

Whatever happened to small-town America?

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JIM Rockford, private detective in NBC-TV's popular *The Rockford Files*, is in trouble. He is driving along in rural northern California on routine detective business, when his car suddenly hits a big bump and is incapacitated. Rockford, who is used to life in Los Angeles, is frantic. There he is, in the middle of nowhere, without any means of getting out: no taxicabs, no rental cars, no buses, no limousine service, nothing.

Then salvation comes, in the form of a towtruck operator who just happens to be passing by. He offers to tow Rockford into the nearest town for repairs. By chance, the town is named "New Pastoria." Rockford grins with delight; he is back in the driver's seat. But then he gets a jolt—the towtruck driver wants \$100 just to tow Rockford a few miles. There is no alternative, so Rockford agrees; at least he'll be able to leave soon. But while he is having lunch and waiting for the car to be fixed, Rockford learns that the repairs, which he thought would be minor, are going to cost over \$1,500. Again, that jolt—he isn't in Los Angeles now, so he can't just go to Aamco and get another estimate. The situation is starting to become painful to Rockford—and to look familiar to veteran television viewers as well.

Naturally, the car can't be fixed until the next day. So Rockford

is consigned to the local motel, where he soon finds himself in the arms of a seemingly confused but seductive teenybopper. Suddenly, someone bursts in and takes a compromising photograph; then while Rockford is still holding the supposedly shaken girl, a deputy sheriff comes roaring up, gun drawn, and threatens him. The deputy turns out to be the girl's fiancé, and he suspects that Rockford has been messing with his girl. Now hardened television watchers know for sure that they are about to see one of the few formula scenarios of the movies and television today—the nightmare descent of the innocent city dweller into the incomprehensibly wicked and evil depths of the countryside. It has been seen a hundred times before, with slight variations, and it is a story as familiar as the one about the rookie cop teamed up with the tough 20-year veteran, or the murdered prostitute with the heart of gold.

This characterization of the small town as evil and threatening to innocent city dwellers is now a staple of contemporary American mass culture. But the small town wasn't always seen that way. Over a relatively brief time, cultural attitudes towards small towns have changed virtually 180 degrees, from the old view of the small town as the bastion of everything good about America to the current view of the small town as everything frightening and corrupt about America. The change has been so complete that when we see a vestige of the old view appear, we are startled.

Yet last summer, when New York City was having such severe fiscal troubles, the old view surfaced. In a column in *The Wall Street Journal*, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., said that President Ford's reluctance to help New York could be explained entirely by the traditional American antipathy towards the big city, and love for the small town. (Professor Schlesinger has obviously not been watching enough television.) Schlesinger quoted at great length from a book by Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus The City—From Thomas Jefferson To Frank Lloyd Wright*. The authors' thesis is that the greatest American thinkers have had a strong animus toward their cities. The Whites say that they can find no unifying theme for this dislike. Some, like Jefferson and William Dean Howells, disliked the American city because it was too commercialized, too filled with the extremes of wealth and poverty. Some, like Henry Adams, disliked the city because it was crowded with large numbers of non-Anglo-Saxon residents. Others, like Jane Addams and Henry James, faulted the American city for lacking the grace and charm of the older, more settled cities of Europe.

At least until the 1920's, many American intellectuals regarded

their cities as "too big, too noisy, too dirty, too smelly, too commercial, too crowded, too full of immigrants, too full of Jews," and on and on. Small towns, on the other hand, were thought to be America's salvation. Jefferson summed up the small-town virtues that would make America great: "Crime is scarcely heard of, breaches of order are rare, and our societies, if not refined, are rational, moral, and affectionate, at least."

Somehow, between the age of Monticello and the age of Malibu, things have become turned around. In the televised and filmed literature of America, small towns are now the places where bad things happen; the innocent wayfarer returns to the city for protection. It is more or less routine on television for naive families to have a tire blowout outside a small town and completely disappear into the maw of a town-wide criminal conspiracy. The small towns of the movies are no better. Innocent youths ride through them only to be driven off mountain roads, or blown to pieces by crazed local sheriffs. Even the really tough guys—Mannix or Cannon or Baretta or Harry Orwell or poor Jim Rockford—take their lumps in small towns.

Big-city fear and loathing

To understand what has brought about such a remarkable change in cultural attitudes, it is instructive to see what else happens to Rockford in New Pastoria. He has already been rendered symbolically impotent—what can a man do without a car? Moreover, the very milieu that has left him powerless is the same one that can alone return his power to him—by fixing his car. The dependence that Rockford feels towards his tormentors is like something out of the Patty Hearst trial; it is pitiful. And it reveals the rage that people who cannot fix things feel towards people who can, which is basically the rage of the city dweller towards the small-town dweller. And this provides a clue to the attitude of the media towards the small town. Many writers for the media feel that small towns have some power over them, which they resent enormously.

In fact, the small town has offended against television and movie writers in a number of ways. Not only can small-town people repair things—which puts them immensely more in control of their lives than most writers ever will be—but they are also resistant to the political currents which move writers. For these are the small towns that have cars with bumper stickers reading "This is Wallace Country." These are the small towns that voted for Goldwater. People

ride around in pickup trucks with rifles hanging in the rear window. They don't protest United States imperialism or refuse to eat grapes. In such small towns, presumably, under every gingham dress is the robe of the women's auxiliary to the Ku Klux Klan.

It is not coincidental that after Rockford is rendered impotent by the forces of the small town, he is then confronted with a teenaged seductress. This dramatizes his impotence and suggests that people in those small towns are not just politically, but also morally, insane. Finally, Rockford's brush with a lawman who is clearly acting against the law is also perfectly true to form. When the political and moral climate is so completely bizarre, what can be expected of law enforcement officials?

After the brush with the deputy, Rockford meets the mayor of New Pastoria, who is also the mother of the juvenile seductress. It turns out that the mayor is trying to lead the formerly economically depressed town to prosperity, through unspecified means. After Rockford returns to his room to sleep, he is plunged into a literal nightmare. Thugs break into his room, claim he is a drug dealer, threaten to kill him, and practically scare him to death. He is then betrayed by a seemingly kind old ex-sheriff, thrown into jail on trumped-up drug charges, and offered his release in exchange for a huge bribe. The story resembles a televised version of one of Kafka's more representative works.

Finally, while out on bail, Rockford breaks into the district attorney's office and finds evidence that the town has been systematically preying on traveling city folk, breaking their cars, charging outrageous repair bills, framing them on various charges, and then blackmailing them—the source of the income for New Pastoria's economic renaissance. Rockford eventually breaks the scheme wide open, but only with the help of authorities from the city. New Pastoria, the quintessence of the small town of television and the movies, comes in for a hell of a beating.

Cultural politics and the media

But the reasons that small towns came to have such a bad image in the "industry" involve more than merely political differences and have even deeper roots.

Even while Jefferson was writing about how wonderful life was in rural Virginia, early abolitionists were noticing that in those idyllic Southern towns, some human beings owned other human beings. That in itself was terrible, and the owners often did terrible

things to the people they owned. The idea gained strength, especially after the Civil War, that small Southern towns were places where the mask of law was used to hide horrifying crimes against law and morality.

Some early silent and talking pictures picked up the theme. The most notable example was *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, in 1932, which marked a turning point of sorts because its message was that small Southern towns were so evil and corrupt that they unjustly oppressed white people, too.

At about the same time, small towns were being scorned by many great American novelists of the 1920's who—from Baltimore or New York or Paris—saw the American small town as the lair of the “booboisie,” that dreaded American species named by H. L. Menck-en. Small towns were not only stupid, but terribly unfashionable as well.

The classic example of a small-town conspiracy against the outside world was not revealed, however, until after World War II. A film called *Bad Day at Black Rock* told the story of a small town in the Southwest that went amok after Pearl Harbor and murdered a local Japanese-American farmer, whose son was fighting with the Nisei forces in Italy. Spencer Tracy, who had been with the Nisei soldier when he was killed, brings the son's medal to his family after the end of the War. All the people in the small town participate in the coverup, and when Tracy gets too inquisitive, they try to kill him. It is in all ways a prototypical story—there is the same bewildering solidarity, the same lawless police officials, and the same lazy cunning that were to be copied again and again by television and the movies. It was no coincidence, as the saying goes, that *Bad Day at Black Rock* came out in 1955, a time when virtually the entire American mass media were arranging themselves into a political and cultural style which still persists to this day, although some weakening is evident.

It is obviously problematic to move from analyzing media prototypes to analyzing the sociological reality of the creators of such images. Yet writers for television and films have political and cultural points of view, just like everyone else. And they are predominantly liberal and antiestablishment (without realizing, of course, that they *are* the “establishment,” show-business intellectuals maintain one of the most delightful routines of “doublethink” anywhere). It is no accident that George McGovern and Tom Hayden found many large donors in Hollywood. The people who are now writing were shaped intellectually at a time when most intellectual respectability,

so it seemed, belonged to left-wing thought. Many idolized Franklin D. Roosevelt and hated Joe McCarthy. In Hollywood, finding a writer who is a Republican is almost like seeing a woman without painted toenails at the Beverly Hills Hotel swimming pool. When the Presidential elections come around, the longest lists of writers and directors will always be found on the stationery of the most liberal Democratic candidates.

To such people, small towns are the enemy. Small towns did not support Adlai Stevenson; some of them didn't even like Roosevelt. These writers' formative years were spent reading about lynchings in small towns and rural areas. They know that once they leave New York or Los Angeles, they are in political *terra incognita*, and that scares them. When they depict a small town as frightening, they are really telling us that they are frightened.

But they are more than frightened; they are angry, too. By consistently casting conservative votes, the small towns have blocked them politically from creating the kind of America they would like to create. Small towns now have lots of people who didn't like big cities in the past because big cities had too many Jews, and a truly great number of the people who write movies and television shows are Jewish. It is hardly surprising that many of these writers should not be enamored of small towns.

Not that there is any religious animus involved—far from it. These writers do not care one bit about the religious practices of the people in the small towns. If they are religious, that is one more piece of hypocrisy, but piled on top of so much hypocrisy, it doesn't matter much. What is at work is an ethnic/cultural polarity. The typical Hollywood writer, from my experience, is of an ethnic background from a large Eastern city—usually from Brooklyn. He grew up being taught that people in small towns hated him, were different from him, and were out to get him. As a result, when he gets the chance, he attacks the small town on television or the movies.

No matter that statistics show that living in a small town is about seven times safer than living in a large city. A person whose sole source of knowledge about America came from watching television detective shows would think that driving outside a big city is comparable to jumping off a tall building. Any number of movies—*Deliverance*, *Macon County Line*, *The California Kid*—make the same point. The television shows and movies are not telling it "like it is"; instead they are giving us the point of view of a small and extremely powerful section of the American intellectual community—those who write for the mass visual media.

The cultural civil war

What is happening, as a consequence, is something unusual and remarkable. A national culture is making war upon a way of life that is still powerfully attractive and widely practiced in the same country. To be specific, about half of all Americans still live in small towns and rural areas, and, more interestingly, about three out of four Americans sampled in a 1975 Gallup poll said they would prefer to live in a suburb or a small town, or on a farm. (Almost 25 per cent chose a farm!) Thus feelings of affection for small towns run deep in America, and small-town life is treasured by millions of people. But in the mass culture of the country, a hatred for the small town is spewed out on television screens and movie screens every day.

So far as I know, this is a historical first. In many earlier societies, there had been a literature which belittled and criticized the small town and the rural way of life. But it was confined to small groups of the population. For the masses of the people, there was a folk tradition which glorified the rural and small-town way of life. Now that situation is turned around. Television and the movies are America's folk culture, and they have nothing but contempt for the way of life of a very large part of the folk.

In no time before the advent of television has a writer been able to reach so many people so quickly. Similarly, before the age of television, writers as a group were never able to circulate their opinions so widely in so short a space of time. What happened was the coincidence of a cultural event and an electronic event. The cultural event was rather complicated. It involved the emergence among television and movie writers of a predominantly left-wing, antiestablishment style of thought and view of the world—the result of a whole series of events that are too lengthy to enumerate (and which I do not fully understand), but are clearly apparent. Part of that worldview is an animus against small-town America. The electronic event was the growth of television; and entry to its ranks of writers, as for the movies, was decided on a strictly meritocratic basis. The result was that aggressive, striving people with a modicum of talent could become television and movie writers. Thus the medium and the message came together around the mid-1950's, although the two had been converging for some time before.

The consequence of this merger has been that the American people are told falsehoods about their country—untruths that those in control of writing for the media believe, or at any rate refuse to disbelieve. And the falsehoods have consequences.

The anti-small-town show makes the point clearly. Poll after poll has shown that Americans in cities fear crime more than anything else—even more than inflation. Statistics also show that the most frequently committed crime is simple mugging, and that the typical mugger is a teenage, minority-group male. And what people fear when they leave their cars and houses are precisely teenage, minority-group youths.

But most writers of America cannot cope intellectually with the idea that some of those pitiful minorities, whom they were taught were oppressed and tormented, are now themselves tormenting others in turn. Many therefore take their own free-floating anxiety about crime and violence and move it to a place that is more comfortable for them—the small town, which they were taught to hate and fear. It is a complete reversal of reality to make the small town more dangerous than the big city, but it accords perfectly with these writers' view of reality—or what reality should be. (There are other examples of this inverted depiction of crime on television. For instance, if a crime is committed in the city, it is usually by a person who is either rich or insane. The real world, in which violent crimes are committed by people who are poor, vicious, and quite sane, rarely shows its head.)

The simple consequence of this distortion of reality is that people are misinformed. Far more serious and dangerous, however, is that people are taught to hate and fear their own culture. They are given additional reasons to detest a fundamental social unit of their country—the small town. This detestation leads like a stream, among many such streams that such writers and intellectuals have fashioned, into a mighty confluence of doubt of America by Americans. People are told that their culture is, at its root, sick, violent, and depraved, and this message gives them little confidence in the future of that culture. It also leads them to feel ashamed of their country and to believe that if their society is in decline, it deserves to be.

It is simply inconceivable that a medium capable of making a brand new deodorant number one in sales in only six months ("Try it under your own two arms—we're Sure") could not, after years of trying, make Americans feel ambivalent about small towns.

A small-town revival?

And yet, the polls still show a strong attachment to the concept of small-town life. That, perhaps, is the result of some reality penetrating into the minds of people who watch television. Those peo-

ple have been to small towns. The small towns are often pretty, clean, and quiet. No one hurt them or threatened them there. So the television shows make them feel ambivalent about the small town, but cannot destroy all feelings of affection. What the television shows and movies can do is create self-doubt and confusion. What would be terribly interesting would be the reactions of Americans to small towns if their views had not been affected by television shows and movies that are filled with negative images.

We may get to see just that. There are signs of a change in the attitude of the media toward small towns and rural America. Somewhere along the line, someone discovered that the hatred of small towns collided with the environmental issue. Suddenly, for the groups whose parents were taught that everything outside the city was the domain of the Klansman, the city and its pollution now became the enemy.

A new generation of ad men and women and music hucksters have come along who realized that when you call something "country" or "farm-fresh" or "natural," people think of it as lacking poisonous pollutants and additives. On the same shows where the small town is cruelly trapping the innocent city dweller, the commercials are showing how wonderful it is to live on a farm and get fresh food and have a fresh complexion, and how healthful it is to live in a small town where there is plenty of fresh air and hard work. People have begun to think that out in the country, there are not only fewer sulphur-dioxide emissions, but less meanness and tension. Television documentaries now tell about city people who are leading new lives in Vermont and Maine.

A generational clash is developing in the media. The people most in tune with the generation of the 1960's and 1970's know that, despite all the television shows, Ralph Nader has authoritatively told them that big cities are disgusting, unhealthy places—and they believe him. Such people are resuscitating the country image in those media forms which most quickly adapt to changing trends, music and advertising. On the radio air waves, country music expands to new stations at an almost geometric rate. It is customarily only a matter of time before such trends move to prime time and the silver screen.

But the writers who grew up without the environmental issue are still around, and are still powerful. Their world view has not changed and they are still grinding out the melodramas which make the small town eat dirt.

So a struggle in the media continues in which ground is gained

and lost. The signs of how it will turn out are unclear, but they seem to indicate a small-town renaissance. A recent phenomenon is the sudden emergence of pictures about small towns, particularly in the South, which are not slanderous and which are making big money, even in suburban markets. Think of Burt Reynolds and you can think of the cinematic genre referred to. The emergence of Nashville as a powerful media center is another sign of the regeneration of the image of the small town. It grows daily more powerful in both records and films, and it is the capital of small-town America (a fact which earned it an astonishingly crude slam in the movie which bears its name). Several new television shows are set in small towns—*Sara*, *The Bionic Woman*, and *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*—and the small towns are treated affectionately. Even a recent made-for-television movie adapted from the works of John O'Hara took a compassionate view of small town life.

Still, these are just straws in the wind. The predominant theme in prime time and at the theater is still that small towns are places where bad things happen to innocent people. It is a view that is neither realistic nor helpful to America or to anyone in particular, but it reveals something about how the media and our culture are shaped.