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Percy and Sagan in the Cosmos

On the 30th anniversary of "The Last Self-Help Book."

Alan Jacobs | posted 3/04/2013

It is February of 1969 and a new television series is beginning on BBC2. The first images—they are in color, which is noteworthy—are of Michaelangelo's *David*, Botticelli's *Primavera* (in closeup), a series of beautiful buildings both ancient and modern. A noble and passionate organ piece by Bach plays. Finally one word appears on the screen: "CIVILISATION"—followed soon by this: "A Personal View by Kenneth Clark." In weekly episodes that last into May, the learned and patrician Clark, one of the great art historians of his age, guides his viewers through the history of European art from the fall of Rome to the rise of modernist architecture in the New World. In the first sentence he speaks, Clark quotes John Ruskin's view that it is through the history of art that we can best understand a given civilization's core commitments and true achievements; for the following 13 hours he makes his viewers believe that Ruskin was right.

The series was extraordinarily successful, and the primary lesson that producers at the BBC learned from it was that the "personal view" was key: the series worked not because it provided many beautiful images from the history of Western art—though it did that, and filmed on 35mm stock as well, which is why modern DVDs of the show look so good—but because viewers loved being guided by Clark. His distinctive sensibilities, his willingness to pronounce his own judgments and to own them as just that, personal, captured viewers' imagination.

So the BBC decided to do it again—but on a larger scale. If the history of Western art made a good story, why shouldn't the whole history of humanity make a better one—if you could find the right teller? And thus was born, in 1973, *The Ascent of Man*, a primer on "cultural evolution" hosted by the mathematician, historian of science, and polymath Jacob Bronowski. This series opens not with Bach but with Bronowski's own reedy voice—"Man is a *singular* creature"—but when the title sequence arrives, it announces its debt to *Civilisation*: "THE ASCENT OF MAN," the first screen reads, followed by "A Personal View by J. Bronowski."

The Ascent of Man was produced by Adrian Malone, and one of its directors was David Kennard. A few years later they moved to the United States, where they decided that they would look for a subject even larger than the long history of human evolution: Why not the story of the universe itself? And so in 1981 their new PBS series was launched, once more in the 13 parts that Clark had apparently made canonical. It begins with what appears to be the camera moving through a field of stars—a technique pioneered by Douglas Trumbull in the later, phantasmagorical scenes of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—as ethereal music by Vangelis plays. Then the title: "COSMOS." Then: "By Carl Sagan." And on a third screen: "A Personal Voyage."

We see huge ocean waves breaking, and then a man standing on a grassy cliffed coast with a heavy sea off to the right. (Perhaps in Newfoundland?) He begins to speak, not in the polished Oxbridge tones of Clark and Bronowski but in an oddly modulated voice hinting at Sagan's native Brooklyn: "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be. Our feeblest contemplations of the Cosmos

stir us—there is a tingling in the spine, a catch in the voice, a faint sensation, as if from a distant memory, of falling from a height. We know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries."

Everything here—the music, the images, the quietly impassioned tones of Sagan—reinforce this core idea: "We know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries." Throughout the series Sagan repeats two key messages. The first is that science is our only true guide to the mysteries we approach:

There is no other species on Earth that does science. It is, so far, an entirely human invention, evolved by natural selection in the cerebral cortex for one simple reason: it works. It is not perfect. It can be misused. It is only a tool. But it is by far the best tool we have, self-correcting, ongoing, applicable to everything.

The second message emerges from the Cold War politics of the time: instead of approaching the Cosmos with reverence, "we are directed far more toward war." We endanger ourselves and our planet because we fail to realize that "present global culture is a kind of arrogant newcomer. It arrives on the planetary stage following four and a half billion years of other acts, and after looking around for a few thousand years declares itself in possession of eternal truths." We must unlearn that arrogance; we must cultivate awe in the face of the immensity of the Cosmos. This is our only hope.

Millions of people watched *Cosmos*—indeed, until Ken Burns' *Civil War* series appeared a decade later it was the most-viewed show in PBS history, and if you count worldwide viewers it may still be the most-viewed of all. Among the viewers was a man in Covington, Louisiana who almost certainly watched it with a glass of bourbon in his hand. This man, whose name was Walker Percy, was a doctor of medicine but instead of practicing that art had become a writer. He was deeply interested in the manifold varieties of human oddity, preferring perhaps the farcical to the tragic—or at any rate he was inclined to see the farcical within the tragic. For this reason, and because as a writer he kept irregular hours, he also liked to watch the *Phil Donahue Show*, the first of the tabloid talk shows that later became ubiquitous on American daytime TV. It occurred to Walker Percy that a strange, twisted thread linked Carl Sagan's "personal voyage" through the Cosmos and the bizarre array of bruised and weird people who showed up so regularly on Donahue's set. Thirty years ago he published the book in which he traced that thread. It is called *Lost in the Cosmos: the Last Self-Help Book*, and it may as well have been written yesterday.

2.

In the second chapter of the *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), Søren Kierkegaard introduces a key idea in this way: "Suppose there was a king who loved a maiden of lowly station in life ..."—after which follows something considerably longer than an example or even an anecdote, but not quite a short story. It's a kind of brief parabolic tale, a little fable. Similarly, in *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard approaches the terrible story of the binding of Isaac by retelling it over and over again, beginning invariably with "It was early in the morning" and ramifying from there into different branches, different ways of trying to make sense of what Abraham did. ("No one is so great as Abraham! Who is capable of understanding him?")

It is a curious and affecting way of pursuing philosophical and theological questions: to burst into story, as characters in Broadway musicals burst into song. Percy is one of the few who have taken Kierkegaard as a model in this respect. *Lost in the Cosmos* is stuffed with mini-stories, cast in the form of "thought experiments" which conclude with questions for the reader. There is the soldier of the future who may or may not be able to see the Parthenon; the "ex-suicide" who goes to work because he doesn't have to; the several observers of a corn dance at a Taos Indian pueblo; the physicist ("You write about the Cosmos") whose friend and neighbor is also a popularizing scientist—but a more successful one.

These stories culminate in questions because *Lost in the Cosmos* is (so its subtitle informs us) "The Last Self-Help Book," and takes the form of a "Twenty-Question Multiple-Choice Self-Help Quiz to test your knowledge of the peculiar status of the self, your self and other selves, in the Cosmos, and your knowledge of what to do with your self in these, the last years of the twentieth century"—the

sort of quiz you might take while thumbing through an issue of *Reader's Digest* or *Ladies' Home Journal* or *Psychology Today*, but afflicted with a comic gigantism, inflated wildly and parodically to 250 pages. Question 20 ("The Self Marooned in the Cosmos")—which, in the spirit of the thing, naturally becomes three questions—is embedded in 40 pages of narrative about a handful of survivors on a blasted post-nuclear-holocaust Earth.

Among the other narratives, one of the longest and most provocative is part of Question 8 ("The Promiscuous Self") and is called "The Last Donahue Show." It is the last Donahue show because Phil's conversation with and about a pregnant 14-year-old named Penny—"I want to have my baby. I think babies are neat"—is interrupted by the sudden arrival on the set of three uninvited strangers, two of whom have inexplicably traveled through time while the third has (rather more explicably) traveled from distant space. One visitor is a Confederate colonel named John Pelham. The second is John Calvin—yes, *that* John Calvin. And the third is an unnamed representative of an advanced alien civilization who has come to announce the imminent nuclear destruction of all, or almost all, life on Earth.

So what in the world is going on here? We might begin to grasp the point by noting that at the end of the last episode of *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan solemnly intones,

The human species is now undertaking a great venture that if successful will be as important as the colonization of the land or the descent from the trees. We are haltingly, tentatively breaking the shackles of Earth—metaphorically, in confronting and taming the admonitions of those more primitive brains within us; physically, in voyaging to the planets and listening for the messages from the stars. These two enterprises are linked indissolubly.

To this image of a voyaging, questing, shackle-breaking humanity moving forth boldly into the Cosmos, Percy's fable implicitly responds with a question: What if the Cosmos were to come to us? And were to come in the form of a highly advanced race that has concluded that we suffer from a not-fully-understood "disorder" that makes us "a potential threat to all civilizations in the G2V region of the galaxy"? Among all the species in the G2V region, the Cosmic Stranger says, we are "the only one which is by nature sentimental, murderous, self-hating, and self-destructive." We have to be destroyed before we communicate our disorder to other worlds.

As Phil Donahue says in response to this news, "Heavy!"

3.

Stuck right into the middle of *Lost in the Cosmos* is a 40-page "intermezzo" that Percy calls "A Semiotic Primer of the Self." It's prefaced by a kind of apology in which Percy predicts that many readers will not be satisfied with it and, anyway, it "can be skipped without fatal consequences." But Percy certainly thought it the most important part of his book. In fact, it sums up and often repeats things he had been writing for the previous 30 years, ever since, early in the 1950s, he had started reading some then-recent work on symbolic thought—especially Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*—which in turn led him back to the philosophy of language and communication developed in the late 19th century by Charles Sanders Peirce. Most of Percy's publications in the decade before his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, appeared in 1961 were essays on semiotics, that is, the study of signification.

When Percy collected those essays in 1975, in a book called *The Message in the Bottle*, he wrote a prefatory essay that covers much of the same ground that he would later cover in his "Semiotic Primer of the Self." In that essay, "The Delta Factor," he describes the collection as "the meager fruit of twenty years' off-and-on thinking about the subject, of coming at it from one direction, followed by failure and depression and giving up, followed by making up novels to raise my spirits." This is not the only place where he suggests that his inquiries into semiotics were the primary focus of his intellectual life, to which his fiction was secondary.

He returned to these same themes over and over because he thought them absolutely essential to the formation of an adequate

"theory of man"—but, as he sometimes ruefully commented, "people are not interested." That's from a self-interview he wrote in 1977, in which he went on to claim that as bad as the 20th century had been, things "have to get even worse before people realize that they don't have the faintest idea what sort of creature man is. Then they might want to know. Until then, one is wasting one's time. I'm not interested in butting my head against a stone wall." And yet five years after writing these words he was butting his head against that same stone wall one more time—though perhaps from a slightly different angle. The chief difference between *Lost in the Cosmos* and his earlier semiotic inquiries is that he had come to realize the fundamental role that television played in the semiotic formation of the American self.

All signification involves mediation: any sign mediates in multiple ways, between a person's mind and a concept, or a thing, or another person's mind. Media are systems of signification; and the people who populate media signify and thus mediate. Did Kenneth Clark get chosen by the BBC to host *Civilisation* because he was an authority on its core subjects? No doubt; but more to the point, Clark was recognized by a large audience as an authority on its subjects because he was chosen by the BBC. He mediates culture to his audience—just as Carl Sagan, in precisely the same way, mediates science, and Phil Donahue mediates a very different subset of culture than does Clark. Each of these figures offers "a personal view" of an issue or "a personal voyage" into a subject and in so doing makes the abstract and the difficult (or in Donahue's case the just plain weird) seem accessible, recognizably human. Television provides for us a series of authoritative mediators of images, who are themselves, though we are not encouraged to think about this, also images.

We are not encouraged to think about how the structures of mediation work because that would cause us to question them and our relation to them. That is, we might start reflecting on the semiotic construction of the self, and begin to see the formation of our selves as problematic, none of which is good for business. American media culture, Percy believed, involves a lunatic oscillation between absolute indulgence of the self (Donahue) and absolute evasion of it (Sagan). Looked at in one way—in any number of ways—Phil Donahue and Carl Sagan have very little in common; looked at in Percy's way, they serve an almost identical function as guides who gently distract us from attention to how we're being formed and how we might be formed differently. Percy's task, therefore, is to bring the self with all its contradictions into proper focus, to subject it to the harsh light of truth.

But he knows that we do not wish to experience this, so he follows Kierkegaard's model of ironic and comical "indirect communication." Percy is to us what Virgil was to Dante, but cannot fulfill that role straightforwardly because of our hostility to anyone who claims moral authority. But maybe a sardonic, foul-mouthed, bourbon-drinking Catholic Virgil is the one we both need and deserve.

4.

Carl Sagan first became known to the general public as an authority on the possibility of extraterrestrial life, and when Percy makes Sagan the central character of *Lost in the Cosmos* he clearly has this point in mind. (I should pause here to acknowledge that I owe Carl Sagan a great debt: when I was fifteen I discovered at my local public library a copy of *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, a book Sagan co-wrote with the Soviet physicist I. S. Shklovsky on a subject with which I was fascinated at the time. Several chapters of the book feature quotations from a book by Loren Eiseley called *The Immense Journey*: these quotations intrigued me enough to send me on a search for Eiseley's book, which I came to adore. Eiseley was for a number of years my favorite writer, and I still hold him in great esteem.)

Yes, I seriously mean to claim that the central character in *Lost in the Cosmos* is Carl Sagan, even though he is not mentioned directly until quite late in the book. If we understand Sagan's prominence in American middlebrow culture in the early 1980s we will see Percy's book's title as a pointed reference to the PBS series; and then relatively early in the book, to reinforce that point, we meet the fictional scientist who "writes about the Cosmos" and gets invited to talk shows. Question 17 of the *Lost in the Cosmos* self-help quiz is titled, "The Lonely Self (II): Why Carl Sagan is So Anxious to Establish Communication with an ETI (Extraterrestrial

Intelligence)." And the question itself is: "Why is Carl Sagan so lonely?" It seems to Percy that one important prompt of any deep desire for contact with extraterrestrial intelligence is a sense of absence or deficiency—deficiency in one's own self, in others' selves, in the world. But what, Percy wonders, what precisely is this absence? What is it that makes us look out into the Cosmos with such longing?

At around the same time that he was working on *Cosmos*, Sagan was writing a screenplay about the first human encounter with extraterrestrial intelligence. It is difficult to overstate how important this subject was to American popular culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Steven Spielberg's film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—featuring as a significant character a French scientist, played by the great director François Truffaut, whose desire to meet intelligent aliens is highly reminiscent of Sagan's own enthusiasm for ETI—had appeared in 1977. Five years later, Spielberg would direct the even more popular *E.T.* Sagan, writing in the midst of this craze that he had done a good deal to fan into flame, couldn't get the screenplay developed, so he turned it into a novel, *Contact* (1985); only in 1997, the year after Sagan's premature death, did a film version appear.

The protagonist of *Contact* is a scientist named Ellie Arroway (played in the film by Jodie Foster), who admits that she does not, cannot, believe in God because there is no evidence, no "data," supporting his existence. But, in a twist rather more ironic than one might have expected from Sagan, when Dr. Arroway meets intelligent aliens, all evidence of that meeting is destroyed, and she has to face pervasive and scornful disbelief of her story. In the movie's most famous speech, Arroway explains why she does not, given this utter absence of evidence, admit that she never met aliens:

Because I can't. I ... had an experience ... I can't prove it, I can't even explain it, but everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever ... A vision ... of the universe, that tells us, undeniably, how tiny, and insignificant and how ... rare, and precious we all are. A vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves, that we are not, that none of us are alone! I wish ... I ... could share that ... I wish, that everyone, if only for one ... moment, could feel ... that awe, and humility, and hope. But ... That continues to be my wish.

And one more layer of irony: many times over the years I have seen this speech claimed by Christians as expressing their own commitment to belief in the face of skepticism and scorn.

In *Contact*, as in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, the aliens we meet are perhaps more technologically developed than we are but they clearly feel a kinship with us that they wish to deepen. This vision offers a radical alternative to the previously dominant idea that such aliens would want to destroy us out of sheer but inexplicable malice. But the possibility that an extraterrestrial intelligence might look upon us with moral disgust and even horror never crosses the popular mind. Percy sees this as a lamentable failure of imagination.

5.

I noted earlier that the last and longest narrative set-piece in *Lost in the Cosmos* relates the experiences of a tiny handful of humans who have survived the nuclear attack on Earth by an alien race that has deemed us too murderous to be allowed to infect the rest of the Cosmos. Percy prefaces this narrative with a note in which he credits Carl Sagan's series *Cosmos*, and its accompanying book, with inspiring his extended science-fictional riff. "Sagan's book gave me much pleasure," Percy writes,

a pleasure which was not diminished (perhaps it was increased) by Sagan's unmalicious, even innocent, scientism, the likes of which I have not encountered since the standard bull sessions in high school and college—up to but not past the sophomore year For me it was more diverting than otherwise to see someone sketch the history of Western scientific thought and leave out Judaism and Christianity.

Percy briefly suggests some elements of a truer history before insisting once more (perhaps disingenuously) that he bears no hostility towards Sagan, whose "sophomoric scientism" is not "deplorable":

—no, what is deplorable is that these serious issues involving God and the nature of man should be co-opted by the present disputants, a popularizer like Sagan and fundamentalists who believe God created the world six thousand years ago. It's enough to give both science and Christianity a bad name.

Percy's critique here is more subtle than it might at first appear. Science is not the problem; even a "sophomoric scientism" is not the problem. The problem is science and scientism and religion alike being filtered through the semiotics of the "personal view" and the "personal voyage": it is the television-based cult of personality that's mind-numbing and soul-killing, whether the personality so celebrated is that of Carl Sagan, Phil Donahue, or Percy's fellow Louisianan Jimmy Swaggart, whose evangelistic program was in 1983 carried by more than 250 stations around the country.

People—people in their role as viewers—are receptive to cults of personality because such cults distract us from the dislocations of our very selves, and from the suffering those dislocations cause. The kind of literate, educated person who might pick up a book by Walker Percy can see how that works in the case of the *Phil Donahue Show*, which is why "The Last Donahue Show" comes fairly early in *Lost in the Cosmos*. It's a savagely funny parody, but it also flatters our sensibilities. That Carl Sagan's cosmic meditations, shown in primetime and on PBS, might work on its viewers in the same way is not so easy to see, and not so comforting to realize; but it's true. *Cosmos* was not about science, but about allowing us to observe a scientist with an attractive personality as a substitute for thinking scientifically.

Those in the audience for Phil Donahue's final show are distracted from themselves by watching Penny, the pregnant 14-year-old who thinks "babies are neat"; those who watch *Cosmos* are distracted from themselves by thinking about "our place in the Cosmos," that is, by reverting to abstract categories that evacuate personhood from human beings and fail to imagine contact with extraterrestrial intelligences in terms other than those of an utterly decontextualized "wonder." Donahue, Sagan—not really a dime's worth of difference between them.

When the 16th-century Frenchman Michel de Montaigne produced his extended exercise in self-investigation called the *Essays*, he knew his project was open to criticism. "If the world complains that I speak too much of myself," he wrote, "I reply that it does not even think of itself." *Lost in the Cosmos* is Percy's attempt to make the world think of itself, or rather to prod and provoke each of his readers to ask the uncomfortable questions that our preferred entertainment media help us avoid.

Though it might be better to say "our preferred *uses* of entertainment media": the problem is not television *per se* but how we habitually use it. Consider once more Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*: it is "a personal view," and Clark is a winsome guide, but he wears his authority lightly, and—this is far more important—the camera is rarely on him, preferring to offer long lingering shots of the great works of art he describes. Whatever Clark might say about it, Charlemagne's Palatine Chapel speaks eloquently for itself, because it is a product of the human mind and employs a visual language we are eager to read. The Crab Nebula remains comparatively inscrutable. This helps to explain why Clark as a guide promises less but delivers more than Sagan, who by denying that the "heavens declare the glory of God"—remember, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be"—seeks to deprive the Crab Nebula of what may well be its native tongue. *Civilisation* is proof that television can be used in a way that prompts responses from viewers, that stimulates thought rather than merely transmitting a putatively authoritative account of what is and what was and what remains yet to come.

People can read novels in the same existentially evasive way and for the same self-forgetful purposes that drive them to watch most of what they see on television. (Today they can, and do, use the internet for similar purposes.) This may account for Percy's abandonment of his usual genres of fiction and essay in favor of this mongrelized form, with its ludicrously inflated question-and-

answer format, its interpolated stories, its sensitivity to the most recent pop-cultural trends, even its overt and arcane scholarship. Percy is striving to break our usual readerly habits, to prevent us from being simply entertained, to make us oscillate among laughter and puzzlement and offense and excitement.

Lost in the Cosmos is the most peculiar book of Percy's career, and in my judgment his finest achievement. I read it when it first appeared, and if you had asked me at the time whether I expected the book to be relevant in 30 years, I probably would have said no. It seemed so topical, so of its moment; and how long could that moment last? But re-reading it in preparation for this essay I saw how little it matters that many people today will know nothing or nearly nothing about Phil Donahue or Carl Sagan. Their immediate heirs are with us every day when we turn on the TV. And Walker Percy's social vision remains as acute and discomfiting today as it was in 1983. That says a great deal for him as a writer and cultural critic; but it also, I believe, teaches us that our culture is, in its bones, changing less quickly than we have accustomed ourselves to believe. It's the same old Cosmos, declaring the same old Glory, and we're just as prone to getting lost in it as we ever were.

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