

AT ISSUE

The Age Demanded

Attitude: a fleeting affectation of style or manner suggesting a purposive relation to the world and one's fellows; a contemporary alternative to belief, conviction, and, possibly, character; occasionally pejorative, but more often a term of high approbation, as in, "That lady has *attitude*."

To point out that American culture today is all about attitude is nothing more than to state the obvious.

Should we worry, or even think about being worried? Why not just change the channel?

Before we do, though, we might pause for a moment, or at least until the next commercial. Because there is something NEW—even something NEW and EXCITING—about attitude. Something that tells us about US. And if we're no longer interested in the world, as every major survey says, we're at least interested in US.

Here it is, like the "plastics" tip given to Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*: attitude rules because history is over.

No, not over in the way Francis Fukuyama meant in his essay of 1989 ("The End of History?"): not because communism has closed shop and liberal democracy-cum-free-marketism has prevailed.

We're talking higher concept here: the transformation of psyche and culture, not everyday politics. We're talking end of all past-connectedness, not to mention all past-hauntedness. History is a complicated nightmare from which we finally awoke. And where we are now—I mean right now—is in this long, lazy stretch and yawn called . . . you got it . . . attitude.

Can't you just feel it? It's a bit like not shaving or combing your hair and wear-

ing your pajamas all day long, indoors or out, and not really giving a damn what other people think—because what do other people think, and who cares, because who the hell are you, and I'm Bart Simpson and Al Bundy and Roseanne all rolled into one. And it really is kind of

funny, the way nothing matters, the way cause and consequence have gone out the window, or at least the way we think they have.

You encounter attitude everywhere. Of course on the tube, and of course in the movies. Films might even be its prime showcase, having some time ago abandoned all interest in plot and character. A perfect instance is the much praised *English Patient*, which, like the novel it's based on, is about a collection of attitudes bumping into one another in romantic settings, doing things for no plausible motive or reason. If it works even better on the screen than on the page, it's because the attitudes are embodied in attractive, model-perfect actors. And attitude, after all, is the suggestion of character and action in *look*.

As well as strutting across our various stages and playing fields, attitude fills newspapers, magazines, and other outlets of gab and buzz. It's not only the subject—whether sports hero or a movie idol—but the style in which the subject is handled. So we get volumes of edgy profiles of

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defiant Dennis Rodmans or chastened but unbowed Madonnas. Everything is discussed with attitude, including politics, as we see on the talking head shows, where tidbits of insider gossip are delivered with a snarl or a sneer or a just-so smile. Should we be surprised or disappointed that politicians themselves are becoming masters of the game, more concerned with making the right kind of statement than with making policy?

The end of history that brought about the cultural triumph of attitude didn't just happen overnight, of course. The process has been charted by scores of culture critics. The historian Warren Sussman saw it in the gradual displacement of character by personality. The satirist George S. W. Trow described it as the emergence of the "context of no context," a culture in which, among other things, the ideal and authority of adulthood no longer hold force.

Such seismic cultural shifts resulted from the dizzying changes that science and technology brought about in our material world—and particularly the ever-accelerating speed of those changes in this century. The late-Victorian American moralist Henry Adams, contemplating the steam-driven dynamo at the 1900 Paris Exhibition, predicted that technology would have a devastating effect on human character by accelerating the very tempo of life. The poet Ezra Pound, not two decades later, might even have adumbrated the coming aesthetic of attitude when he wrote, "The age demanded an image/ Of its accelerated grimace."

The speed at which everything moves—from human bodies to information—is so fast that we now vicariously experience the equivalent of many lifetimes during the course of our single one. Life itself seems to be less the living out of a linear, chronologically unfolding destiny than a vicarious sampling of various life possibilities, or lifestyles (a word unheard-of as late as the 1950s). Attitude is just the mask we assume for our current choice.

So much is this a time of attitude that representations of an older, more time-

bounded reality come almost as palpable shocks: shocks of the old, you might say. One such representation comes, surprisingly, in the Hollywood film *Jerry McGuire*, which despite its obligatory slickness, shows characters changing fatefully as a result of decisions they make and actions they take. A successful sports agent, played by Tom Cruise, risks his career by suggesting to his colleagues that there might be a better, more decent way of doing business. He pays for his presumption (a false note: in reality he would have been ignored), but he learns and recovers from his losses, perhaps too neatly staging a comeback by living according to his principles. The astonishment of this film—in addition to a child actor, Jonathan Lipnicki, who steals the show from his elders—is that it has what Aristotle would have recognized as a plot: plot as the development of character—not the display of attitude.

A far more textured and credible reminder of the world we have left behind—indeed, a brilliant fictional version of how we journeyed from belief and conviction to attitude—appears in John Updike's recent novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. The novel traces the fortunes of one American family from the dawn of this century to our bewildering present. It begins with the Reverend Clarence Arthur Wilmot, rector of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Paterson, New Jersey, whom we encounter just as he enters a crisis of faith that will cost him his position, his station, and his security—losses not only for him but for his wife and children.

In addition to leading us through the coils of Wilmot's crisis and its pathetic aftermath—the fallen reverend is reduced to selling encyclopedias door to door, at one point to his former maid—Updike suggests how the shadow of that spiritual catastrophe plays across three successive generations of Wilmots, including a greatgrandson who joins a religious cult and is killed in a Waco-style battle with the law.

The effect of the reverend's legacy on his various heirs, who end up every-

where from small-town Delaware to Hollywood to the mountains of Colorado, is a spiritual hunger that drives them down different but equally desperate paths. Updike dramatizes the interaction of their private struggles with the great cultural changes of the century, changes that reshape communities and reconstruct human character. The reduction of life, including true feeling derived from real experience, to a simulacrum life, in which feelings must consult appearances for confirmation, is captured in a powerful scene in which the cultist's mother, a famous actress, learns of her son's death: "Her heart came into her throat as she heard this bleat of news but she wondered if her reaction was sincere; she checked her face in the rear-view mirror to see how actressy she looked. No, her sudden shocked haggard look was genuine."

It could be worse, Updike as much as

says. The mother might have had no real feelings against which to check her appearances. More hopeful yet, we learn that her son, despite his malformed character, in the end behaved nobly, helping the women and children escape from the lethal conflagration against the will of the deranged cult leader.

For the granddaughter and great-grandson of the Reverend Wilmot, as for most of us, some concern for truth and reality survives, albeit shakily. Despite the accelerating assaults of the fantasy machine, we cherish some link with the real past, with history. Among other things, this attachment accounts for our renewed curiosity about our ancestors the Victorians, who first encountered the accelerating upheavals of the modern, and did so with imagination and bravery. But in the age of attitude, the link grows ever more fragile. And there is no guarantee of its holding.

—Jay Tolson