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The Tyranny of 18 to 49: American Culture Held Hostage

As a documentary filmmaker of my acquaintance tells it, he had recently been shooting a movie on an "aeronautical archeologist" for one of the cable networks. The archeologist, actually a kind of detective, would go to old airplane crash sites trying to determine what had caused the accident. In one case, a crash that had occurred back in the 1940s, several of the passengers had survived and were still alive some five decades later to be interviewed for the program. There was only one problem. The cable executive overseeing the film didn't like these aged victims because he thought that the young audience to whom he was programming would tune them out. "Couldn't you find some *younger* victims?" the executive asked my friend.

Tales like these abound in television – stories of how "Gilmore Girls," which placed 121st out of 158 programs last season, nevertheless could charge three-quarters of the fee for a thirty-second ad that "Law and Order: SUV," which had three times the audience of "Gilmore Girls," charged for its thirty-second ads because "Gilmore's" audience was younger than "Law and Order's"[1]; or how ABC was ready to dump its legendary late-night news program "Nightline" for David Letterman largely because Letterman's audience was marginally younger, though not larger, than "Nightline's," thus allowing ABC to charge more for ads; or how the networks began

[1] Jonathan Dee, "The Myth of `18 to 34,'" *The New York Times Magazine*, October 13, 2002, p. 58.

packing their schedules with so-called reality shows in part because these attracted more young viewers than conventional programming.

It is of course no secret to any sentient being that it is a young person's world and the rest of us are just living in it. For decades now, television has appealed almost exclusively to what it considers a young audience, but so do most other media. Rock and roll, pop and hip-hop dominate the recording business – 48% of all CDs sold in 2001.[2] The teenage blockbuster has become the foundation of the American motion picture industry. Newspapers have had to renovate themselves, shortening articles and emphasizing graphics, because executives say young people won't read them otherwise. The most competitive titles in magazines are the so-called "laddie" publications aimed at young male readers. Book publishers hunt for young writers and subjects with youth appeal. Even CNN Headline News, hardly a youth destination, felt compelled to add windows and zippers to the screen reportedly as an enticement to younger viewers accustomed to sensory bombardment.

While the culture has been fixated on youth, it has also been hiring the young to service its constituents, creating a self-perpetuating system. Aging producers, aging writers, aging agents, even aging stars are increasingly marginalized because it is thought they can neither take the pulse nor race the pulse of the young. Aging talent complains that it cannot even find representation, much less work. A thirty- something writer who faked being eighteen to land a job on the TV series "Felicity" was summarily fired when her real age was discovered, and a number of writer friends have told me that forty is practically a death sentence in the television business. All of which leads to an inescapable and frightening conclusion: We live in a culture of the young, for the young and by the young, and anyone over 49 – the demographic breakpoint of

[2] "RIAA Releases 2001 Consumer Profile," <www.edatabasecentral.com/news.02_9006.htm>

old age for most television advertisers – is tossed onto the trash heap of history, all eighty million of them.[3] In effect, these people, just under one-third of the American population, have been steadily disenfranchised by a ruthless, self-serving, myopic and ignorant dictator. That dictator is the eighteen to forty-nine demographic cohort, and it is the single most important factor in determining what we see, hear and read.

At first blush, this may seem a rather wide demographic swath to constitute an oligarchy of age. It is so large, in fact – roughly 120 million people in 2001[4] – that it almost seems as if those who target it willfully intend to exclude older Americans as an act of revenge. Common sense would suggest that it is too large a group to be meaningful as any statistical category; forty-nine year-olds, after all, have very little in common with eighteen year-olds. There is nothing about this group that binds it in terms of income or discretionary spending or region or religion or values or any of the categories that demographers now dub as "psychographic," meaning psychological characteristics. The only thing they seem to have in common is that they are older than those under eighteen and younger than those over forty-nine.

Common sense would also suggest that the fixation on such a large and disparate group is almost entirely arbitrary. Why not fifteen to twenty-five? Or thirty-five to forty-five? Or twenty-five to fifty? Or people with blue eyes? What special magic do eighteen to forty-nine year-olds possess? Indeed, some advertisers and programmers have filleted the eighteen to forty-nine cohort, concentrating instead on the meaty eighteen to thirty-four year-old subset, though there is nothing about this smaller group that is any more uniform or statistically coherent than the larger one, ranging as it does from high schoolers to young parents. It simply makes no sense to market to this group as a group.

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[3] "National Population Estimates," July 1, 2001, U.S. Census Bureau, <eire.census.gov/popest/data/national/tables/asro/US-EST2001-ASRO-o1.php>

And yet when advertisers and programmers say that they are targeting eighteen to forty-nine year-olds, they obviously believe, or at least promote the idea, that there is something unique about them, some quintessence that people fifty and over do not have. Otherwise how can you target them and why should you target them. Since, as we have established, common sense dictates there is absolutely nothing significant that 120 million Americans could possibly share, save the country in which they live, those who revere eighteen to forty-nine year-olds must create a fiction about them – a fiction that dissolves the differences and imposes a commonality. That fiction is that these folks share the same taste. Without overstating the case too much, it assumes they like the same kinds of TV shows, the same kinds of music, the same kinds of movies, the same kinds of magazines – one size fits all. On the evidence of our popular culture, it assumes as well that they are not fundamentally serious or particularly intelligent, that they need to be stimulated constantly or they will lose interest, that they are sex-obsessed and voyeuristic and that they have no interest whatsoever in anything that and anyone who isn't young. While this generalization is patently absurd, it is an absurdity that dominates the contemporary cultural landscape. It is not eighteen to forty-nine year-olds who really tyrannize America. It is the *fiction* developed around them by advertisers and programmers that tyrannizes.

Of course, no advertising or television executive will come clean and admit that the eighteen to forty-nine year-old cohort share nothing. Instead advertisers adduce two reasons why this group is coveted. The first is that people within these age parameters are more impressionable than older consumers, more susceptible to advertising pitches and less loyal to brands, meaning that they are more likely to switch after watching an ad. A corollary is that if you catch these consumers while they are young – though it is hard to see how people over forty exactly qualify –

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[4] *Ibid*.

and in the process of forming those loyalties, you will have them for life. "They are considered early adapters of consumer brands," Bill Cella, executive vice president of broadcast and programming for McCann-Erickson Worldwide told *Adweek*. "If you get [this demo] at an early age they can become loyal brand users."[5] Therefore advertisers who target this group say they are really visionaries, looking a generation ahead, though in an economy where most businessmen rarely look beyond the next quarter, much less the next decade, this is a hard argument to swallow.

The second reason advertisers and programmers give is that people between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine watch television less frequently than people who are older. This makes them harder to reach via television and therefore a scarcer commodity than those baby boomer couch potatoes. Advertisers are willing to pay more for commercials on the programs that do reach them, a kind of youth premium, which clearly gives the programmers the incentive to provide those shows the eighteen to forty-nine year-olds seem to enjoy.

On the face of it, and putting aside for the moment the lunacy of thinking that there is actually a kind of programming that will appeal to the entire cohort, these explanations sound reasonable enough, even though, once again, it is hard to imagine that one can usefully generalize about something as vague as brand loyalty or even viewing frequency in so large and diverse a group. Still, if a viewer is more likely to respond to your ads and is not easy to reach, one can see why advertisers would want to target him rather than an older viewer who is readily accessible.

There are, however, two problems with this analysis – both of which directly contradict the desirability of the eighteen to forty-nine demographic. The first problem is logical. Let us assume that younger consumers are, indeed, less brand loyal than older consumers and that in

[5] Teresa Howard, "Opposites Attract," *Adweek*, May 10, 1999, p. 10.

inundating them with ads you are able to win lifelong converts. The flaw in the argument is that if these consumers are not already brand loyal, presumably due to their youth, they are also not likely to be brand loyal to your product either. The next ad they see might be just as likely to change their buying habits as your own ad did. This isn't particularly cost effective. So what advertisers really want is not a young, gullible consumer who goes with the advertising flow. What they really want is a consumer who has reached the point where brand loyalty kicks in. In short, they want an older consumer, one who has forsworn product hopping. Youth fails the test.

As for the scarcity argument, let us assume that the most desirable consumer is the one you are least likely to reach. Why then stop at the eighteen to forty-nine year-olds? Surely, there are consumers who are much more scarce than they are. As *New Yorker* economic columnist James Surowiecki wrote, "[B]y this logic, advertisers ought to pay top dollar to reach sheepherders in Uzbekistan."[6] (In fact, teenagers watch less TV than anyone, but they have yet to become the cynosure for programmers.) Furthermore, if the older consumers/TV watchers are regarded as already hooked and thus ad friendly (never mind that they are supposed to be less influenced by ads), then isn't there the danger that broadcasters will drive them away in the devotion to younger viewers, making *them* more scarce? Theoretically, this would lead to networks providing programs for the young, attracting them, losing the older audience in the process and then having to program to them, which would drive off the young and…well, you get the idea. "In effect, the worse TV nets perform at getting large audiences," John Polich, a professor of communications at Fordham University, has written, "the more they emphasize segments. The more they emphasize audience segments, the more they lose audience."[7] The irony is that the obsession with eighteen to forty-nine year-olds puts television in the business of

[6] James Surowiecki, "Ageism in Advertising," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2002, p. 40.
[7] John Polich, "Mass Appeal," *Adweek*, May 31, 1999, pp. 36 and 38.

ignoring and even attempting to drive away its most devoted viewers, which is certainly a peculiar practice for anyone, but especially for a broadcast executive, to be in. It puts the network in the service of the very people who don't want to watch it and antagonistic to the very people who do.

In their defense, advertisers and broadcasters insist that by designing programs and advertisements for the younger demographic, they also manage to reach a portion of the older demographic precisely because the latter watches more television and obviously doesn't just hit the "off" button when a youth-oriented show comes on, whereas a company that advertises on one of the higher-rated programs among adults aged fifty and older is unlikely to reach a comparable percentage of younger viewers because those potential viewers are unlikely to be watching.[8] One might call this the "sucker" argument. It assumes that older viewers don't really care what they watch and that they can be induced to watch anything. It is, to be frank, hard to tell if this is true or not, since Nielsen doesn't make this information publicly available and since any decline in viewing can be attributed to a number of factors, not least of which are the alternatives to broadcast television of videos, DVDs and cable. But by doing a bit of extrapolation, it does appear that the over-fifties' *rate* of viewing has decreased significantly as broadcasters have neglected them. Network affiliate ratings in primetime generally have been declining for twenty-five years -- from a 44.8 rating in the 1984-85 television season to 31.7 in the 1998-99 season and from a share of seventy-four percent of television sets in use to fifty-four percent over the same period. Since the over-fifties constitute a sizable segment of the television audience, it is only logical that their viewing should be declining in at least the same proportion and probably greater.[9] Indeed, even programs that *are* targeted to older consumers seem to have been effected by the spillover of the networks' having ignored those consumers overall. Over the last twenty

[8] Horst Stipp, "Why Youth Rules: A Network Response," *American Demographics*, May 1995, p. 30.

years, the ratings for the nightly network news broadcasts, for example, broadcasts that skew very heavily toward older viewers, have fallen precipitously – by almost half.[10]

The second problem with the analysis is not faulty logic; it is faulty statistics. Despite the conventional wisdom about older consumers, study after study shows that consumers over fifty are no more brand loyal or unwilling to try new products than younger consumers are. It is simply another fabrication. One study conducted by Nielsen Marketing Research in 1993 showed that, on average, sixty-seven percent of female heads of household aged eighteen to thirty-four claimed to be willing to sample new brands as opposed to seventy percent for females in the thirty-five to sixty-four year-old group.[11] A 1996 study by Information Resources also found that older women were more likely to change brands than younger ones, and an earlier study by J.D. Power and Associates found the same to be true of older men buying replacement cars.[12] Another study in 1997 by Nielsen, comparing baby boomers to twenty-somethings, concluded that the former sampled just as many brands of soda, beer and candy as the latter.[13] Yet another study, this one by the ProMatura Group, found that seventy-eight percent of Americans between fifty-six and ninety years old are "likely" or "very likely" to try to new products.[14] And a study conducted just last year by the Roper Organization for AARP determined that young consumers and consumers over forty-five are remarkably similar when it comes to things like the reasons they choose brands, the research they do on brands and, most importantly, their willingness to try new brands – seventy percent of those over forty-five. Virtually identical percentages of under-forty-fives and over-forty-fives agreed with the statement, "In today's marketplace, it doesn't pay

[9] Nielsen Media Research, *2000 Report on Television: The First Fifty Years*, (NY: Nielsen Media Research, 2001), p. 17.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[11] Elizabeth Jensen, "Chasing the Youth Audience," *Brill's Content*, March 1999, p. 88.
[12] Surowiecki; Jensen.
[13] *Ibid*.

to be loyal to one brand," and half of the over-forty-fives said that they are "always looking for better products." The summary: "[W]ith the exception of only a few [product] categories, the majority of 45-plus Americans are not loyal to any one brand."[15]

As for the frequency of television viewing, if the statistics are accurate – and Nielsen is notoriously untrustworthy when it comes to older viewers -- it is undeniable that older Americans do watch more television than younger ones and that television viewing, as measured in hours per week, generally increases with age, though it is difficult to determine exactly how much more television older Americans watch since Nielsen lumps all viewers fifty-five years and older together and since the frequency is probably skewed by stay-at-homes at the upper end of that range.[16] (By contrast, the percentages of people who watch *some* television each week are remarkably consistent over age groups.)[17] Still, these figures thrust us right back into the paradox discussed earlier. If younger viewers are not watching television, and according to Nielsen they spend fewer than nine hours each week in primetime, why bother advertising to them? More, why bother tailoring programming, virtually *all* the network programming, to the fictional advertising/broadcasting psychographic construction of them? The statistics seem to militate against it. Or put another way, television seems a very poor way to reach eighteen to forty-nine year-olds. They don't watch it. They don't seem to like it, even when it is expressly designed for what advertisers and programmers think they want.

What this suggests is that rather than try to lure so-called young people to television, advertisers would be better advised to use other media – radio, magazines, newspapers, stand

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[14] Frank Ahrens, "In TV's Numbers Game, Youth Trumps Ratings," *Washington Post*, March 13, 2002, p. A1.
[15] Press Release: "The Truth About Brand Loyalty: Executive Summary," AARP, May 7, 2002 <www.aarp.org/press/statements/2002/st050702brdloyal.html>
[16] Nielsen Media Research, *2000 Report on Television: The First 50 Years,* p. 15.
[17] "Survey of Television Watching, Spring, 2000," Mediamark Research Inc <www.mediamark.com>

alone ads, billboards, T-shirts, the Internet. If one did hit these, then presumably one would reach those eighteen to forty-nine year-olds, assuming that they hadn't all pulled a Ted Kaczynski and left civilization entirely. But if an advertiser were to do this – and obviously many if not most of them do – then the 120 million or so hard-to-reach eighteen to forty-nine year-olds would no longer be so hard to reach. The material statistic would be how many in the age group are exposed to any ads, the point being that television advertising does not exist within a vacuum. It is one component in a vast complex of media, and when one considers advertising within that broader context, the issue of scarcity disappears. Advertisers can reach allegedly young viewers without commandeering an entire medium to do so, especially since there are so many of them to reach. It should be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Yet even if one accepts the argument that these so-called young people are playing hard to get, the only reason to get them is that they are worth getting, which is to say that they have money and the willingness to spend it. Conversely, the reason to spurn older viewers is that they have less money and less willingness to spend it. After all, money is money. A dollar doesn't differentiate between young and old, so advertisers should be targeting the people with the most money to spend, again assuming that they want to spend it. But here is where the appeal to youth and the rejection of those over fifty seems especially capricious. Americans over fifty years of age control fifty-five percent of the discretionary income in America.[18] By contrast, the share of aggregate spending of Generation X, ages twenty-five to thirty-four, was only 17.7%. The share of those geriatrics over fifty-five was 27.5%[19] In fact, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Americans between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four spent $46,100 per household in

[18] Tobi Elkin, "Enlightened Age," *Adweek*, May 10, 1999, p. 20.
[19] "Changes in Aggregate Spending byAge: 1990-2000," *American Demographics*, April 2002, p. 37.

2000, while those under twenty-five spent $22,543.[20] More, forty-five to fifty-five year-olds had the highest household incomes and spent more on consumer goods than any other demographic cohort.[21] Of American households with incomes of more than $100,000, sixty-one percent are headed by baby boomers. And this should make the broadcasters and advertisers who fixate on scarcity salivate: Households with incomes greater than $60,000 watch considerably less television than those earning below that amount.[22]

Of course, advertisers would argue that they are banking on the future and that younger consumers are a kind of investment. But once again the statistics refute this. Thirty-eight percent of Americans are now over forty-nine, but that percentage will swell to forty-seven percent within twenty years.[23] And while their numbers increase, so does their spending. Through the 1990s, Baby Boomers, aged thirty-five to fifty-four, increased their share of America's aggregate spending by 6.7%, while Generation Xs' share actually fell a whopping 18.7%.[24] More, the average annual expenditure of twenty-five to thirty-four year-olds during the decade of the 1990s increased 38.5% while the annual expenditures of fifty-five year-olds increased 34.4%, indicating that older consumers were hardly tightening their belts. In fact, in absolute per capita numbers, the older consumers spent more than the younger ones -- $39,340 to $38,945.[25] In sum, older consumers are growing at a faster rate than younger ones, have more money to spend than younger ones, actually spend more of that money than younger ones and are increasing their spending at roughly the same rate as younger consumers. And yet they remain the lepers of television advertising. By one estimate, fifty-five percent of the $8 billion spent in 2001 for

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[20] Ahrens
[21] Peter Francese, "Big Spenders," *American Demographics*, September 2001, pp. 30-31.
[22] Nielsen Media Research, p. 15.
[23] Hillary Chura, "Ripe Old Age: Time's Running Out for Myth That Keeps Marketers Eyeballing the Still-Coveted 18-49 Demographic," *Advertising Age*, May 13, 2002, p. 16.
[24] "Changes in Aggregate Spending by Age: 1990-2000."
[25] "Changes in Consumer Spending by Age: 1990-2000," *American Demographics*, April 2002, p. 39.

television's "upfront" advertising – i.e., time purchased before the season – was directed at the eighteen to forty-nine cohort with most of the rest directed to viewers under eighteen and only a tiny remainder to viewers up to fifty-four.[26]

As both a moral and an economic defense to their youth fixation, advertisers and broadcasters would no doubt say that older viewers have other television options, especially in cable, which skews older than broadcasting now, and that those viewers are hardly being ignored. Advertisers have even confessed that for them to obsess exclusively on young viewers is counterproductive. As Peter Chrisanthopoulos, president for broadcast and programming in the United States at Ogilvy & Mather, told the *New York Times* in 1999, "For those of us representing advertisers, it's good if a network has a focus, a mission, and tried to fulfill its goals by focusing on the audience it desires. The youth focus is good as long as they all don't do it."[27]

But the fact is that they *are* all doing it, even the cable networks that are supposed to be pluralistic and niche-oriented – the smart bombs of television. In truth, they only serve older viewers begrudgingly. Last year, The History Channel, which attracts an older audience, began an internal search for younger historians so that the network could begin to appeal to a younger audience. This season, Court TV, which also appeals to an older audience, crowed that its median age had fallen from fifty to forty-eight, and it trumpeted its audience retention rates through commercial breaks for the audience, surprise!, aged eighteen to forty-nine, even though a full half of its viewers were outside that group.[28] American Movie Classics, where I was once employed as a host, had an audience that was appreciably older than the target eighteen to forty-nine demographic, understandably since the network specializes in showing old films. But in

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[26] Chura
[27] Stuart Elliot, "Networks Deliver Smorgasbord to Fill Order for Young Viewers," *New York Times*, June 21, 1999, p. C17.
[28] Cynopsis, March 25 & 26, 2003, <www.cynopsis.com>

2002, the network decided to change from one that was subscriber-supported to one that was advertiser-supported and made the concomitant decision to change its demographics to attract advertisers. The new target viewer, I was told, was the thirty-three year-old. Given the nature of its programming, this made almost no sense – in the event, the network, now redubbed simply "amc," kept losing what younger viewers it did have once the new policy was inaugurated -- but it did raise an important question: If the only aim of television is to attract young viewers, then why even have a network of movie classics or historical programs or public affairs reports that appeal to older viewers? Why not just have a network of the Miller Lite "Catfight Girls" 24/7?

Despite the overwhelming evidence arguing against the focus on youth, few advertising or television executives in America challenge the conventional wisdom. (Overseas, where populations are aging more rapidly and where there has always been a greater appreciation for the virtues of maturity, it seems to be a different matter; according to a recent piece in *Newsweek*, companies like Prada, Gucci, Armani, L'Oreal and even Harley-Davidson, whose average customer is fifty-two, are all actively targeting older consumers now.)[29] Here the youth fetish is so ingrained among advertisers that it isn't likely to change soon. As the novelist Johnathan Dee put it in an essay in *The New York Times Magazine* decrying the fixation on the even narrower eighteen to thirty-four cohort, advertising "changes course with all the agility of an oil tanker."[30] Nevertheless there are a few powerful voices of dissent. Jon Mandel, the co-managing director and chief negotiating officer of the Medicam division of Grey Advertising, which buys some $4 billion worth of media time for its clients, has long insisted that the obsession with the eighteen to forty-nine cohort was foolish and self-defeating given the tremendous growth of the older

[29] Stefan Theil, "Marketing to the Elder Set," *Newsweek*, September 16, 2002, p. 34.
[30] Dee, p. 61.

market.[31] And he goes further. He believes that the kinds of products older consumers buy drive better, which is to say pricier, advertising. As Mandel describes it, the main product categories being pitched to the eighteen to forty-nine year-olds are "package goods" – soap, soda, chips. Not only are these relatively low-rent, they have also, according to Mandel, declined in sales six percent over the last three years. Meanwhile, one of the fastest growing categories in commercial time is pharmaceuticals, which in the course of four years has soared from near-zero in advertising buys to $1.4 billion.[32] (Baby boomers also spend $30 billion a year on anti-aging products.)[33] The largest single product category on television in terms of advertising dollars spent is the automobile, and the largest group of new auto purchasers is Americans fifty-five to sixty-four – this despite the emphasis that auto companies themselves place on the younger demographic. Similarly, the prime buyers of trucks are forty-four to fifty-five year-olds.[34]

While Mandel has been making the argument for an older demographic on the advertising side, there is also an apostate on the television side: David Poltrack, the executive vice president of research and planning at CBS. "The old categories are increasingly irrelevant," Poltrack told *The NewYorker's* James Surowiecki, "but we keep using them," warning that older consumers could be neglected only at the networks' peril. But instead of being regarded as a prophet of the coming demographic future, Poltrack has been ignored at best and ridiculed at worst. After all, he is the chief apologist for CBS, the network that skews oldest in the broadcast universe.

That very point, however, is of the utmost relevance in attempting to understand the networks' odd fascination with eighteen to forty-nine year-olds. Long before any network

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[31] "Talk of the Nation," National Public Radio, March 4, 2002.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Michael Weiss, "Chasing Youth," *American Demographics*, October 2002, p. 35.
[34] Nielsen Media Research, p. 61; Ahrens.

thought in terms of age cohorts, CBS was the undisputed king of the ratings hill. For fifteen straight years, from the 1955-1956 season through the 1969-1970 season, CBS led in primetime ratings, and after losing by one-tenth of a rating point in the 1970-1971 season, it reeled off another five straight years of dominance.[35]

CBS's ratings hold was impregnable, but only if one measured the whole audience. It was the genius of Leonard Goldenson, the head of ABC, which routinely finished in third place well behind CBS and NBC, to change the rules. Unable to compete in the big sweepstakes, Goldenson created a smaller one that he could win. ABC, he told advertisers, was getting younger viewers than CBS and NBC, which meant that advertisers with products appealing to that segment would be wise to buy time on ABC. This was akin to a football team saying it had lost the game, but it had gained more yards than the winner or posted more first downs or that it had better looking fans. Given the general attraction to youth, especially among advertisers who loved the association, the network had managed to make itself seem successful despite its consistent third-place finishes. It was all smoke and mirrors.

ABC didn't achieve this single-handedly. It was abetted in its hoax by two other factors. The first was that by focusing on audience segments rather than on the whole audience every network could claim a ratings victory, depending on how the demographic pie was sliced. This became particularly important (and apparent) when Fox entered broadcast television without a prayer of beating the Big Three but with a bead on even younger viewers than ABC had touted. When WB and UPN were launched, targeting even younger viewers than Fox, the youth movement swept away common sense altogether, and CBS, which continues to win the overall ratings race as often as not, was rendered an antique. No one, except CBS, ever talks in terms of

[35] Nielsen Media Research, pp. 18-19.

overall ratings anymore. The only numbers that matter are eighteen to forty-nine or eighteen to thirty-four.

This is only possible, though, because of the second factor. In 1987, Nielsen Media Research, which computes the ratings, introduced a new system of measurement called the "people meter." This shifted the basis of gauging a program's popularity from the number of *households* watching that particular program to the number of *people* watching it. Not incidentally, this meant that Nielsen was now able to stratify that audience into demographic layers. The new measurement served the purposes of the networks, each of which could stake their claim to being victorious in one of those strata without having to win the whole thing, and of the advertisers who, by one account, would pay less for the commercials because those commercials were reaching a smaller segment of the populace.[36] Everybody won, except CBS and the older viewers.

What this does not explain, however, is why *every* medium fetishizes youth – not just the advertiser-supported ones that are trying to sell to the youth market. The movies and the recording industry, for example, target youth almost as eagerly as television, even though the sheer numbers of older consumers and their discretionary spending would seem to make them a desirable audience. Movie executives would say that young people go to the movies more often than older ones, so it is only sensible that the industry would serve them with the kinds of films it makes. (This is certainly more logical than the television executives' argument that youth must be served because it *doesn't* watch TV.) Americans aged twelve to twenty-nine accounted for just over thirty percent of the population but fifty percent of movie admissions in 2002.[37] Film executives might add that younger viewers are less discerning than older ones, that they are more likely to respond to predictable formulas, which is why the industry has become so heavily

[36] Polich
[37] "U.S. Movie Attendance: Admissions," MPA Worldwide Market Research, p. 6.

invested in special effects and action films. It is much more difficult to make the kinds of films that older audiences enjoy, especially since those patrons are less likely to go to “the movies” indiscriminately than younger viewers are. As Amy Pascal, Columbia Pictures chairman, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “It’s easier to make brand-name movies than good ones.”[38]

But this doesn’t factor in the self-fulfilling prophecy aspect. As with television, if movies are not made for an older sensibility, older audiences are less likely to go to them, meaning, in turn, that fewer movies will be made for them, and so on. The movies have been traveling along this Mobius strip at least since the late 1950s when audiences generally dropped off and those who remained were basically children and teenagers who rendezvoused at the theater on weekends. The problem with this approach is that Americans fifty and over constitute a third of the population but only seventeen percent of movie admissions in 2002, which means that there is clearly a lost opportunity for the film industry.

Despite the general neglect shown them, though, older viewers have been steadfast, in part, no doubt, because the film industry has been gradually wising up and recognizing them through boutique studios like Miramax, Fox Searchlight, Sony Classics, Artisan and Focus that produce more adult-oriented pictures. While moviegoers between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-nine constituted between thirty-six percent and forty-one percent of all admissions over the past five years, older moviegoers forty and up constituted between twenty-nine and thirty-six percent – not a dramatic difference.[39] From age thirty on, the percentage of Americans who qualify as “frequent” moviegoers – those who see at least one movie a month – is also remarkably constant, hovering at just about thirty percent.[40] More important, the older audience is actually growing. According to *Variety*, in the decade between 1990 and 2000, the proportion of

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[38] Patrick Goldstein, “A Graying, Growing Audience,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 24, 2002, p. F-1.
[39] “U.S. Movie Attendance: Admissions,” p. 6.

moviegoers between the ages of fifty and fifty-nine doubled from five to ten percent, while the proportion of moviegoers between sixteen and twenty, that prime teen demographic, actually declined from twenty percent to seventeen percent.[41] By the same token, over the last five years the percentage of moviegoers between twelve and twenty-four has been level, but the baby boomer contingent actually rose slightly – 1.5% -- in 2002, because, one can only assume, there was more for them to see.[42] It may not be much, but it is something..

The situation may be even more dramatic in the recording industry, which has been losing buyers in droves. Though music is usually regarded as a young person's domain, especially since rock, hip-hop and pop account for over sixty percent of CD purchases, the proportion of purchases by consumers between the ages of fifteen and thirty has fallen from just over forty-eight percent in 1992 to just over thirty-six percent in 2001. In fact, the percentages have fallen in every age cohort from ten years old through thirty-nine years old with the greatest decrease in teens between the ages of fifteen and nineteen. Over the same period, though, the percentage of purchasers forty-five and older has nearly doubled – from 12.2% in 1992 to 23.7% in 2001 -- so that they now match the fifteen to twenty-five year-olds.[43] Teen-oriented artists may get the attention, the radio play and a good chunk of the advertising budget but not apparently the aggregate sales.

All of which raises the $64,000 question: If, as all the data suggest, older consumers are so appealing, why do we live in a culture in which youth dictates? One could answer that television executives and advertisers have hoodwinked us, and one wouldn't be entirely wrong. They have used demographics as a kind of pseudo-science – the marketing equivalent of

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[40] "U.S. Movie Attendance: Frequency," *Ibid*., p. 9.
[41] Peter Bart, "Decline of the Zitgeist," *Variety*, September 16-22, 2002.
[42] "U.S. Movie Attendance: Movie-Goers," p. 5.
[43] RIAA

alchemy. But that really begs the question. The deep dark secret of our popular culture is that the tyranny of the so-called young may be less an issue of economics than of psychology. One thing that advertisers, advertising, television, movie and recording executives, publishers, editors and everyone else who controls the popular culture have in common is that they all are, more or less, in the business of, and in thrall to, images, including their self-images. And, not surprisingly, the most important image to promote is that of youth – its purported vigor, sexiness, excitement, edginess, even its ironic detachment. "Being associated with youth is a positive because people like to envision themselves as young, virile, active," one advertising executive has said.[44] Another added, "For a lot of brands we work with, it's sexier to advertise to the younger consumers who are trendier, much more fashion-forward, very social and very in the public eye."[45] "Everybody's looking for young eyeballs," Jamie Kellner the president of AOL/Warner Brothers television, told *The New York Times*.[46]

What should complicate the issue is that the line of demarcation between youth and age isn't as clear as it used to be. People over fifty look younger, act younger, generally feel younger and think younger than previous generations of mature Americans did, and they spend a good deal of money to make it so. They are not exactly geriatrics anymore. As Richard Kinder, president of SLG Advertising, put it, "Sixty year-olds don't think like they did in the last generation. Sixty year-olds in the last generation wore plaid pants."[47]

Still, the stigma of age dies hard. Some executives, particularly mid-level executives, come to this naturally because they are young themselves. In one survey, the average age of advertisers' representatives was thirty-one years old, the average age of agency representatives

[44] Stacy Lynn Koerner, vp for broadcast TV research at TN Media, quoted in Elliott.
[45] Melissa Pordy, senior vp-director of print, Zenith Media, quoted in Chura.
[46] Elliott
[47] Chura

twenty-eight.[48] A similar study in England found similar results. The largest number of advertising employees were under thirty with less than twenty percent over forty and a meager six percent over fifty.[49] These kids seem to shrink the world to their own horizons. When a sample of young advertisers and advertising executives was asked the median age of American adults, twenty percent said 35.5 and half said thirty-nine. The correct answer in 1995, at the time of the survey, was 41.3 and rising rapidly

One might excuse these young foot soldiers for assuming that everyone is or should be in their image. But in advertising, television, film, recording, and book and magazine publishing most of the real decision-makers are not kids. They are seasoned veterans, virtually all of whom are outside the prime demographic cohort – people like Paramount head of production Sherry Lansing (59), Sony Pictures Chief Executive Officer John Calley (73), Universal chairman Ron Meyer (58), Miramax head Harvey Weinstein (51), CBS network president Les Moonves (54), Sony Music CEO Andrew Lack (55), Dreamworks' partners David Geffen (60), Jeffrey Katzenberg (53) and Steven Spielberg (57). So why are they selling youth? Like almost everyone in their demographic cohort, but even more so given the pressures of the entertainment business, they are fighting to be relevant – fighting not to be old. It is no wonder, then, that the entire popular culture is bowing to the young. Identifying with and serving the young may be the best way for the rulers of that culture to demonstrate their own youthfulness. "There's no strong economic reason for Madison Avenue's fascination with the young audience," David Poltrack of

[48] Vicki Thomas and David Wolfe, "Why Won't Television Grow Up?" *American Demographics*, May 1995, p. 26.
[49] Dominic Mills, "Grey-beards Have a Place in Youth Game," *Telegraph*, December 12, 2002 <www.telegrph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml>

CBS has said, missing what may be a far more powerful reason – namely that associating with the young is like professional botox.[50]

If true – and no one in entertainment will ever admit it -- what this means is that the entire culture is tyrannized by a fiction of youth because those who command the culture are themselves tyrannized by their creation of this idealized cohort. In effect, we are beholden to their insecurities. They would have to be dragged kicking and screaming to recognize and satisfy the older viewers, listeners and readers, which is why it isn't likely to happen soon, no matter how much economic sense it makes. For people who fancy themselves as young and in the vanguard, the adjustment would be too traumatic. The rest of us have seen the future and it is older. On Madison Avenue and in Hollywood, there may be no more terrifying thought.

And so the tyranny continues.

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[50] Elliott