

No Curiosity Filled the Cats

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OBSERVER

Down to the cellar we went and lit up the horror box. The President was playing the piano again. This time at the Grand Ole Opry. "God Bless America." He plays badly, perhaps by design, for he is a man of design, fearful of the natural gesture, careful to contrive cocoons of image protecting the private man from public grasp.

If he could play like Paderewski, who was also a President, he would not dare it in public. Wrong image. Long hair, Beethoven's "Apassionata," highbrow music, tender sensibility—it would never play in Peoria, as they used to say around the White House in the glory autumn of 1972. In any case, he did not play the piano well at the Grand Ole Opry. It is okay to like Presidents who play the piano but not well.

What are we doing down in this cellar with the box lit? A continuing experiment. Can cats be made to look at television? And if not, why? Do cats have some higher critical faculty? They are intensely interested in everything else that occurs in this house, but so far they have refused with absolute indifference to look at television.

The cats are not the least interested in observing the President of the United States at the keyboard in Nashville. Just the other day we had the President on this same box playing the piano at the White House in accompaniment to Pearl Bailey, and the cats gave it not a single glance. It is probably because they have no sense of history, no taste for irony, no ugly obsession with the intricate processes by which men are destroyed in the public arena.

With any sense of history at all, they might have paused to reflect that this outburst of public piano was pointedly reminiscent of Harry Truman, who also did turns at the keyboard. In his agony President Nixon was working to spin yet another image for the public's distraction: embattled, feisty Harry, who walked with kings but had the common touch.

Richard Nixon's admiration for Truman extends back twenty years when he used to quote Truman's homily about getting out of the kitchen if you can't stand the heat. Even now with Nixon's polls on the bottom, Nixon loyalists cleave to Truman, whose polls were just as bad. And here we are, lighting the box to find him doing a Truman.

Well, Truman was a natural man and Nixon is an image-spinner. Twenty-six months ago, on top of the world, he was Big Brother. The American people were like children, he told an interviewer. Discipline was what they needed. Had to learn that instant gratification of every wish was not the route to a healthy polity. Now, on the

ropes, here he is in the cellar. Harry Truman, free spirit and battler against heavy odds, piano-pounder to an amused populace.

Who is Nixon really? The cats are blind to the mystery. With irony, they might see at least that this piano playing is, well, *interesting* because done by a man who in his Disraeli manifestation dreamed of the generation of peace. The nobility of the dream and the clownishness of this public straining to play the nice guy do not play in the cellar, although this particular cellar is admittedly not Peoria.

The images are out of joint. If the cats had the slightest sensitivity, they would surely see, wouldn't they, that something truly terrible is happening on this very box that they refuse to consider. A man is being destroyed. Or is it only a cocoon of images that is being torn to pieces? And if so, will we find that there is nobody inside the cocoon? That the cocoon has absorbed the man and left nothing but images—all illusions without juice? Disraeli, Truman, Big Brother, A. Mitchell Palmer, Babbitt, Lincoln, King Charles I, Scipio Africanus standing between Western civilization and Asiatic Hannibal.

It is dreadful to see this happening in the cellar. He was there the other night for what is called a news conference, although no one confers and no news occurs. The cats would not watch. One tried to hold them, to make them confront the screen, but the grip failed as the mind became absorbed in the appalling nature of the spectacle, and soon the cats had fled to the laundry tubs to torment the crickets.

Next day the papers said the President had not done badly. Well... perhaps so, if one considered the thing as yet another exercise in image projection. There were moments of dynamism at which image critics might have said yes, he is projecting Presidentialism very well, very Theodore Rooseveltish.

Looking for the man, however, one saw a sad, groggy figure who had taken a brutal pummeling and was going on grit alone. If the Watergate thing were a fight, it would have been stopped long ago. There in the cellar it seemed that he had already taken such punishment that the damage would surely be permanent. It is truly a horror box we have down there.

Afterwards, much later, patience brought us Morris—or is it Maurice?—television's feline cat-food salesman. The cats were rushed to the screen, eyes front. Surely they would show a flicker of interest in one of their own.

They did not. Cats, it seems, have no stomach for witnessing the debasement of their species. Strange creatures.