

Amusing Ourselves to Death

Quotes

Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business by Neil Postman

“We were keeping our eye on 1984. When the year came and the prophecy didn't, thoughtful Americans sang softly in praise of themselves. The roots of liberal democracy had held. Wherever else the terror had happened, we, at least, had not been visited by Orwellian nightmares.

But we had forgotten that alongside Orwell's dark vision, there was another - slightly older, slightly less well known, equally chilling: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Contrary to common belief even among the educated, Huxley and Orwell did not prophesy the same thing. Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost

infinite appetite for distractions". In 1984, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right."

— Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: 1984, fear

129 people liked it

like

"Everything in our background has prepared us to know and resist a prison when the gates begin to close around us . . . But what if there are no cries of anguish to be heard? Who is prepared to take arms against a sea of amusements? To whom do we complain, and when, and in what tone of voice, when serious discourse dissolves into giggles? What is the antidote to a culture's being drained by laughter?"

— Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: criticism, dystopia, laughter, media

21 people liked it

like

"What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In 1984, Orwell added, people are controlled by

inflicting pain. In Brave New World, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we fear will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we desire will ruin us.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: brave-new-postman

17 people liked it

like

“When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience, and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

16 people liked it

like

“[M]ost of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action. (68).”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

16 people liked it

like

“The television commercial is not at all about the character of products to be consumed. It is about the character of the consumers of products. (128)”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

14 people liked it

like

“Television is our culture's principal mode of knowing about itself. Therefore -- and this is the critical point -- how television stages the world becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged. It is not merely that on the television screen entertainment is the metaphor for all discourse. It is that off the screen the same

metaphor prevails. (92)”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

13 people liked it

like

“[It] is not that television is entertaining but that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience. [...] The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining. (87)”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

11 people liked it

like

“We do not measure a culture by its output of undisguised trivialities but by what it claims as significant.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

10 people liked it

like

“I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world. I mean to say that when news is packaged as entertainment, that is the inevitable result. And in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

8 people liked it

like

“For in the end, he was trying to tell us what afflicted the people in 'Brave New World' was not that they were laughing instead of thinking, but that they did not know what they were laughing about and why they had stopped thinking.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

7 people liked it

like

“...there must be a sequence to learning, that perseverance and a certain measure of perspiration are indispensable, that individual pleasures must frequently be submerged in the interests of group cohesion, and that learning to be critical and to think conceptually and rigorously do not come easily to the young but are hard-fought victories.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

6 people liked it

like

“The reader must come armed, in a serious state of intellectual readiness. This is not easy because he comes to the text alone. In reading, one's responses are isolated, one's intellect thrown back on its own resources. To be confronted by the cold abstractions of printed sentences is to look upon language bare, without the assistance of either beauty or community. Thus, reading is by its nature a serious business. It is also, of course, an essentially rational activity.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

6 people liked it

like

“A book is an attempt to make through permanent and to contribute to the great conversation conducted by authors of the past. [...] The telegraph is suited only to the flashing of messages, each to be quickly replaced by a more up-to-date message. Facts push other facts into and then out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation. (70)”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

6 people liked it

like

“But it is much later in the game now, and ignorance of the score is inexcusable. To be unaware that a technology comes equipped with a program for social change, to maintain that technology is neutral, to make the assumption that technology is always a friend to culture is, at this late hour, stupidity plain and simple.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

5 people liked it

like

“Parents embraced “Sesame Street” for several reasons, among them that it assuaged their guilt over the fact that they could not or would not restrict their children’s access to television. “Sesame Street” appeared to justify allowing a four- or five-year-old to sit transfixed in front of a television screen for unnatural periods of time. Parents were eager to hope that television could teach their children something other than which breakfast cereal has the most crackle. At the same time, “Sesame Street” relieved them of the responsibility of teaching their pre-school children how to read—no small matter in a culture where children are apt to be considered a nuisance.... We now know that “Sesame Street” encourages children to love school only if school is like “Sesame Street.” Which is to say, we now know that “Sesame Street” undermines what the traditional idea of schooling represents.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

4 people liked it

like

“People of a television culture need “plain language” both aurally and visually, and will even go so far as to require it in some circumstances by law. The Gettysburg Address would probably have been largely incomprehensible to a 1985 audience.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

4 people liked it

like

“It would be a serious mistake to think of Billy Graham or any other television revivalist as a latter-day Jonathan Edwards or Charles Finney. Edwards was one of

the most brilliant and creative minds ever produced by America. His contribution to aesthetic theory was almost as important as his contribution to theology. His interests were mostly academic; he spent long hours each day in his study. He did not speak to his audiences extemporaneously. He read his sermons, which were tightly knit and closely reasoned expositions of theological doctrine”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

3 people liked it

like

“For the message of television as metaphor is not only that all the world is a stage but that the stage is located in Las Vegas, Nevada.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

2 people liked it

like

“Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: americans, conversation, people, shallowness, talking, television

2 people liked it

like

“The written word endures, the spoken word disappears”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: written-word

1 person liked it

like

“Typography fostered the modern idea of individuality, but it destroyed the medieval sense of community and integration”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*

tags: individualism, individuality, typography

1 person liked it

like

“television’s way of knowing is uncompromisingly hostile to typography’s way of knowing; that television’s conversations promote incoherence and triviality; that the phrase “serious television” is a contradiction in terms; and that television speaks in only one persistent voice—the voice of entertainment”

– Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*