

of art that has been." The postmodernist approach has critical implications: namely, that in a society saturated and dominated by mass media, popular culture and pastiche are better able than the sacred pretensions of the avant-garde to provide the visual metaphors for the dilemmas of the everyday.

But some people argue, as Diana Crane does, that the cultural eclecticism promoted by postmodernism is itself the expression of a crisis of meaning, arising from the phenomenon of information being produced more rapidly than meaning systems can integrate and synthesize. What is missing from postmodernism is a genuine attempt to innovate and integrate. Lacking this potential, many neo-expressionists are satisfied with either pure entertainment value, or sinister provocation. Thus, the paintings of Eric Fischl and Robert Longo are full of violence, explicit sexuality, and a sense of undefined catastrophe designed to amuse and provoke the public.

According to Crane, the only art style that is at the vanguard of innovation is Pattern painting, for reasons that are both sociological and aesthetic. Pattern painting is a movement that is primarily dominated by women, who have traditionally been excluded from the reward systems of modern art. Because artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro attempt to reclaim feminine subjects, there is a psychological and political content to their art that is noticeably missing from other groups.

Crane's book is a "sociology of art" constructed in a fairly conventional mold, but it does have a number of useful things to say about the contemporary arts and artists which are both pertinent and welcome, especially because they throw light on the reasons why the courage, audacity and innovation that were the original virtues of the avant-garde are now in decline. In some sense Seigel's *Bohemian Paris* and Crane's *Transformation of the Avant-Garde* speak to a similar issue. Crane blames the institutionalization of the artist within the university, as well as the spectacular growth of the art market and the infusion of massive funds into the art world by corporate and governmental institutions, for moving what had been a wilfully exclusive modern art movement into the mainstream of popular culture. In a complementary way, Seigel recognizes that it is difficult for the avant-garde to survive without a subcultural enclave that shelters and encourages adversarial expression.

Bohemia had its poseurs, its frauds and its nihilists who overwhelmingly outnumbered the serious artists, but it did offer an alternative community which

prided itself on its unconventional and an avowed independence. Bohemia and the avant-garde needed each other. Not only did they shake the complacency of society, but they made doing so a profession of faith. In our postmodernist interregnum both the artist and the intellectual, as Russell Jacoby has recently argued, have lost the quarrelsomeness and solemn sense of anti-values that were once found inside Bohemia. Such qualities are more difficult to express both from within the bureaucratic world of academe, and from the hyped *simulacra* of mass culture, which turned the eccentric forms of bohemian lifestyles into commodified expressions.

The eclipse of Bohemia and the avant-garde is closely bound to the emergence of a new moment in late-consumer capitalism. Modernism was proud of the demands it made on its audiences. Now the public, having fully integrated the aesthetic tricks of modernism, lives on its borrowed images. A portent of this trend is the transformation of history into an instantaneous electronic present: self-enclosed, pre-emptive and fully aestheticized. If postmodernist art, or any kind of postmodernist inquiry, is to play a constructive critical role then it must restructure its cultural production so that it can once again call into question the reality principle of the middle class. Whether it can fulfil this role is still an open question, though time is running out and the room to maneuver increasingly restricted. We are at an ambiguous point in what has often been an ambiguous historical moment. And it is easy in the midst of this confusion and uncertainty to succumb to the soothing illusions of the *simulacra*, or an equally soothing dark vision of postmodernist pseudo-despair. The challenge is to move towards a more diverse and democratic culture, and perhaps, a new Bohemia.

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The Closing Of The American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy And Impoverished The Souls Of Today's Students by Allan Bloom (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). 392 pp.

Two reports issued in 1983 fundamentally challenged the effectiveness of the American educational system. The first, "A Nation at Risk," decried the "rising tide of mediocrity" in American Schools. It cited an "alarming decline" in educa-

tional standards and lowered SAT scores as evidence of crumbling educational standards and growing illiteracy.

The second report, by the 20th Century Fund criticized the Federal Government's role in education. It found federal intervention to be "counter-productive, entailing heavy costs and undesirable consequences." With these reports, the latest round of the "crisis" in American education was inaugurated. Since then, education has become a major national issue and the subject of several best-sellers, most notably—or notoriously—Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*.

There can be little doubt that Bloom's work has tapped into some prevailing social sentiments, the ground for which has been prepared by the neo-conservative critique of education. Neo-conservatives see a legitimacy crisis in American education based on the excess demand put on the educational system by the forces of liberalism and individualism. Higher education in particular is troubled by the conflict between popular democratic tendencies and the "internal" functions of the universities, the training of professionals and social elites. Neo-conservatives claim that post-war educational reforms and the baleful influence of Deweyan progressivism have watered down educational standards; while intellectual leaders, suffering from a "failure of nerve," have not had the courage to stand up to students and dissident intellectuals and assert real standards.

The forces of conservative restoration attempt to solve the legitimacy crisis through a return to respect for authority and intellectual standards. Many, like Secretary of Education William Bennett, have called for a return to a core curriculum: a set of required texts which provide the student with the basic ideas of Western culture. For Bennett, these ideas are absolute truths which have been corrupted by the rise of moral and intellectual relativism.

Allan Bloom's conservative jeremiad takes off from the groundwork of the neo-conservative critique of higher education. However, he gives it an even more conservative twist, rooted in the philosophy of Leo Strauss. Like Bennett, Bloom sees relativism as the central educational problem. He seeks a return to reverence and respect for authority and absolute truth based on a renewed study of classic texts—texts which Bloom views largely as sacred. Bloom grounds his argument not only in the ideas of modern conservatism, but in Plato and Aristotle. He employs the ancient model of the human soul and the idea of a rational purpose in nature to buttress his critique of modern society.

Despite Bloom's academic creden-

tials this is not a scholarly work. Not only does it lack citations and references, it is filled with misguided arguments and non-sequiturs. My personal favourite is a paragraph that begins with an allusion to Margaret Mead's sexual adventures and ends with the conclusion that "all such teachers of openness had either no interest in or were actively hostile to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution." There is no discernable connection between the substance of the paragraph and its conclusion.

The structure of the book is equally puzzling. Divided into three loosely connected sections, *The Closing of the American Mind* vacillates between a theoretical treatment of the rise of modernity rooted in a conservative *Kulturkritik*, and personal/intellectual vendettas—against old teachers at Chicago (for teaching relativism) and colleagues at Cornell (for giving in to the black students). Biographical and criticism stand in an unresolved tension.

A treatment of these tensions would be a compelling and revealing task, however, I've chosen to focus on Bloom's arguments about the secularization of modern culture, for it is here that his link with the neo-conservative critique of education is most apparent and most insidious.

Bloom laments a disintegrating American culture racked by an easygoing nihilism which ultimately leads to the destruction of community. In treating all values as equal, it fails to affirm the distinction between good and evil, worthy and worthless. Characterized by a pervasive "openness" which accepts all without any rank order, American politics degenerates into an indiscriminating pluralism, which diverts politics into factionalism and social fragmentation. Modern pluralism, argues Bloom, views the polity as the competition of a discreet set of interests. It lacks any notion of a common public good.

If the modern polity is disordered, this is reflected in the disorder of the soul. For Bloom, as for Plato, the soul is an ordered hierarchy. The higher rational parts must govern and restrain the appetites. The *eros* that drives the soul must be shaped, moderated and directed to its true end, the good. This is the task of education. Not all, however, are capable of the proper ordering of the soul; they must be directed in other ways, by harnessing the will or the appetite in socially harmonious ways.

Modern culture does not engender the orderly shaping of *eros*. The modern family has lost the sense of piety and respect of the traditional family—though Bloom's notion of the traditional family has no real correlate in historical experience; it is more a figment of his conservative imagination. Bloom views the fam-

ily as a place where transmitted through ceremony. The modern, however, is undermined by feminism which relegates the home and attention to their careers. The personal life, content of the family go against integration of family, reversible effects of proper training the passion and incapability lack the striving for desire and education. Bloom links desire and authority rather.

Bloom's account of modern society is supposed to be secularization. In a survey of the culture and politics, the middle section of the book the burden of responsibility for stripping moral authority. Rorty (I think) thought has metaphysics with a creation of a solipsistic

Political modernism, chiavelli, who substitutes soul and continues the tradition of virtue into the Protestant interest has a redeemer in the political theory moderate balancing interest is for Bloch. American polity Straussians.

Locke's political is unstable. It can force of secularization of culture for unity and spontaneity, bourgeois culture, tendencies toward the rejection of the self. The rejection of nature. Freedom comes to activity. The romantic does try to introduce counter to disenchantment for religion its original unifier comes exemplified "ethnicity."

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ily as a place where moral authority is transmitted through religious ritual and ceremony. The moral unity of the family, however, is undermined by the wave of feminism which removes women from the home and attenuates men's dedication to their careers. Besides fragmenting personal life, contemporary conceptions of the family go against nature. The disintegration of family life also has irreversible effects on children. Without proper training their souls are devoid of passion and incapable of education. They lack the striving for wholeness that links desire and education. Here, predictably, Bloom links desire to respect for order and authority rather than to freedom.

Bloom's account of the decay of modern society is supported by a critique of secularization. In a long and free-wheeling survey of the disenchantment of culture and politics, which constitutes the middle section of the book, Bloom places the burden of responsibility on rationalization for stripping away the metaphysical/religious grounds for political and moral authority. Rationalist (read secular) thought has replaced religion and metaphysics with a rampant subjectivism which sees thinking and acting as the creation of a solitary subject.

Political modernity begins with Machiavelli, who substitutes politics for the soul and continues with the transformation of virtue into self interest. When still tied to the Protestant ethic, however, self-interest has a redeeming moment clearest in the political theory of Locke. Locke's moderate balancing of enlightened self-interest is for Bloom, the basis of the American polity so admired by the Straussians.

Locke's political solution, however, is unstable. It can not fully contain the forces of secularization and the subjectivization of culture. The romantic quest for unity and spontaneity represents, for Bloom, the flip side—the dark side—of bourgeois culture, and this reinforces the tendencies toward a subjectivist interpretation of the self. The continuing disenchantment of the world has led to the rejection of nature as a teleological order. Freedom comes to be understood as pure activity. The romantic notion of culture does try to introduce moral order as a counter to disenchantment. But this substitute for religion breaks down. It loses its original universal reference and becomes exemplified in a plurality of cultures grounded in "rootedness" and "ethnicity."

The terminus of modern rationalization is found in Nietzsche who, according to Bloom, holds that reason's disenchantment of the world is the source of its own dissolution. Although reason undermines religion it is incapable of finding its own foundation. Reason requires the

abandonment of rationalism.

This insight, if true, would seem to undermine Bloom's own position, based as it is on a form of classical rationalism. However, Bloom bypasses this problem and extends his critique to modern education. Influenced by (primarily German) ideas of value-relativism and subjectivity, modern intellectuals have lost sight of the true purpose of the university. They teach the equality of values, and treat value choices as irrational ultimate decisions. Human activity becomes infinite freedom and creativity without respect for its necessary limits and awareness of the anarchy of pure freedom.

Far from being a refuge for great minds, the university is democratized. It is this threat of democracy both in the university and in society which Bloom fears the most. According to Bloom, democracy exemplifies interest detached from reason. It represents only mass opinion, and follows the concerns and fashions of the times, not the permanent truths of the cosmos. Bloom pays lip service to democracy, but denies that collective deliberation is the basis for a rational judgment.

Bloom's animus extends to socially disadvantaged groups as well. He can barely conceal his resentment against women and racial and sexual minorities who assert their own needs or desires against the supposed harmony of the whole.

Bloom's tragic lament for the fate of modernity contains its element of farce. His "solution" to the dilemma of disenchantment resorts to a magical incantation to the ghost of lost souls. Like the neo-conservatives, he takes the results of Max Weber's theory of rationalization and attempts to read back into it conclusions that the theory cannot hold. While Weber concluded that the power of religion to integrate society, culture and economy into a whole is inevitably lost in the transition from religious/metaphysical to modern worldviews, Bloom simply postulates as given a religious need that can be fulfilled only by returning to the traditional notions of the sacred. No grounds are given for this argument, nor does it seem to follow from the implications of secularization. It is a dogmatic assertion implicit throughout Bloom's book. The conservative critique of modern culture presumes that there can be no moral unity without a religious consciousness. There is, however, no reason to rule out a secular or non-transcendental conception of social solidarity—a notion internal to social life itself.

Bloom's analysis of secularization equates modern rationality with a kind of instrumental reason—one which leads to subjectivism and relativism. While Bloom may have touched on some of the pathologies of modern society, he has not

shown that modernity itself is pathological. Here his analysis confuses cause and effect. The fragmentation of culture is not due to modernity or to its form of rationality, but to the effects of a capitalist modernization. It is this process which selects out and favours the dominance of instrumental rationality, and which is at the root of the reification of culture. Bloom, however, wants to convert a social process into one that occurs mainly in the heads of intellectuals. Misguided intellectuals are at the core of the problem.

The ultimate effect of Bloom's proposal is to invalidate the experience of students. The conservative theory of human nature and the hierarchical ordering of the soul that Bloom proposes, impose an order on the drives and desires of individuals based not on the potentialities of social life, but on an historical metaphysics which conceals its own ideological basis. The alienation and devaluation of experience leaves the student open to manipulation under the guise of tutelage supposedly based on the interests of reason. These best interests, however, restrict the student's own potentials to find happiness and solidarity in relation with others.

This tactic is evident in Bloom's book. The reader is constantly told that students are incapable of judging what is good for them. They must be led to the truth by master (and primarily male) teachers. In Bloom's view the skill of the teacher lies not in a capacity for rational persuasion, or productive dialogue with students, but in erotic performance. The erotic power of the teacher is aroused and stimulated by the rapt desire of virgin students to be filled with the master's power. This interpretation of eros seems less like the dance of lovers than the last tango of erotic domination. Based on power rather than concern for the other, it places the performance of the teacher at the centre of the process.

For those of us who do not view education as a process of libidinal bondage, Bloom's view may strike us—with good reason—as perverse. The act of teaching requires a respect for the independence of learners and a willingness to listen and be educated. In a similar way the notion of culture used by conservatives is not, as Bloom seems to think, a "single coherent object" created by gods or geniuses, one which restrains and dominates an uncivilized everyday life. Far from being the solution to the educational problems of today, *The Closing of the American Mind* is a symptom of the depth of the crisis.

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folding chair at a library near you.

Gender and Expertise

Edited by Maureen McNeil

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Women have always had a lot to say about scientific rationality. But their observations have taken many different forms. In 1792, long before there was an organized women's movement, Mary Wollstonecraft argued that the inferior position of women resulted from the fact that most women did not have access to education. A true daughter of the Enlightenment, she believed that the position of women would improve only when they had the means to become as 'rational' as men.

This theme has been voiced in feminist writings as recent as those of Simone de Beauvoir, who believed that women, being closer to their 'animality', were prevented from transcending their immediate situation and thereby entering the world of cultural creativity.

Fortunately, in the years since, the scope of the debate has become broader and more complicated. Feminist approaches to rationality and science are more heterogeneous and diverse. They emanate from a number of sources including those women engaged in practical struggles, such as the women's health movement, to women involved in academic endeavours; the latter consist notably of feminists taking a deconstructive approach to the gendered metanarratives that mark Western thought.

Nevertheless, few feminisms have managed to disentangle themselves from the association of woman with nature; fewer still have stopped to problematize such slippery conceptions as rationality, expertise or technology.

Liberal feminists have, for the most part, pursued Wollstonecraft's concern about women's access to the professions and trades traditionally dominated by men. For them the only problem with expertise is how to get more of it. And it is in part due to their efforts that the number of options available to women has greatly expanded—particularly for middle and upper class women. But these so-called equity projects stop short of questioning the gendered relations of power through which expertise is defined.

In an interesting, if predictable twist, liberal feminists have also been active at important sites of popular struggle where gender and expertise have been the focus of theoretical work, namely the women's