

WORLD WORLD

How I learned to stop worrying
and love the Blob

By *Thomas de Zengotita*

Lately it's getting, like, face it—you know?

As genocidal wars go, Kosovo seems to have turned out pretty well. Bombing worked after all. Back home, looks like welfare reform worked, too. Wasn't there supposed to be some urban-riots type thing by this time? Whatever Rubin and Greenspan did, we have this unprecedented economic success, don't we? And all that hard-core Newt stuff, that's history. Some fuss about the WTO and Starbuck's, but there's that African AIDS initiative, which is good, right? GATT and NAFTA caused some pain on all sides of several borders, but the Big Comeuppance promised by the Asian economic crisis never came to pass, and those designer-label seamstresses will catch more of the new action eventually, won't they? China, yadda-yadda, everyone knows the money is talking. I mean, are *you* worried about war over Taiwan? Russia? Okay, a little Chechnya friction, but they helped with the Serbs, and Putin will soon realize that free-form corruption requires institutionalization if it is to do business with IMF institutions. Barak is so into the "peace process"—in fact, the whole Middle East is succumbing to it. Ditto Ireland. Now India and Pakistan want some diplotherapist to broker *their* beef. Maybe even Castro will loosen up when he gets Elián back. If East Timor, classic example of manufactured consent by corporate imperialism, can make the world's to-do list, anything's possible. Prospects for women are certainly better than they've been in the history of the species. And, speaking of species, the peregrine falcon is off the endangered list, and Grand Banks fisheries are replenishing fast. I read where population trends are leveling off. Y2K disasters? In your dreams. What's next? Instant Rain Forest?

Gosh. The more folks shrug off those ponderous old identities and traditions, and those grand political theories and movements, and turn instead toward money, fame, and cool gear, the better things get. Now there's a Bridge to the twenty-first century. Call it World World—as in Disney World, only *much* bigger. A horrifying prospect? When compared with the truly horrifying twentieth century? Meet the only ideology we have left, the one that drives World World's content providers. And what is this "ism" for the Last Man, or (Nietzsche would have loved this) Last Person? We could call it "sensationalism" if the semantic space occupied by socialism and liberalism could be implicated. "Entertainmentism" maybe?

Personally, I file it all under "Blob." Not much of a metaphor, not precise,

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FOR BILL IT WAS THE MONICA
STATE OF THE UNION

but anything more specific wouldn't do the idea justice. You'll see.

Anyway, back to the question. Suppose the objective conditions of history (remember them?) forced this choice: World World for all or continued human misery on a massive scale. Pretend it's a values-clarification workshop. You'll learn a lot about yourself if you choose. Maybe you already have.

Don't worry. World World will have an Eggheads & Radicals Arcade and Chat Room. There you will be free to continue your ruthless unmasking of powerful interests who exploit World World for gargantuan profit. No one will think you're a snob or a drag or a threat. No one will know you exist. "Click" and you're gone. Democracy, Blob-style.

LEADER OF THE FREE WORLD WORLD

And Bill was the man, the man with the plan, or without the plan, and the stuff to see it through, or not, depending on the ebb and flow of money and polls. He consolidated trends that have been developing since Kennedy's TV presidency, but with Bill we crossed a threshold. A future History Channel (talk about a *mot juste*) will reference him as the defining figure of our age.

To see more deeply into this abyss of necessity, realize that it is Monica and choked-up lies and pastoral sessions with Jesse that made Bill a World World historical figure. It is sheer incredibility that entitles him. If what happened last year had been forecast to you, would you have believed it? Incredible! But incredible also in the other sense: Of everything he says or does now, isn't it pointless to ask whether he really means it?

As with greats of yore, there was, for Bill, the speech that made history. For Churchill it was "blood, toil," etc.; for FDR it was "fear itself"; for JFK it was "ask not what"; for MLK it was "I have a dream"—you know the top ten. For Bill, it was the Monica State of the Union. As with Lincoln at Gettysburg, it will take time to gather significance, but it will assume World World historical importance eventually, because in that performance Bill brought showbiz politics to apotheosis, forcing his vast appetite for dominion upon an enthralled planet like some Genghis Khan of virtuality. Remember how it was? Congress, the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, the Foreign Dignitaries, the Media, somnambulating into a newborn zone of Being in which hallowed custom and bizarre context were so surreally fused that the whole tableau seemed poised to shimmer off into the ether. A new form of stage fright permeated the halls of Congress and extended to millions, maybe billions, of viewers. Prime ministers and CEOs, district managers and college deans, sat riveted to the tube. They knew how central to their success was the ability to bullshit their way through an awkward situation. They felt implicit solidarity with Bill, deeper than any substance. Would he fumble? If just one giggle broke the stillness, what then? Would people be able to go through with the charade? Most of all: *Was this really happening?*

That most fundamental of questions went unarticulated, assuming thereby what Heidegger called its grounding significance. Plebeian as a Shakespearean watchman, the sergeant at arms announced—and Bill did the rest. Under pressures that would have crushed a citizen of the old real world, he strode into an arena without precedent and slam-dunked it into a shape of his choosing. In that masterful performance the personal and the political fused utterly, on a global scale, in real time. History slipped into the future.

We were all carried along, were we not? Bemused, admiring, repelled—no matter; we went with him down the aisle and through the first formalities, and gradually, as he picked up momentum, we realized it was going to be okay. And we were, at some level, profoundly grateful. He kept it together, himself and World World, in that instituting hour. We could relax back into accustomed roles—stand or not, clap or not, yawn or yell or switch channels—pretending not to notice that everything had changed even as it went back to normal. For if *that* could be normal, then normal could only be "normal" from now on.

On that evening the baseline of those job-approval ratings was set, and they

have not wavered since. William Jefferson Clinton had indeed done his job.

Didn't you just love it when they used all three names? It gave the expression "make a mockery of" a whole new dimension.

BLOBSTERS ALL

Remember when Dylan sang at Clinton's first inaugural in front of the Lincoln Memorial as fighter jets flew overhead in battle formation? Actor-activist Ron Silver saw those jets roar across the sky, and, recalling the '60s days of rage in that same place, he was troubled. But (after all, he *was* invited) it soon passed. A sudden realization reconciled him to the scene: "Those are *our* planes now," he thought.

That's a Blob Moment. You've had them yourself, right?

Don't confuse Blobby moments with hypocrisy and rationalization. The self-deception here is of a different order. Among Blobsters, self-deception is indistinguishable from self-overcoming.

Jedermann ein Übermensch. A small example: when Bill says he feels your pain, it's true. There is no limit to his empathic capacities. That's why people are so impressed with his one-on-one skills; the way he listens, the way he makes you feel important. Even really smart people (like you, dear reader) who get face time with Bill and know they are getting the treatment do not, on that account, resist. It makes them feel like insiders to be so treated and to realize it. The Blobby benefits of this doubling are multiple (as everything Blobby is). On the one hand, a gesture that passes for autonomy: describing the encounter later, re-creating every little stroke, you come off so knowing. On the other hand, in that retelling you submit again to the treatment—like Swann, remembering Odette saying something he needs now to believe.

Now we see why there were no John Deans or Elliot Richardsons in Bill's entourage. His subordinates couldn't turn against him, outraged at betrayal, because they had never been deceived. Neither could they desert the sinking ship. They rightly felt ownership of it. In the politics of World World, where the appearance of loyalty matters more than loyalty, serious players can never quit. War Room. Take the Heat. Rajin' Cajun. Grrrrrrr.

Suave Mike McCurry embodied this form of followership most publicly. He knew but he didn't know, you know? His superb demeanor conveyed the message. He wasn't loyal; he was "loyal." He couldn't be charged with responsibility, yet he got credit for handling the pressure that would have gone with responsibility if he had really had it. Is that cool or what? The press held Mike in high esteem for this performance. In coming as close to candor as the reflexivity of World World allows, Mike became a role model. He was in the thick of it but above it all—the very state to which power journalists aspire.

Bill provided Blobby moments for all those who were vaguely on the left out of fashionable habit. He let them down in ways that allowed them to acquiesce without a crisis of reflection. He picked issues on which they wouldn't want to waffle publicly and did it for them. Ever since he pulled the switch on that retarded murderer in his last term as governor, Bill has been

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facilitating this process. People who wouldn't openly criticize gangsta rap or abandon gays in the military or promote global capitalism were enabled to tsk-tsk at Bill's New Democrat compromising, even as he did what they didn't object to *that* much. Like some virtual savior, Bill took the sins of his generation's expediency upon himself.

SUCKING UP REALITY

The Blob is bigger than Bill, of course. It would be engulfing everything even if he didn't exist. Think of all the techniques and theories, movies and memoirs, counselors and programs and presentations, that condition your experience. Of course, a few things in life are still just what they are. Maybe you have a nice little unmediated relationship with your feet, rubbing them together under the blankets. Don't fend this off by saying that culture has always filtered experience. Just framing that objection makes the point. Culture provided categories taken for granted; the Blob offers—*options*.

Options are good, right? You can choose any product, any opinion, any lifestyle. It doesn't matter. It's like the Internet. As more and more people make more and more choices, it gets less and less important what they choose. That's why they are free to choose. That's good, right?

Even if it isn't, there's nothing you can do about it. Oh sure, some of us are still pretending to real freedom, pretending to retain sharpness and edge. But the Blob will not tolerate edges—though "edgy" is fine. Edgy is one of the Blob's most active digestive enzymes. Edgy gets us nowhere. What about sincerity?

Take this Jedediah Purdy fellow. The custodians of our nation's morality have a new poster boy. Jed is out to purge us of irony. He's got a true cause; he's writing books, making the rounds. The boy's youth excuses him, but haven't Kristol and Bennett learned anything? The enemy is irony, okay—but Lordy, boys, irony isn't a personality trait, it's a cultural condition. You can't *package* sincerity. The impossibility is almost logical. Remember those canonical Socratic dialogues? You're in a state of self-contradiction here.

Quixotic efforts to penetrate the Blob with sincerity aren't confined to conservatives. Poor Bill McKibben is mourning the death of outrage, too. He can't understand complacency about global climatic change. He exhorts us to reflect on the fact that the rain and the wind are now artifacts. He means "artifacts" in the literal sense; he's thinking product of carbon dioxide emissions. Poor guy, he is very sincere, but he doesn't understand that the wind and the rain were *already* artifacts—of The Weather Channel and twister movies and vacation commercials.

Imagine people, subjected to these mediated exhortations to outrage, actually trying to respond to all of them. See the problem? They can't.

Okay, so edgy and sincerity don't work; what about tribal authenticity?

Front-page story, the *New York Times*. Pictured are some South American Indians doing something groupish. Hands raised. Lots of grins. The caption pegs "a workshop in Vicus, Peru," designed by a humanitarian program to help "Indians learn to handle psychological problems brought on by the long Shining Path rebellion." A good thing, right? Better than Shining Path, anyway. Better than Che Guevara? Better than traditional lifeways and rituals? Well, no matter. They're doing the workshops, they *like* the workshops.

Occasionally, an eruption of fate or evil, an earthquake or a school shooting, feels like it might be sharp enough to pierce the pulp and impede the Blob. No way. The media corpuscles swarm to the scene, recognizing the very junctures that require the most coverage. What must be *covered* is anything that might become the one thing the omnitolerant Blob cannot allow: something outside it, something unmediated—something real.

Here is the deeper reason the Blob embraces scandal. The stain on Monica's dress threatened for a while to be irremediably real. It made you wonder how enthusiastic fellatio in the sunlit silence of the Oval Office *sounded*. This is also why Bill is at his best when he's making what threatens to

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be real into an act, when he comforts survivors of the disasters the Blob must cover or reconciles ancient enemies. After enough time with Bill and his agents, these old warriors start to feel outdated, provincial. That's what turns them. They want to be with it. And when they get with it, they begin to serve the Blob's agenda.

THE NICE AGENDA

You know what it is. Social Security Education Health Care The Environment. The only issue? How to "get it done." Answer? Money. Now the realists take over. Because nothing is realer than money. Right?

Blobsters are a reflective and ironical bunch, but one thing they pride themselves on, unreflectively and unironically, is their realism. Bruising boardroom and courtroom battles. Staggering sums and careers in the balance. These are the folks who get it done, because they are the ones who know what "the reality is." One of their favorite expressions. Because their reality is World World, they are known as "players."

Actually, of course, whatever isn't money is more real than money. Money has no substance or direction. It doesn't matter where it comes from. It doesn't matter where it goes. It can do anything. That's why the Blob thrives on money. And money is especially compatible with the Nice Agenda. You can see it helping. Medicine. Infrastructure. So real. And that realness gets attributed to the money that, as they say at the thank-you banquets, "made it possible." In World World it's money—as opposed to, say, God or Nature—that makes reality possible. Whew!

Back when politics was animated by visions that resonated to laws of God or Nature, people were authorized for great events, for conquests and revolutions. They dared everything for glory and the cause. You wouldn't talk about the "agenda" of the French Revolution, would you? But aren't we better off without all that, all the intoxicating fantasies that brought devastation to millions? Aren't we better off if people are limited to the glory of the sports arena and the concert hall? Napoleon? Lenin? Really! I mean, how much self-esteem do we want to encourage here? Kant? Wittgenstein? The brass of these guys, pontificating about ultimate reality and the purpose of *our* lives. Who did they think they *were*?

Don't get me wrong, it's okay to put them in books and movies. That's where they belong, up in La-La land with the Jedi Knights, not down here where regular folks are fashioning their own philosophies and lifestyles. Today great leaders are exercising great leadership in every company and school and neighborhood—special people doing special things in their own special ways. The old-style heroes weren't empowering; that's the point. They had an intimidating kind of greatness that discouraged you from developing your own greatness. By all means, celebrate those celebrities of the past. Drape the giant banners, mark the centennials and all other ennnials, the more the better, actually, because the more we do, the more proportionality we get—and *that's* what this is about. Proportionality. Likewise with using the Ninth Symphony in margarine commercials, pasting Gandhi on Apple billboards—stuff like that, over and over again, until everything is absorbed among the options. That's fair, right?

Robin Toner got the drift. In a *New York Times* review of Mona Harrington's *Care and Equality*, she hailed a "feminized politics" in which "the country no longer requires the 'warrior hero leaders' of the past." Susan Faludi's on the same track. She extended her compassion to those hapless lunks who flounder in the wake of these developments, invoking "a new paradigm for human progress . . . in a freer, more humane world."

But here's the really original part: in the absence of malignant Fascists or Communists or Capitalists or whatever, this is "a battle against no enemy . . . in service of a brotherhood that includes us all."

A battle against no enemy. Now what could be nicer than that? Who could argue with that? Certainly not me. ■