandt used as an ironing board). Jean-Luc Godard has done quite a lot of this kind of thing (perhaps most notably in Passion). And before him, there was Luis Buñuel, who in Viridiana (1961) gave us the locus classicus: the moment when a crowd of beggars, who are throwing themselves a banquet, freeze in a parody of Leonardo’s Last Supper.

The great Spanish actor Francisco Rabal happened to have participated in Viridiana. Now I see that he’s back in the tableau vivant business, starring as the title character in Goya in Bordeaux. Written and directed by Carlos Saura, the film has precious little use for critical commentary. It’s strictly of the “It came to me in a dream” school—and as such things go, it’s worth a few laughs.

This much of the story is true: In 1824, when he was already an old man, Goya went into exile from Spain, which had become uncomfortable for him with the restoration of the monarchy, and settled in France, where he spent the last four years of his life. With him were his much younger companion, Leocadia Zorilla, and their little daughter. Goya in Bordeaux takes