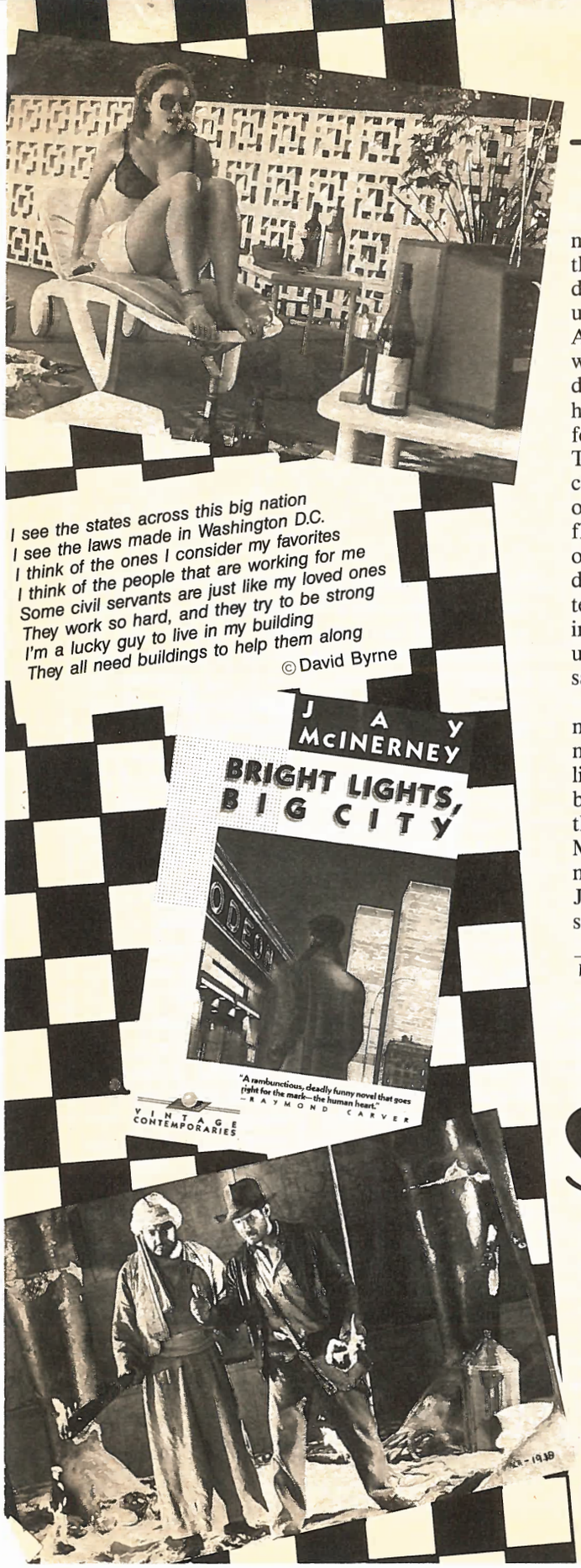

SELLING

by William McGowan

The deadpan humor of David Letterman, host of the TV show "Late Night," is enjoying a vogue. Letterman's on-air pranks have included spray-painting the ankles of Bryant Gumbel, the host of the "Today" show; crushing a franks 'n beans dinner under a hydraulic press; covering himself with Alka Seltzer and being lowered into a tank of water; and, most famously, inviting viewers to demonstrate "stupid pet tricks." Such put-ons have won Letterman a wide following (ad sales for "Late Night" are outpacing those of "The Tonight Show") and even a recent *Newsweek* cover story. The formula is simple: a slight raise of the eyebrow here, a mock-ponderous vocal inflection there, and suddenly the homely realities of everyday life acquire a tinge of the absurd. "We do a lot of what we call 'found comedy,' " Letterman explained to *Newsweek*. "Things you find in newspapers. Viewer mail. The fact that January actually *is* National Soup Month, so we're saluting soup all this month."

This new brand of minimalist irony has enormous and increasing appeal in our culture, and not just among viewers of "Late Night." Films like *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* quietly burlesque the conventions of adventure serials of the 1930s even as they revive them. Rock stars like Madonna and David Byrne of Talking Heads mockingly defend materialism and conformity. Jay McInerney's novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, satirizes but also glamorizes the New York night

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life. Artists in lower Manhattan carry on the tradition of Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can—at one gallery you can buy a silkscreen of a 99-cent grape jelly jar for $150—parodying mainstream culture through mimickry.

In this increasingly conformist age, such cultural artifacts might at first seem vaguely subversive, or at the very least, confusing. But even as we laugh at the new style of irony, it's easy to see that it's completely unthreatening. It may be fun to savor the little banalities, non sequiturs, and incongruities of American life, but when we fail to distinguish between what is truly ridiculous and what merely can be made to seem so, irony loses its bite. The result is something worse than a lot of sophomoric jokes and bad art.

Gray-flannel wink

If David Letterman can be said to have an antecedent in American fiction, it is Frank Wheeler. Wheeler is the antihero of Richard Yates's 1962 novel, *Revolutionary Road*. Columbia College, class of '49, director of sales promotions at the Knox Business Machine Company in New York, Wheeler discharges his "lazy duties" with a "secret astringent joy." Wheeler is a bohemian secreted inside a gray-flannel suit, a Connecticut suburbanite and World War II veteran in ironic rebellion against the tedium of his organization-man existence.

Revolutionary Road has not aged well in many respects; in particular, its 1950s view of organizational life seems caricatured today. But Yates's insights into the social type of the "ironic pretender" strike a surprisingly contemporary note. Wheeler runs everything in life on a double track, one for the acquisition of a paycheck and the lifestyle it supports, the other for his own amusement. Thus his job at Knox Business Machines, where his father toiled in lifelong obscurity, is "the very least important part of his life, never to be mentioned except in irony." Intelligent, thinking people, Wheeler believes, "hold the larger absurdities of deadly dull jobs in the city and deadly dull homes in the suburbs" at an ironic distance. That isn't to say they reject them; after all, one has to make a living. "Economic circumstances might force you to live in this environment, but the important thing was to keep from being contaminated. The important thing was to remember who you are."

Thus armed, Wheeler can savor the disparity between his real self and the mannequin he sends to work in the morning on the commuter train and home at night in the club car. He even takes perverse pride in "the gulf between the amount of energy he was supposed to give to the company and the amount he actually gave." The advantage of working at a place like Knox, he boasts to an old undergraduate chum, "is that you can sort of turn off your mind every morning at nine and leave it off all day and nobody knows the difference."

Yates's portrait of the ironic pretender reflected a significant new way of thinking about life in our society. Previously, wrote Lionel Trilling in *Sincerity and Imagination*, Americans had seen

OUT WITH A SMIRK

Lessons from David Letterman, Susan Sontag and David Byrne

themselves as "wholly innocent and wholly sincere. . . singleminded in their relationship to things, to others and to themselves and avoiding the tendency to give themselves over to duplicity." Now a new edge had appeared. One indicator of the new sensibility was the increasing interest, first among intellectuals and then among the population at large, in camp.

In 1964, Susan Sontag wrote an essay titled "Notes on Camp." The term was just acquiring wide currency; indeed, Sontag wrote that she could find only one previous discussion of the phenomenon in print, in a relatively obscure Christopher Isherwood novel from 1954. Like Frank Wheeler's "secret astringent joy," camp, Sontag observed, was a private tongue for the disaffected. "Behind the straight public sense in which something can be taken," Sontag wrote, "one has found a private zany experience of the thing." Camp "involves a new, more complex relation to the serious." It was a way of asserting "that there is a good taste of bad taste," a truth Sontag found "very liberating." How could bad art be liberating? "It makes the man of good taste cheerful where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion."

As camp sensibility trickled down to the popular culture during the 1960s and 1970s, it targeted a variety of well-known sources of indigestion. Certain questionable public figures—Lester Maddox comes to mind—came to be appreciated as absurd buffoons. The 1930s movie, *Reefer Madness*, once shown to high school children to warn them of the (ludicrously exaggerated) evils of marijuana, became a midnight favorite, shown in dark rooms filled with the pungent scent of cannabis. (When I went to see *Reefer Madness*, it was preceded by that other camp classic, Nixon's Checkers speech.) Old television shows, because they were often so laughably bland, became popular with camp audiences, and Buffalo Bob Smith, former host of "Howdy Doody," made the college lecture circuit.

Camp was nurtured, in part, by a counterculture that opposed mainstream values and reigning government policies (most notably, the Vietnam war). To a younger generation that had established its own culture on its own terms, the absurdity of camp targets was self-evident; rather than argue a case that was well understood, why not revel in the foolishness? During the past ten years or so, however, the counterculture has mostly disappeared, while the new ironic sensibility has continued to spread. "Tuesday Night Titans," a wrestling show, is the number-one-rated cable TV program in Manhattan right now. Staged down to the last grunt and groan, pro wrestling has won a loyal following among the beautiful people, including Cyndi Lauper, Andy Warhol, and even Geraldine Ferraro. Meanwhile, in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, a naive and drab housewife from New Jersey trades places with a calculating downtown hipster who proceeds to luxuriate by the pool, munch junk food, and otherwise engage in all the surface banality of the suburban lifestyle; of course there's no threat to the latter's integrity, since it's all done with irony. In real-life lower Manhattan, one boutique sells a vest with NFL labels and a shirt plastered with Budweiser labels; at another there's a wooden sculpture called "Wishing Well" that is adorned with plastic figures of an Eskimo pie, a flying cow, boy and girl astronauts, flowers, and tinsel. Last year *Rolling Stone* published a special issue to celebrate "The Age of Junk." Readers learned about phone sex, belly-flop contests, and a couple who held their wedding at McDonald's.

So bad it's good

Why did camp survive even after the counterculture had shriveled away? I think there are two reasons. The first has to do with the way camp reflected a national obsession with taste. In this tumultuous, upwardly mobile society, status-anxious Americans on their way up the ladder value taste as a crucial badge of class identity. A few years before Sontag's essay appeared, Dwight Macdonald had received much attention for his essay "Masscult and Midcult," which delineated the difference between highbrow and lowbrow culture. When Sontag announced the arrival of the camp sensibility, this sort of taste gamesmanship could grow more delightfully complex. To give us a sense of how complex, Sontag drew up a list of her favorite camp artifacts. Those of us who, tongue-in-cheek, have sent tacky postcards to knowing friends, can only pause in humble admiration as we contemplate Sontag's catalog:

Zuleika Dobson
Tiffany lamps
Scopitone films
The Brown Derby on Sunset Boulevard in L.A.
The Enquirer, headlines and stories
Aubrey Beardsley drawings
Swan Lake
Bellini's operas
Visconti's direction of *Salome* and *'Tis Pity*

Sancho could understand all that was ridiculous about Don Quixote and still be ready to join the great knight in his crusade. But these days irony has become an excuse to avoid passionate commitment.

She's a Whore
Certain turn-of-the-century [!] postcards
Schoedsack's *King Kong*
The Cuban pop singer La Lupe
Lynn Ward's novel in woodcuts, *God's Man*
The old Flash Gordon comics
Women's clothes of the twenties (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.)
The novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett
Stag movies seen without lust

It should be pointed out that Sontag wasn't completely oblivious to the snobbery in this game. "The old-style dandy hated vulgarity," she wrote, but "the new-style dandy" could savor its camp value. "Where the dandy would be continually offended or bored, the connoisseur of camp is continually amused, delighted. The dandy held a perfumed handkerchief to his nostrils and was liable to swoon; the connoisseur of Camp sniffs the stink and prides himself on his strong nerves."

Snobbery and one-upsmanship tend to go hand-in-hand. In the case of camp, this one-upsmanship had the effect of causing more and more elements of our culture to be appreciated on the basis of "so bad it's good." You think "Leave It to Beaver" is campy? Well get a load of "Mayberry R.F.D."! I'll see your fast-food waitresses on roller skates and raise you my bowling shirt and Ray-Ban sunglasses. And so on. Few of us may be able to swap absurdities at Sontag's high-stakes level, but what the rest of us lack in refinement we've made up in volume. By now, what aspect of our culture *hasn't* been subject to a knowing wink?

But the arms-race quality to camp isn't the only reason it has outlasted the counterculture that helped foster it. It's also true that the detachment of an ironic perspective comes in handy when you're feeling uneasy about your actions. To put it more bluntly, a little irony makes it easier to sell out.

This point is made in a somewhat melodramatic way in *Revolutionary Road*. Toward the end of the book, Frank Wheeler's wife, who is pregnant, realizes that they've become trapped in their suburban existence. She tries to give herself a home abortion and dies. But Yates doesn't let her die before she's had a chance to denounce the double game they've been playing against the system: "Once you started it was terribly hard not to stop. . . .You found you were saying 'Yes' when you meant 'No' and 'We've got to be in this thing together' when you meant the very opposite. Then you were breathing gasoline as if it were flowers."

You don't have to live in the suburbs or work for IBM to know that a broadly ironic perspective helps make life's compromises seem trivial, and perhaps even inevitable. Indeed, one problem with the man-in-the-gray-flannel-suit critique was that it defined compromise through crude symbols: the commuter train, the fluorescent-lit office beehive, the ranch house with the lantern-bearing jockey out front. Now people with the best taste and the best jobs are using irony as an excuse to avoid passionate commitment to and responsibility for the organizations they work for.

When everything is absurd, there is a danger that nothing really will matter. Of course, it doesn't have to be that way. Sancho could understand all that was ridiculous about Don Quixote and still be ready to join the great knight in his crusade. A sense of one's absurdity can take the self-righteousness out of commitment and make it human. But these days irony seems to be a way of conditioning ourselves to accept the gap between our ideals and our deeds. As a result, we avoid responsibility for the kind of work we do and the kind of life we lead. ■