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John Connelly teaches the history of East Central Europe at the University of California, Berkeley, and is working on a study of occident in the Catholic Church.

David Edgar’s Playing with Fire will be on at the National Theatre in September and October.

Hal Foster teaches at Princeton. His most recent book, written with Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, is Art since 1910.

Ed Harriman is a journalist and television documentary film-maker.

R.W. Johnson’s South Africa: The First Man, The Last Nation was published in October. He has recently been examining Nazi intelligence activity in South Africa during the war and the counter-intelligence response to it.

Tom Leonard’s Access to the Silence was published last year by Eruscate Books.

Michael Longley’s Snow Water is out from Cape.

Hilary Mantel is working on a new novel called The Complex Stranger. Reginald Black was reviewed in the issue of 23 May.

Edwin Morgan is Scotland’s first National Poet. Title from Ranev Menchanast in our front Mariscat Press.

Christian Parenti, whose latest book is The Premise: Shadows and Halftruths in Occupied Iraq, is a research fellow at the City University of New York’s Center for Peace, Culture and Politics.

Christopher Prendergast is a fellow of King’s College, Cambridge, and was the general editor of the Penguin Proust.

Simon Schaffer is a professor of history of science at Cambridge. He recently contributed to a tercentenary collection of essays on the history of chemistry teaching in Cambridge.

Steven Shapin teaches in the department of history of science at Harvard. He was the joint winner, with Simon Schaffer, of this year’s Erasmus Prize for the study of science and society.

Theo Tait works at the Work.

David Trotter teaches English at Cambridge. His most recent book is Postmodern Modernity: Literary Experiment, Psychoysis and the Professionalisation of English Society.
Yellow Ribbons
Hal Foster on kitsch in Bush's America

Kitch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

It also makes it, in societies ruled by a single party, ‘totalitarianism’, and ‘so little film-charitably totalitarian kitsch; all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions.’

During the Reagan years Kundera was a darling of the neo-conservatives, who were pleased with his account of Communist society as a ‘world of grinning idiots’ on ‘the Grand March’ to egalitarian mistakes for uspica. Today, however, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, aspects of ‘totalitarian kitsch’ have returned in American society, pressured over consumption and ideology, which renders it all the more immune to criticism. (Recall the heady mix of honesty and nostalgia in this communist version of a ‘socialist Bush advice’ before the last presidential election: ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—it’ll be us again, creating other realities, which you can study too.’) Yet the similarities are marked as well: even though not all questions are precluded, many answers are given in advance (there are WDMS in Iraq, there is an al-Qaeda connection), and we are surrounded by ‘beautifying lies’ of the sort noted by Kundera – a ‘spread of democracy’ that often bolsters its opposite, a ‘mass of freedom’ that entails that reality is ‘judiciously’, as you will – it’ll be us again, creating other realities, which you can study too.

What does all this have to do with humble kitsch? In part the blackmail that produces ‘our categorical agreement’ operates through its tokens. For instance, in support of the ‘war on terror’ are the decals of the World Trade Center towers draped with stars and stripes, the ‘protest’ of the yellow ribbon stickers on vehicles across the US that exhort us to ‘support our troops’ (SUVs seem to lead the way, as if extreme patriotism can save ex-convicts). Part of the force of this sign is its legibility, which depends on an American custom, dating from as late as the Civil War, whereby women in a yellow ribbons of liberty to men gone to battle. This event is mythical, put in circulation by the 1949 John Ford film We’re no Angels, which starred John Wayne as a cavalry officer in the Indian battles in the West. And even this source is shaly, as used today, the ribbons date only to the ‘hostage crisis’ of 1979-81 when 52 Americans were held by Iranian militants, and there the relevant source is a pop song, ‘The Yellow Ribbons Round the Ole Oak Tree’ (1973), about a parsleyed convict.

The point is not to mock this symbol (its shallowness below its strength), much less to bemoan its taste, but rather to suggest how it serves to ‘certain off’ shit and death. For in lieu of images of flag-draped coffins, let alone of blown-apart bodies, we get these bows inquieting our support – which, of course, is less for ‘our troops’ than for this administration, whose adventures are not exactly in the troops’ best interests. Seen from this jaundiced point of view, the bows begin to seem more like collars that blid us semantically to the imperial project.

Another prime example of Bush kitsch, this time concerning ‘moral values’, is the brandingishment of the Ten Commandments at state courthouses. (The main protagonist is Roy Moore, the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, who was dismissed after he refused to remove his granite monu-

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state, to take money away from social pro-
grammes so that people are driven towards the church - "God's rent, instead of welfare. The tedbels emblazon this vanguard of the
right; they also epitomise its literal rela-
tion to the law, for even as a constitutional principle is defined, the biblical letter is hon-
oured. (In part this literalism stems from
the Baptist doctrine of the 'inerrancy' of
the Bible, which effectively obviates the need to read it, let alone interpret it. Often in
this society the Bible does appear more cer-
tain than the law, and more brandished than cited. Being-along-with-Jesus is all one needs.)

In the case of both the yellow ribbons and the Commandment monuments, ex-
hortation slips into the imperative: 'Sup-
port our troops.' 'Thou shalt (not)'. This is
also the voice of the second anthem of the
US, 'God Bless America' (also available as a
flag sticker), only here it is God who is ex-
hoarded. Again, this stuff seems innocuous, but precisely because of this it acclimatises
us to rhetorical structures that now suffice political language, especially on the right, where policy positions - against reproductive
rights, gay rights and so on - are pre-
seanted as preordained, commands from on high, answers given in advance.

Some cultural critiques of Bush kitsch have appeared: witty campings by groups such as 'Millionaire's for Bush' (who per-
form brilliantly in demonstrations), as well as
as graphic accounts of its oppressive effects, such as Art Spiegelman's 'In the Shadow of No Towers'. I want to point to two other
instances, one an independent film, the
other an art installation: each takes on a
prominent 'moral value' advanced by Bush
kitsch.

A T THE HEART of kitsch, according to
Kundera, is the 'idiotic tautology'
"Long live life!" Bush kitsch has its own version of this tautology, even as it
seems to define life as, optimally, the time between conception and birth (and, more rarely, between vegetative state and death). In part the thinking here is evangelical: if the Creation is one with the Fall, then the
fetus is more innocent than the child and
so more worthy of protection (this line af-
ficts the Bush position on stem-cell re-
search, too, among other issues). In his new film Palindromes, Todd Solondz mercilessly plays out some implications of this view of
'life'.

The movie centres on a girl called Aviva (played by different actors in different
scenes, which, along with her palindromic
name, indicates her allegorical status). Barely a teenager, Aviva is subsumed by this
ideology of 'life': she wants a baby, and,
when she becomes pregnant, she cannot
separate her existence from this pregnancy.

After her middle-class parents urge an
abortion, she runs away and falls in with a
freaky sort of folks who are damaged psychologicaly or physically. This family is a
palindrome of its own, a closed world run
by an evangelical couple called Bo and
Mama Sunshine, who have coaxed the child-
ren to accept Jesus as their 'personal sav-
ior'. At dinner on the day Aviva arrives, an
albino girl, who is blind as a result of her
mother's drug abuse, tells her story of her
redemption in a harrowing idiom of beatific-robotic faith. Later, the kids, who
have formed a musical group called the Sun-
nishes, practise songs written for Jesus: shot in quasi-documentary fashion, this set-
iment combines the sentimentalism of Chris-
tian pop with the pathology of family bands. In another scene Mama and the children
celebrate life-through-Jesus-upstairs while
Bo and two associates plot the murder of an
'abortion doctor' downstairs (the same
docor Aviva had visited with her mother); here the kitsch tautology of 'life' is seen
not only to 'curtain off' death but to pro-
duce it as well. None of this is subtle, yet
the strategy of the movie is precisely one
of mimetic excess - to rehearse evangelical language to the point of implosion.

'The flag and the foetus are [are] our Cross
and our Divine Child,' Harold Bloom wrote
under the first Bush. 'Together they sym-
bolise the American Religion.' This is even
more the case under the second Bush: the
foetus is sacrosanct, so is the flag. Looked in
the aura of the Cross. Especially since 9/11
this administration has operated as if under the aegis of the wrathful Christ; we too have
suffered, we too have a right to judge and to
punish. Perhaps this is the point of identifi-
cation that made P uslik of the Christ so pop-
ular in the US: after two hours of torture,
Mel Gibson (like Jesus, an honorary Ameri-
can) delivers the split-second money-shot -Jesus resurrected and vengeance.

The result was that were Mad Max, Braveheart and Patriot all in
one. It is this 'moral value' of redemption
violence that Robert Gober evoked in his
recent installation at the Matthew Marks
Gallery in New York. As usual with Gober,
the exhibit was a broken allegory that both
elicited and resisted interpretation. It open-
ed with two stacked garbage cans in plast-
er covered by a sheet of plywood, on which
lay the folded shirt of a priest. This make-
shift pulpit led onto two rows of three
dirty white slabs (in bronze made to look
like plaster, each of which, like a plaque,
supported a particular object. To the left
was the plank of faux wood in bronze
(malformed, it seemed both molten and pet-
ified) and to the right a bag of nappies
(made of plaster seared in plastic); then a
milk crate with three more bags of nappies
and another plank; and, finally, two glass
bowls filled with large pieces of fruit in
beeswax. Elsewhere in the gallery were
other fabricated elements characteristic of
Gober: behind two doors were two pairs of
legs, one male, one female, set in two bath-
tubs, and in two corners were two toscus,
each with a male and a female breast, and
with a male leg sprouting from the body.

The presentation of all these things was at
once forensic and ceremonial, as if we were
in a morgue and in a chapel at once. This
strange effect made sense once we saw that
the four framed pictures hung on the side
walls consisted of reproduced spreads from
the first section of the New York Times of 12
September 2001, with images of embracing
couples drawn over photos of the al-Qaeda
attacks.

In the al-Qaeda objects, motley material,
memorialis slabs and crumbling limbs evok-
ed a historical hell that combined the post-
attack space of the World Trade towers with the bomb sites of Iraq. Some years ago,
too was a political continuum in which the
trauma of 9/11 was transferred into the
triumphalism of the "war on terror," replete with the rhetorical coercion of the last election to oppose Bush was to appease the terriorists, to betray the troops and so on. This lastresult was driven by a crusaded Christ made of cement. Decapitated as if vandalslized, Jesus was flanked, in the custumary positions of the two Marys, by spare tokens of suburban life, a white chair in glassedover snow and a carton of bug lights in blown glass. Like additional stigmata turned to tactic spots, the spills of the beheaded Christ flowed streams of water into a round hole cut roughly into the floor.

Like Sollon, then, Geb Orterichated his effects through a mimetic exacerbation of Bush kitsch, drawing equally on Wal-Mart goods, churchyard displays and gberapaiments. The acophilic Jesus was the crucual touch, for it conditioned a mass of associabions: reminiscences of the beheaded hostages in Iraq as well as the hooded victim at Abu Ghrab (the one posed on a box with his arms outstretched as if crucified with electrodes), and, behind or through both images, the figure of America in the guise of Christ the righteous aggressor, the one who kills in order to redeem. The ambiguity of this symbol was irreducible and intense, and as such it served, momentarily, as a riposte to the world of yellow ribbons and Commandment monuments.

At Tate Britain

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The Joshua Reynolds exhibition at Tate Britain (until 28 September) is subtitled "The Creation of Celebrity." The case for Reynolds as a prime mover in the invention of that modern kind of fame is well made. The catalogue, the wall labels, the little cards with short quotatons set in fancy borders which are stuck below some of the pictures, all those self-help notes can be read from the paintings themselves: that Reynolds, in his seven-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week pursuit of reputation, fame and wealth, and in his ardent prosecution of his role as a maker of iconic portraits, not only made likenesses of distinguished literary men, successful courtiers, noblemen, royalty and friends (especially friends, because many of the great and many of the scandalous were also his friends), but gave them a dignity, withnessomeness, beauty or authority which the imagination of a literate public, fed with gossip and news from a burgeoning press, recognised and relished.

No painter today could do it. Photography has so far subordinated the power of painting, embalmed personality as it was by Lucian Freud (who in his pieces, subjects and repuaton is the closest thing we have to a dominant face-painter of Reynolds's caliber) paints "the Queen" (as Reynolds painted the Prince of Wales) or Kate Moss un-dressed (as Reynolds painted Kitty Fish-er), it is not the power of his canvases to match the glamour evoked by the written and spoken word which first strikes us, but their resemblance or lack of it to photogr-aphs — very often to photographs posed with turns of the head and flourishes which go back to Reynolds's portrait. Photographs which we can't help knowing already con- dition our first responses and, insofar as we are participants in that cult of celebrity which reaches its early maturity in Rey- nolds's work, those first responses may also be our la.

Celebrity portraits may have another more profound, or at least more dignified life as works of art, or our problem when we look at them is that way the encroach- ment of the publicity images which accompany them in our memories. A Reynolds exhibition presents an analogous but differ- ent problem: when you have subtracted from one of his portraits the cleaver pre sentation which made it as a publicity piece, does what is left add up to a great work of art?

One of the admirable aspects of this exhibition is the space and attention given to prints. The mezzotints shown here did much to spread Reynolds's reputation; they are also achievements in their own right. To some degree they make up for the fact that Reynolds's two thousand-odd portraits are not, on the whole, wonderful pieces of craft. The paintings couldn't have been achieved without the help of drapery paint- ers and other assistants, and while they hold together visually when seen from a distance they do not usually come alive a second time (as Gaitskell expected he would) when you move towards them and read the surface as a field of individual marks. Lesser painters who were his contemporaries or near-contemporaries — Rae- burn, for example, and Lawrence — could make them in swarms surfaces and ease of perform ance. This lack of painterly grace, along with his notorious use of fugitive pigments and doubly drying dry colors, underlines that Reynolds's genius was, when he wrote, cerebral. In the Diaries he set out ideas about his education of artists and about painting which, he acknowledged, were not those that had governed his own practic. Yet his set, like his writing, is calculate- red rather than instinctive. His travels in Italy and his knowledge of classical and Italian art were the basis of the variety in composition and expression which distinguished the body of his work as a portrait-painter from that of his contemporaries. What set him apart from his soul and the dignity of the high art he so much admired — above all that of Raphael and Michelangelo — and what also saves him from intolerable pomposity, is his theatrical streak. Almost everyone who is not literally in fancy dress is nonetheless playing a part; the very greatest portraits, from the Mona Lisa on, are famously demanding of interpretation. Reynolds's soldiers are just heroic, his actresses just tragic or merely playful; Dr Johnson is given the gravitas of a Roman portrait bust. Some women preferred to be painted by Gainsborough because he let them wear modern clothes. Reynolds, who found modern dress, particularly in sculptur- ure, unartistic, tended to suggest quasi-classical drapery — that is how he dressed Omai, the Polynesian brought to London from Tahiti in 1774. One of the most in- triguing pictures in the exhibition is this study of Omai, which shows how far Ray- nolds was willing to go to make a port- rait match an ideal. It is not just the turban and drapery which are un-Tahitian in the final portrait, it is the face itself. The nose, one realises when you look at the convincingly Polynesian face of the study, should be flatter and less turned up, the mouth more still. The study has the same kind of truth which only those who turn back on the ideal achieve. This is not a fancy Noble Savage but a candid- ate for a Pacific island rugby team's front row.

Peter Campbell