FACTS ARE ventriloquist’s dummies. Sitting on a wise man’s knee they may be made to utter words of wisdom; elsewhere they say nothing or talk nonsense.

ALDOUS HUXLEY
Time Must Have a Stop

Ballast is an acronym for Books Art Language Logic Ambiguity Science and Teaching, as well as a distant allusion to Blast, the short-lived publication founded during World War I by Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist artist and writer. Ballast is mainly a pastiche of astonishing passages from books, magazines, diaries and other writings. Put differently, it is a journal devoted to wit, the contents of which are intended to be insightful, amusing or thought provoking.

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DOROTHY [Christopher Isherwood’s maid] had never heard of [Igor] Stravinsky. She thought she recognized Igor as a Jewish comic on the Molly Goldberg show.

ROBERT CRAFT

I HAD A DIME and a nickel in my pocket. With the dime, the tenth part of a dollar, I bought a ticket. I went in and heard the ventriloquist and his dummy: “Will you spell a word for me, Danny?” “I’ll try, what’s the word?” “Constantinople.” “Why do you tell me you can’t stand on an apple?”

IN THE LATE 18th century, a British entertainer named James Burns, who was known as "Shelford Tommy," persuaded a freight carrier to empty his wagon in order to search for a child whose cries for help seemed to be coming from inside the load he was hauling.

During the same period, when a York shoemaker was accused by fifty witnesses of having tossed a crying baby into the river, he defended himself in court by producing a second crying baby, which he then shockingly beheaded—but which, upon closer inspection, was shown to be only an inanimate doll.

Both Burns and the shoemaker were experts at ventriloquism, the act of making it seem that a voice or other sound has emanated not from one's own larynx, but from some other adjacent object. A person who does this professionally is a ventriloquist or "belly speaker," a coinage that comes from the merger of two Latin words, venter (belly) and loqui (to speak).

Actually, ventriloquists do not really speak from the belly, nor do they, as people mistakenly think, "throw" their voice. Rather, they only create the illusion, which at times can be very convincing, that the sounds that they are making are coming from other sources. They do this not by throwing or projecting anything, but simply by taking advantage of our inherent tendency to see connections between certain things in our surroundings and to dismiss the connections between
When told that a soloist would need six fingers to perform his concerto, Arnold Schoenberg replied, "I can wait."
it turned out, whenever Winchell spoke for the dummy (without moving his lips), the boom mike was being mistakenly placed over the head of the dummy.

Ventriloquism as a stage act was widely practiced during the early decades of the 20th century. Then, like other Vaudeville and music hall acts, its popularity faded as that of "talking pictures" grew. This is interesting, because the phenomenon of sound motion pictures is not unrelated to ventriloquism, since films also create the illusion that the actor's voice (although produced by the sound system) is somehow coming from the screen. (We are painfully aware of this when a foreign film is poorly dubbed, so that the lip movements do not match the dialogue; or, as often happened with old film projectors, when lips and sound are out of sync.)

During the 1940s and 50s, there was a major revival of ventriloquism in the U.S. that was spurred by the frequent appearance of ventriloquists not in motion pictures but—of all things—on radio programs. This is ironic because one of the methods by which ventriloquists convince the audience that not they but the dummy is speaking is by not moving their lips. And since radio is an invisible medium, how would the audience ever detect if a ventriloquist is or is not moving his lips?

Perhaps the best known and most successful American ventriloquist during this period was Edgar Bergen (actress Candice Bergen's father), who appeared in motion pictures, on radio, and later on television, as the straight man for a smart-alecky wooden companion, a dummy named Charlie McCarthy.

At nearly the same time, there was a daytime children's show on television that starred Buffalo Bob Smith and a talking cowboy marionette named Howdy Doody.

Later, in the 1950s and early 60s, two other television ventriloquists became immensely popular: Shari Lewis and her talking hand puppet named Lamb Chop; and Paul Winchell, who bantered with a dummy named Jerry Mahoney, and who, oddly enough, would later contribute to modern medicine by developing the first artificial heart valve.

I can remember some of this because, as a child, I too was a ventriloquist. I don't recall how it started, but by the age of ten or so, I was performing ventriloquioqist acts. Unable to purchase a dummy, I made my own. I modi-
fied the rubber head of a doll that my sisters donated, by painting on hair, a moustache and goatee with black shoe polish, and fashioning a moving mouth. A retired next-door neighbor, who whistled as a hobby, carved an entire body out of wood, with a cavity in the back; and my mother and a family friend, who was a professional tailor, constructed a whole suit (with tie and spats and everything) of miniature clothing. I christened this makeshift companion "Mitchell Mahoney," arrived at by joining the last name of Jerry Mahoney (Winchell's dummy) with the first name of Mitch Miller, a television band leader who hosted a popular musical show in which people sang along by "following the bouncing ball."

Using recycled Vaudeville jokes (e.g. Who was that lady I sawed with you last night?), I entered myself and the dummy in a classroom talent show. Our performance was flawless. The jokes and my fledgling ventriloquist skills were received with such enthusiasm that, until the last moment, it seemed inevitable that I would win the competition. But the final contestant was an unimaginative classmate who, devoid of inventive alternatives, had taken up accordion playing. In the closing moments of the contest, he became the crowd favorite when he chose to play a portion of Rossini's William Tell Overture—a passage that everyone knew in those days as the theme for the popular Lone Ranger and Tonto television series. Okay. End of contest. Ouch!

That same year, as a Christmas present from my parents, I was given a genuine Jerry Mahoney ventriloquist's dummy. It was the economy model, which meant that it had a moving mouth, but no head or eye movement. I used it in performances for at least another year or so, but gave it up soon after that. I don't remember why I lost interest, but it may be that I or others believed that I was too old to be playing with dolls.

More than forty-five years later, I still have that dummy. He lives here with my wife and me—along with the dogs and the parrot(s) and cat. However, his paint is irreparably damaged, and he hasn't said a word for years.

Looking back, I suppose I was never impassioned about becoming a ventriloquist.
But I do know that, throughout my life, I've had an insatiable interest in all kinds and varieties of puzzles, illusions and conundrums—among them ships in bottles, sea horses, camouflage, the man in the moon, riddles, distorted rooms, pictures than contain themselves, metaphors, puns, magic tricks, afterimages, mirages, anamorphic distortions, hand shadows, living plants that mimic stones, chameleons, stage illusions, distorted mirrors, giants and midgets, concrete poetry, logical paradoxes, Mexican jumping beans, constellations, mimes, shapes in clouds or oil pools, the Northern Lights, auctioneering, pen pals, chalk talks, rainbows, yodeling, Japanese finger traps, music boxes, bonsai trees, wishbones, dowsing rods, strip poker, sumo wrestlers, lava lamps, walking sticks, smoke signals, saddle sores, spinning tops, tree houses, cat's-eye marbles, Mohawk haircuts, wooden nickels, crazy quilts, that song in which the lyrics say "I was looking back to see if you were looking back to see if I was looking back to see if..." sand paintings in a jar, loco weed, flying squirrels, snow domes, weeping willow trees, all turtles, sea monkeys, x-ray specs, yoyos, pogo sticks, juggling, scratch 'n sniff, dung beetles, tadpoles, Venus-flytraps, wax lips, school paste, plastic puke, cotton candy, beach blanket bingo, pipe dreams, kaleidoscopes, and cricket cages.

I also still remember the endless childhood hours I spent, after listening repeatedly to Gene Autry's recording of "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer," trying to decide if he [Rudolph] would "go down in history" or "go down in his story." Even now, I have yet to determine the answer to that. »-

WHEN I WAS a student at Yale, [American painter] Stuart Davis came as a visiting artist. He walked into my studio and looked for a long time at my paintings and then began to speak. As he spoke, his cigarette never left his lips. It wobbled up and down at the corner of his mouth. I watched as the ash got longer and longer and finally flopped onto his shirt. As the cigarette burned down and got shorter and shorter, I realized that I hadn't heard a word he'd said. I was afraid that the cigarette would burn his lips, which had already turned brown from years of tobacco—life process interfering with art.

THE FOLLOWING are brief passages from recently published scholarly books, as cited in an article by Robert Fulford, titled "They should know better: Humanities scholars spend lots of time reading, so why can't they write?", in the National Post (Canada), July 15, 2003. Suggested by Mark McBride.

- Kay Armatage, *The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema* (University of Toronto, 2003): "We can see a socio-sexual parallel between the geography of the wilderness and the topographies of narrative in this genre, which organizes a particular spatial itinerary and social anatomy."

- Paul H. Fry, *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford University Press, 1995): "It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absention of actuality from the concept in part through its invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness—rather than the will to power—of its fall into conceptuality."

- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2001): "In the logic of colonialist representations, the construction of a separate colonized other and the segregation of identity and alterity turns out paradoxically to be at once absolute and extremely intimate."

WHEN CRITIQUING painting students [at Yale University], it was customary for [Josef] Albers to ask the students what they were trying to do. If the student responded in terms of color, space or form, Albers engaged in meaningful discussion with the student. If the student responded in terms of feelings, or some esoteric rationale, Albers would throw up his arms and in a loud voice exclaim, "Gotten Himmel! Don't show me your intestines." He would avoid that student for the next few weeks.


**TACITUS**

Style, like the human body, is specially beautiful when the veins are not prominent and the bones cannot be counted.

**CHARLES DICKENS**

The office door was opened by the dismal boy, whose appropriate name was Blight.
There are countless historical videos on Adolf Hitler, the Third Reich, and the circumstances of the death camps, but this is assuredly one of the best. From its beginning moments, which consist of a drawn-out, completely mute flight over a tranquil German village, this film demands our attention, then holds us firmly by the throat for a full two hours. Its power in part is undoubtedly due to the nightmarish subject matter (I couldn’t sleep after watching it). Yet, few accounts of World War II Germany are as memorable, which I think is mostly attributable to the images used (photographs, revealing documents, artworks, and rare and often shocking films, especially those made by the Nazis), the artfully insistent pace of the editing, and the persuasive clarity of the narration. It is not a film that is summarized easily, but its underlying premise is that Hitler (who had initially wanted to be an artist, then an architect) was not entirely irrational, but rather that the things he did, while outrageous and revolting, were seemingly logical methods by which he could “art direct” or “design” society. A devotee of Darwinian natural selection, he believed that the natural process by which the weak (or unfit) are self-exterminating was being subverted by permissive social practices, which he also perceived as analogous to the threat of contagious diseases. Like many of his contemporaries, he was a great admirer of the composer Richard Wagner, especially his elaborate operas, which combined different arts (music, theatre, literature and visual art) into a harmonious single event, for which Wagner used the term Gesamtkunstwerk (German for “total work of art”). Surprisingly, this film does not mention that famous word, although it was widely and commonly used by turn-of-the-century architects and designers, among them Henry van de Velde, Peter Behrens, Josef Hoffmann, and Frank Lloyd Wright (who called it “organic form”). In those days, when the finest architects were asked to design a building, they were likely to refuse to make only the basic shape or shell. Instead, they tended to design the entire building (much as William Morris did with the interior of his own residence, Red House), to make it consistent by also designing the furniture, the fittings, the dinnerware, and, in some cases, even the ideal clothes to be worn by the building’s residents. This was taken one step further in 1899 when Josef Maria Olbrich was invited to design (as a deliberate Gesamtkunstwerk) the setting and most of the houses for an artists’ colony in Darmstadt, Germany. This film does not mention that colony, but it does say that, as Chancellor, Hitler began to imagine himself as the set designer, director and leading actor (or perhaps what designers now commonly call the ‘corporate designer’) of a colossal Wagnerian opera called the Third Reich, for which he really did design certain uniforms, flags, standards and buildings. It also claims that, in addition to Hitler, at least half of his leading officials had direct and significant links to the arts. Those artistic involvements were not incidental, the film argues, because the Third Reich was in certain ways an aesthetic movement—a perversely misguided attempt to improve the world for the German Volk, and to re-unite art with everyday life. ->
IN 1953 he [the Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky] broke off his connection with Hollywood's two Russian [Orthodox] churches, for the reason that the priest-confessor had asked him for an autograph.

ROBERT CRAFT

SHIRLEY TEMPLE
I stopped believing in Santa Claus when I was six. Mother took me to see him in a department store and he asked me for my autograph.

WILLIAM JAMES
(The Will To Believe)
Not every man fits every hour...A given genius may come either too early or too late. Peter the Hermit would now be sent to a lunatic asylum. John Stuart Mill in the tenth century would have lived and died unknown.
LATER I would be taught to wonder...whether anything of which we were normally unaware might have taken place between one tick and its following tock (molecular doings, quantum leaps), because if you ran past a picket fence at the right speed, you would seem to see the green field beyond, as if the fence weren’t there. Walk more slowly, and you might receive nothing but board. Going about at lifespeed, mankind might be missing...well, who knew what?


[MUSEUM CURATOR Peter Morrin] stated that it was important for the intent of the artist not to be absolutely clear. If the intent is clear, the work becomes only propaganda. Ambiguity is important. If the work reveals only the artist’s intention, it is less than what it could be. The work becomes important when the meanings contained are greater than what the artist had in mind when he or she created the work. Ambiguity helps the work transcend itself.


E. B. WHITE A poet’s pleasure is to withhold a little of his meaning, to intensify by mystification.
In the mid-1970s, I was sitting in an office in a Midwestern university when a colleague walked in with an out-of-town guest. I doubt if I had ever heard of Fluxus or Something Else Press, so when this person was introduced as Dick Higgins from New York, it meant nothing to me. But my interest was aroused when he held out a recently self-published book. Its outer appearance was that of a standard Bible (the title gold-stamped on a black pebbled cover, red ink on the edge of the pages, with a ribbon bookmark hanging out), but inside was a text of irreverent thoughts about art, life and what have you, titled *Foewbomwhnw* (now called *F,O,E,W* for short). I've never forgotten that book (nor Higgins), and as recently as six years ago, I was finally able to obtain my own copy. I have also since discovered that Higgins was interested in Merle Armitage, a maverick book designer who died the same year as Higgins' visit, and about whom I have written too. He was working on a book about Armitage, when, at age 60, Higgins died prematurely in 1998. To get to the point, Higgins was the husband of another well-known Fluxus artist named Alison Knowles. I don't know how long they were married, but at some point they gave birth to twins, one of whom is an art historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and is now the author of this volume. As a result, when I heard that this was coming out, I was terribly excited, eager to learn about the Fluxus art movement in relation to the daily lives of Higgins, Knowles and others. Unfortunately, instead it's a dressed-up edition of a doctoral dissertation, so austere, pro forma and scholarly that it might have been written by any art historian. In contrast to the claim on the book's jacket, it's hard to believe that the author "makes the most of her personal connection to the movement by sharing her firsthand experience." There is a surplus of "scholarly" books on Fluxus (a diffuse neo-Dada group that produced mail art, Happenings and sight gags in the 1960s), most of which read like they must have begun as doctoral dissertations. What is still lacking is a candid eyewitness memoir by someone who was there, in the eye of the hurricane, yet did not directly participate in the creative maelstrom. A good candidate is Hannah Higgins, who might have done that here if she had chosen to write openly about her father, or both her parents. Or about growing up in that context, since throughout her childhood, as she states in the preface, "I explored Fluxus objects that sat in our living room; attended Fluxus concerts and Happenings; and shared dinners, demonstrations, and avant-garde festivals with these people." Sadly, nearly the entire book is a formal, impersonal treatise that is, I find, far less interesting. As she herself says in the opening line: "This project has passed through me, but is not of me."


In the mid-1960s, when I was a student at a Midwestern university, no bars were allowed within a mile of the school, nor could beer or wine be sold. And of course this was long in advance of videos, cable TV or computers. One way in which students entertained themselves was to go to the on-campus screenings of foreign films (maybe twice a month), then sit up all night drinking coffee, talking about them. We saw very few non-Hollywood films in those days, and they were of such power, that I still have vivid memories of all of them, including such unforgettable works as *Wild Strawberries* (Bergman), *Lo Dolce Vito* (Fellini), *Knife in the Water* (Polanski), and so on. In those same years, we were also introduced to the work of various avant garde French filmmakers (all of whom had been born around 1930), whose efforts were commonly said to comprise a New Wave in filmmaking, among them Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and Claude Chabrol. As a result, it feels nostalgic to watch this collection (enriched by brief clips from their films) with some of the movement's best-known participants, including Truffaut, Godard and Chabrol, along with a handful of others, less familiar to American audiences, such as Jacques Demy, Georges Franju, Jacques Rivette, Jean Rouch and Agnes Varda. In these informal interviews (recorded originally in 1964 for French television), they touch on all the issues and problem-solving strategies that we, as undergraduate art students, talked about forty-five years ago, after having viewed their films: How to make purposeful use of mistakes. How to accept limitations (financial, technical or otherwise) as advantages, rather than being burdened by them. Having learned the right way to do something, what would happen if we did the opposite? While benefiting from experience, can we also learn from the "innocent eye" of an amateur, naif or outsider? And so on. As I watched this documentary, it occurred to me that I would be wise to revisit the work of all these French directors (which I am able to do now through video stores), to experience their famous films in a new time frame. I would learn more about filmmaking, but I think I might also revisit some truths that I learned long ago when I first witnessed them. 

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**LEWIS CARROLL**

"Which of your teachers do you value the most highly, those whose words are easily understood, or those who puzzle you at every turn?" I feel obliged to admit that we generally admired most the teachers we couldn't quite understand.

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**MEL BLANC**

[voice of Bugs Bunny, the epitaph on his tombstone]

That's all, folks!

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**[ABBOTT H. THAYER]**

sometimes excelled them [his children] in the invention of fanciful nonsense, as when his daughter Gladys painted the face of an Irishman on the back of Thayer's bald head, the scant dark fringe of his remaining hair serving for the beard. When he entered the room walking backwards and giving life to this grotesque apparition by flexing the muscles of his scalp it was startlingly effective.

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**NELSON C. WHITE**


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**MAE WEST**

I'm the girl that works at Paramount all day and Fox all night.
In early 1968, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, head of the South Vietnamese police (and, later, a Maryland restaurant owner), led a bound Viet Cong POW into a Saigon street, pulled out a pistol and, in full view of journalists, shot him pointblank in the head. By chance, an Associated Press photojournalist raised his camera at the same time (not knowing the general's intention), and captured everything on film. And yet, as that newsman confesses in an interview in this film, he had witnessed so much brutality by then that the killing did not phase him and, indeed, a few moments later, he wandered off to go to lunch. It is largely because of the violence shown (or described, in painful detail) that this film is so very disturbing, sometimes almost unbearably, and yet, it is also so riveting that one cannot help but continue to watch. But that is exactly the point that is made by the filmmaker, Coco Schrijber: In human experience (deeply ingrained in the animal brain of, at least, young males), there seems to be some kind of perverse delight (in this film, repeatedly likened to sex) in malicious violence, and, specifically, in killing. In the words of one Vietnam veteran who is interviewed, to kill a perceived enemy is "better than any dope you can get on the street...it's a high that you cannot imagine." Or, as war correspondent and author Michael Herr (writer of the screenplays for Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket) puts it: "If war was hell and only hell, people would simply not put up with it. Rather, we do it because we apparently get some kind of exhilaration (an unparalleled involvement) from the experience of stalking and murdering things. In spite of the fact that the footage consists mostly of interviews with Vietnam War veterans (both soldiers and journalists) and scenes of the tourists who visit there now (where, next to a sofa-sized Mona Lisa, they can also buy a painting of General Loan shooting that Viet Cong prisoner), it would be a terrible error to think that this film is specifically or even primarily about that particular era. It's really about American society at this very moment, in the sense that the questions it raises pertain to events in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the widespread appeal of ultra-violent video games, to explicit violence in films (including this one), and to the shootings of peers and superiors by high school students and factory workers. Deservedly, this film has won several awards at international film festivals. It is smartly and superbly filmed, conceived, and edited. A cry of concern, it is a stunningly beautiful work about the most terrifying of subjects. ☹
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AS FOR his [Prince Albert's] sense of fun... I never could discover it. He went into immoderate fits of laughter at anything like a practical joke; for instance, if anyone caught his foot in a mat, or nearly fell into the fire...the mirth of the whole Royal Family, headed by the Prince, knew no bounds.
