

## PROMISE OF THE PAST

We are all ruled by the past, although no one understands it. No one recognizes the power of the past. But if you think about it, the past has always been more important than the present. The present is like a coral island that sticks above the water, but is built upon millions of dead corals under the surface, that no one sees. In the same way our everyday world is built upon millions and millions of events and decisions that occurred in the past. And what we add in the present is trivial.

A teenager has breakfast, then goes to the store to buy the latest CD of a new band. The kid thinks he lives in a modern moment. But who has defined what a band is? Who defined a store? Who defined a teenager? Or breakfast? To say nothing of all the rest, the kid's entire social setting- family, school, clothing, transportation and government.

None of this has been decided in the present. Most of it was decided hundreds of years ago. Five hundred years, a thousand years. This kid is sitting on top of a mountain that is the past. And he never notices it. He is ruled by what he never sees, never thinks about, doesn't know. It is a form of coercion that is accepted without question. This same kid is skeptical of other forms of control-parental restrictions, commercial messages, government laws. But the invisible rule of the past, which decides nearly everything in his life, goes unquestioned. This is real power. Power that can be taken, and used. For just as the present is ruled by the past, so is the future. That is why the future belongs to the past. The problem is to bring the past alive. To make it real. Single frames from videos and sound bites can be quite effective, less is more. "The Promise of the Past"

Today, everybody expects to be entertained, and they expect to be entertained all the time. Business meetings must be snappy, with bullet lists and animated graphics, so executives aren't bored. Malls and stores must be engaging, so they amuse as well as sell us. Politicians must have pleasing video personalities and tell us only what we want to hear. Schools must be careful not to bore young minds that expect the speed and complexity of television. Students must be amused—everyone must be amused, or they will switch: switch brands, switch channels, switch parties, switch loyalties. This is the intellectual reality of Western society at the end of the century.

In other centuries, human beings wanted to be saved, or improved, or freed, or educated. But in our century, they want to be entertained. The great fear is not disease or death, but of boredom. A sense of time on our hands, a sense of nothing to do. A sense that we are not amused.

But where will this mania for entertainment end? What will people do when they get tired of television? When they get tired of Movies? We already know the answer—they go into participatory activities: sports, theme parks, amusement rides, roller coasters. Structured fun, planned thrills? Sooner or later, the artifice becomes too noticeable. They begin to realize that an amusement park is really a kind of jail, in which you pay to be an inmate.

This artifice will drive them to seek authenticity. Authenticity will be the buzzword of the twenty-first century. And what is authentic?

History and anything that is not devised and structured to make a profit. Anything that is not controlled by corporations, existing for its own sake, and assumes its own shape. The modern world is the corporate equivalent of a formal garden, where everything is planted and arranged for effect. Where nothing is untouched, where nothing is authentic. Where, then, will people turn for the rare and desirable experience of authenticity? They will turn to the past.

History is unarguably authentic. The past is a world that already existed before Disney and Murdoch and Nissan and Sony and IBM and all the other shapers of the present day. The past was here before they were. The past rose and fell without their intrusion and molding and selling. The past is real. It's authentic. And this will make the past unbelievably attractive. That's why the future is the past.

What will people do? They are already doing it. The fastest-growing segment of travel today is cultural tourism. People who want to visit not other places, but other times. People who want to immerse themselves in medieval walled cities, in vast Buddhist temples, Mayan pyramid cities, Egyptian necropolises. People who want to walk and be in the world of the past. They don't want it fake. They don't want it made pretty, or cleaned up. They want it to be authentic.

Under the guise of history, in effect build an intellectual brand name. Such brand names now exist for software, for example. But none exist for history. And yet history is the most powerful intellectual tool a society possesses. History is not a not a dispassionate record of dead events. Nor is it a playground for scholars to indulge their trivial disputes.

The purpose of history is to explain the present—to say why the world around us is the way it is. History tells us what is important in our world, and how it came to be. It tells us why the things we value are the things we should value. And it tells us what is to be ignored, or discarded. That is true power—profound power. The power to define a whole society. The future lies in the past, in whoever controls the past.