The Broken Publicity Machine

by Theodore Dalrymple

“As flies to wanton boys,” says Gloucester in *King Lear* after his eyes have been put out by the Duke of Cornwall at the behest of the evil Goneril, “are we to the gods: they kill us for their sport.”

This could be updated to the following: As flies to Damien Hirst are we to the gods: he kills them for publicity.

A German museum, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, has just removed one of Hirst’s great works of self-advertisement from its gallery on the grounds that it falls foul of Germany’s law protecting animals from ill treatment. The work consists of hatching flies on one side of a double glass cube that are

then attracted by a light in the other, where they are fried to death by the insectivorous equivalent of the electric chair.

The purpose of this work of art, apparently (I will not go into the perennially disputed question of what does or does not constitute art), was to draw attention to the numbers of insects killed every night by artificial light. This is a bit like drawing attention to the horrors of capital punishment by holding public executions. It is insulting to the mind of the public that any proposition such as that the number of insects is declining dangerously in the world—which I believe is the case—must be illustrated in this sensationalist way. Moreover, given the prurient nature of the human mind, watching flies hatching and being killed in this fashion is more likely to pander to sadistic impulses than to encourage deep ecological reflection. The wanton boys to whom Gloucester refers in *King Lear* do not pull the legs and wings off flies in order to discover scientifically which of them is the organ of flight; they do it from what Coleridge called motiveless malignity, which is to say malignity as its own reward.

Macaulay famously said that the Puritans condemned bear-baiting not because it caused suffering to the bear but because it gave pleasure to the spectator—and the Puritans were against pleasure as such. As a matter of historical fact, Macaulay may well have been right; animal welfare was not exactly a preoccupation in England of the 17th century, no doubt because human life hung by a gossamer thread in those days. Why worry about the welfare of bears when a cut on the finger might easily prove fatal within days?

Nevertheless, there is surely reason not to encourage cruelty in children, even if we believe that flies are not capable of subjective or self-conscious suffering. The habit of cruelty is easily formed, all the more because pleasure in cruelty is, if not universal, very widespread. Listening to people gossip should be enough to persuade anyone of this, albeit that

gossip is vicarious sadism rather than its actual practice.

Be that as it may, what strikes one most forcibly about Damien Hirst's career is its brazenness. Self-advertisement there has always been, and presumably there always will; what is new is not so much its existence, for there is no new thing under the sun, as its elevation to a means of success almost independent of all else, such as a talent other than that for brazenness, or exhibitionist narcissism, in itself.

As with all social trends, one looks in vain for a precise date on which it started. I think, for example, of the first mass advertising campaign for patent medicine, that of Thomas Holloway in the middle of the 19th century. He paid for newspaper advertisements for his ointment, pharmacologically inert but useful as a placebo, in every national and provincial newspaper, insinuating supposed news stories of miracle cures by his ointment in far-flung places into those newspapers also, stories that were completely unverified and unverifiable. He was, so to speak, a purveyor of hope at a time when not only could illness strike at any time, but there were few cures. Is false hope better or worse than no hope at all?

Thomas Holloway made an immense fortune, starting from nothing, and eventually endowed one of the great colleges of London University. But he must surely have known that his fortune was founded on untruth and what amounted to intellectual fraud. Holloway himself, however, was not self-advertising: The advertising of oneself as if one were a patent medicine came a little later in history.

Figures such as Oscar Wilde and Bernard Shaw took advantage of the new possibilities of publicity, but there is no denying the literary genius of the first and the literary talent of the second. They sought and used publicity to promote themselves, but even if one reprehends Bernard Shaw's perpetual preference for a *bon mot* that shocked the conventional to the enunciation of truth, no one could

possibly say that he was famous *only* for having been famous. In those days, he could not have advertised himself if he had nothing to advertise.
Only more recently has drawing attention to oneself become, if not the only way to fame, a way by itself of achieving fame. And just as one may admire a shameless swindler for having the courage of his dishonesty, and even be amused by the way he takes others in by his swindles (provided that one is not a victim oneself, of course), so one can admire, or stand in amazement at, the ruthless self-promotion of those who achieve fame without any other talent than that for self-exposure.

But the trend to self-exposure and boastfulness is not confined to artistic charlatans, influencers, and their ilk—on the contrary. Ordinary persons applying for jobs are encouraged, even required, to boast about their achievements, which naturally enough leads to absurd magnification of the utterly banal, since most people have no achievements out of the ordinary. This is not to decry the ordinary, quite the reverse: We need the ordinary quite as much as we need the extraordinary. The problem is that, if you start boasting about yourself, you come to believe your own boasts, and when you find, as inevitably you will, that the world fails to treat you as if your boasts were justified, you begin to feel resentful. This is surely one of the reasons why there is so much anger in society, even when, judged by the standards of all previously existing societies, people are extremely fortunate.

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