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## FORUM: GENERATION IN VITRO

Thomas Lawson

**THE POWERFUL, AND PROBLEMATIC**, generator of European culture was its progressivism, its belief that history moved on, that things improved. This was the ideology of the modern that propelled the European idea to its ultimate expression in America. Now, as American power has consolidated, this linear belief system has begun to fade, its practicality replaced by a more effectively repressive concept of progress as eternal return, the cyclic time of myth in which culture no longer evolves but simply revolves. In this “post-Modern” world, history is no longer a tool of self-identification, and ultimately of autonomy, but is instead merely an instant commodity. With this new order the idea of generation is disappearing with the possibility of regeneration. What is established is a dislocated flashback, a disjointed, inarticulate history that speaks of nothing so much as a loss of memory. It becomes more and more difficult to know who we are and where we are going.

Our fatalistic recycling leaves us condemned, like players of *Trivial Pursuit* seeking that winning piece of pie, to circle the board in search of small pieces of evidence amongst the detritus of “facts,” fragments of proof that we do still possess our own history. And as the makers of that game understood, it is in the apparently seamless world of the mass media that we must look for those tiny signs of life and at the symptoms they sometimes illuminate. Consider the case of one who grows up in a television-poor region or country. When such a person encounters the children of America who grew up with the TV always on, he or she encounters people who *know* their television: they have a common history. But the lack of such a history is easily remedied, at least in the major cities of the United States, for all one has to do is stay up late a few nights a week, catch a few afternoon reruns, and, for the really dedicated, get up early on the weekend. Within about six months a history of sorts will have been provided, and you can talk with authority about the Beaver, Norton, Gracie, as well as Murray and MTM, Captain Kirk, Rockford, and the rest. Better, it will all be crisp and fresh in the memory, a history one can use with accuracy, unlike the befuddled remembrances of those once seeming so advantaged. You can proclaim yourself an authority and most likely those for whom the original shows actually

marked time will let you have your way, for they will not really remember. In time that history from which you were originally excluded can become yours.

Another example of this endless recycling and repossessing is to be found in the rock business. Anyone too young, or too out of it, to have lived through the triumph of the Mersey sound, or the golden age of the so-called supergroups, only has to tune in to an FM radio station and catch up with the tunes, and hear a lot of indispensable gibberish—reminiscences and interviews and the like. Once again the diligent discophile will probably end up with a greater discourse on the references in “American Pie” than any who were there when it happened.

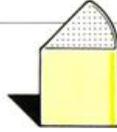
Nor is the phenomenon to be found only in the airwaves, it also has a physical manifestation; journalists call one aspect of it “gentrification.” The East Village in New York, for example, is a whole neighborhood whose history is being erased and rewritten to serve the interests of its new owners and occupiers. Ten years ago it was nowhere, a place deeply embedded in that desperate, unshakable dirt of relentless poverty. Now there are elegant places to eat and drink on the most surprising corners. It used to be very clearly an immigrant ghetto, a place where people tried to come to terms with their new culture without losing the important parts of the old. Now it is more a showcase of ethnic diversity, a sort of World’s Fair for the gourmet, a place where you can eat around the globe. There is a melancholia to the East Village, a deep sadness lost in the sushi bars and chic cocktail lounges, a recognition that an out-of-control parodying and posing is a strategy of despair. In the midst of this new nowhere is an art scene, one that revels in its celebration of a hopeless, endless return. It is an art scene that privileges the *déjà vu*, valuing a debased version of what are usually less than exalted originals. Examples abound: Rene Ricard’s rhapsodies on graffiti (reminding? Ridiculing? Validating?); Norman Mailer’s prose poem of eight years earlier; or Mike Bid-lo’s recreations of notorious art parties at Peggy Guggenheim’s or Andy Warhol’s. Or the reappropriation of the tactics of some of the artists originally associated with the Metro Pictures gallery by the younger group who hang out at Nature Morte. Or, strangest of all, the reemergence as a new group of a bunch of marginal, and mostly bad, expressionist painters who made up the demimonde in Soho in the mid ’70s, throwing huge loft parties and organizing big shows like the “Whitney Counterweight,” shows designed to prove that those without talent also have rights. These artists, taking their cue from the success of the neo-Expressionist fad and the less successful neo-Surrealist or neo-Pop fads, are trying for fame and fortune once more, once again organizing and staging huge shows, shows that retain their earlier efforts’ oddly innocent mixture of wishful thinking and paranoia. Looking at all this work, all this “new” work, is like looking at a dreamscape, a fantasy of life in America, a big success story writ small, so that a greater number can believe they share in it. Wherever you look things seem disconcertingly familiar, until you can no longer tell if you are looking at what, for want of a better term, is called an “original,” or at a copy, or a copy of a copy, or a copy of an idea of a copy. Mimicry has replaced innovation as a creative value. Such a situation can be understood to be critically informed, or not, and such ambiguity is an essential irony. Without it we would merely be watching history repeating itself as farce. With it, that farce holds out the possibility of some other beginning.

So far it’s difficult to see much more than the possibility. There is not much of the new art that has the power, or even the will, to generate new ideas or new forms, for it is the product of a lost generation which has finally put aside the idea of originality as a prime value. The prize is no

longer given to the first, but to the loudest. These are unsettling times, and the unfamiliar is no longer welcome. The art that is most highly prized is that which is most comfortable, most easily recognized. The idea of development, of the work of one generation seeking to better the work of the last, has been replaced by one of repetition. Each generation does the same as the next, with the volume cranked up.

In recent years the scientists who have been working to perfect the techniques of in vitro insemination and fertilization have presented the legal and religious worlds with a host of problems, from inheritance to life itself. The first of a couple's children to be conceived can now be their last to be born, a manipulation of the idea of the generation that perforce will put all our notions of history and progress on hold. But the mass media have been preparing us for this ultimate denial of the passage of generations for years now, and it may be that we are being shown that, culturally, we are now ready to enter that vast plain of indifference, a continuous present, with no discernible past, and no way yet to speak of the future.

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The powerful, and problematic, generator of European culture was its progressivism, its belief that history moved on, that things improved. This was the ideology of the modern that propelled the European idea to its ultimate expression in America. Now, as American power has consolidated, this linear belief system has begun to fade, its practicality replaced by a more effectively repressive concept of progress as eternal return, the cyclic time of myth in which culture no longer evolves but simply reverts. In this "post-Modern" world, history is no longer a tool of self-identification, and ultimately of autonomy, but is instead merely an instant commodity. With this new order the idea of generation is disappearing with the possibility of regeneration. What is established is a dislocated flashback, a disjointed, inarticulate history that speaks of nothing so much as a loss of memory. It becomes more and more difficult to know who we are and where we are going.

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