

Edward Rothstein on Music

The Sight of Music

I.

Watching Carlos Kleiber conduct the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is like being caught in some fluid and circuitous current, curling about one's senses. Everything is liquid, every gesture a continuation of the one before. But everything is also precisely and carefully articulated. When the rushing patterns and strokes of the introduction taper off, Kleiber makes the rhythmic shifts seem like an alteration in the passage of time itself. His hands guide the players from silence to silence. Then he leans forward as if to share a secret, rolls his baton in the air to mark the new pulse, and the main theme enters. And having set events in motion, Kleiber simply stands back, waiting. The phrasing is playful, exuberant, but almost private in its casual abandon. Kleiber just nods his eyes in the right direction and then rocks his body as if singing to himself, only raising his baton when he, like the music, can no longer contain himself.

Another vision: Cherubino has just run into Susanna's room and is breathlessly teasing her with his infatuations. "Every woman makes me tremble," he sings with adolescent sighs. He is, he says, possessed by "a desire I can't explain." His eyes are bleary, intoxicated, his brow sweaty with imaginings, his world dizzy with youthful desire. His aria fairly pants with passion, as he seems to swoon before Susanna. And she seems to whirl around him. As his voice is heard, however, his lips do not move: for the aria that we are hearing we are also watching, as the beginning of Cherubino's thoughts, not his words.

Neither of these visions could be experienced on a recording or in a concert hall. Not only is Kleiber too rarely found in either, but even on the podium his expressions and gestures would hardly be visible. As for the instructions of Cherubino's eyes, opera performance makes facial expression almost irrelevant; direction depends on grosser expression, on the stage tableaux themselves, not on the movements of eyebrows and chins. But both moments can be found on laserdiscs, those LP-sized

discs that look like giant CDs but contain video as well as audio tracks. My first example is drawn from a disc of remarkable performances of Beethoven's Fourth and Seventh Symphonies released by Philips, and my second from a stunning home video version of *The Marriage of Figaro*, conducted by Karl Böhm and directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, released by Deutsche Grammophon.

These examples illustrate two different relationships that may exist between the visual and the musical. In the first, Kleiber's physical gestures are illuminations and interpretations of the musical gestures of the score. They provide images of the music, designed to communicate to the players the appropriate textures and phrasing. They make corporeally manifest aspects of music that lie beyond the reach of ordinary notation. They reveal the inaudible aspect of the audible, allowing silence to hold our attention, or a pulse to be established before a sound is played.

The second image is not an illumination of the music. Indeed, it seems to be its opposite. It is jarring to see a silent face swooning while the music is full of subtle vocal shadings. It seems, at first, to be mere artifice, a face shot in extreme expressions accompanied by something equally artificial—a recording dubbed over the image. But this flirtation with artifice issues in a potent interpretation of the aria. The entire Ponnelle production, in fact, for all its affectations, is an extraordinary dramatization of the tension between the secret and the known, between private desire and public manners. The suggestion that Cherubino's passions derive from an overflowing inner life amplifies the music without undoing it.

The video presentation of music, then, is not just a "record" of a performance, or sound with sight added. It is, rather, its own medium, with its own aesthetic intentions, language, and demands. And it is now becoming more and more a part of what one music magazine has called "the classical music lifestyle."

Forty years ago, a concert on television was a novelty, nothing more than a "you are there" recreation. Now, after the Metropolitan Opera's productions of

Wagner's *The Ring* have been seen by more viewers on television than have ever seen it live during the past century, as "Great Performances" becomes a fixture of the PBS scene, as VCR tapes and now laserdiscs (or CD videos, as some companies call them) proliferate in the stores, as concert and opera organizations around the world are investing large sums of money in taping performances for future broadcasts, the television image of music is coming into its own. The time has come to give it serious attention.

Two major series of musical videos have also just been released from the opposite extremes of our taping age, and considered together they may help us understand the new importance of image for the appreciation of high art music: broadcasts of Arturo Toscanini from the early years of television itself (1948-52) on BMG and videos produced by Herbert von Karajan on Sony Classical just before his death in 1989. During Toscanini's career, television was an anomaly, an afterthought. Music on television was just a demonstration of a new medium. But Karajan considered home video images of classical music so important that he spent a good part of his final years sequestered in a state-of-the-art video studio that he built for himself near Salzburg. There he labored on what he considered his "legacy," obsessively detailed video versions of his conducting. Had he lived, he would have traveled around the world in his private jet with a demonstration video system, inducting innocents into the brave new world.

But what sort of a world is this? The world of pop music video shows part of what is at stake when images are added to sound. In much of pop, the video has become a primary element of the industry itself, the source of its power rather than a supplement to it. (In the early 1980s MTV rescued the record industry from a terrible slump.) For pop, however, this is the culmination of the form; an evolution, not a transformation. The marketing of a group's "sound" has always been linked to its "image." From Elvis to Madonna, songs have not been promoted and played simply for their musical charms, but also because of the appearance and the attitude of their creators. Once video versions of songs became possible for a mass market, they quickly supplanted songs as the center of attention. Madonna's songs are virtual appendages to her videos (which demonstrate the recommended physical responses); the sound serves as an occasion for, a reminder of, the images.

Art music, of course, is more intricate. Its sounds can speak wholly on their own, independent of images. Many pieces of music that were written to accompany particular dances or theatrical performances have survived their occasions and stand on their own. The very definition of art music, in fact, would seem to be that no image is required. The greater the music, the more limited it would be by any particular image. Even Romantic "program music," which would seem to have subordinated the ear to the eye, paradoxically confirmed the opposite, by creating scenes and narratives out of nothing but sound. And nothing has strengthened our sense of the autonomy, the self-sufficient aural, of music more than recordings. They have taught us that music can become disembodied, that it does speak in abstract tongues and requires no physical presence to work its wiles. In this way, recordings do get closer to an essence.

Who needs vision for music? The addition of sight can lead to excess, extravagance, irrelevance, distraction. Even the concert hall can seem superfluous to a world that has matured with the recording. (Wagner demanded that the orchestra be invisible, so that the aural experience not be polluted by the visual one.) We still attend concerts, but what do we go to concerts to see? The chandeliers in the hall, or the crowds of listeners, or heads facing forward in rapt attention? The first violinist sweating or the percussionist shifting position? The tenor's open mouth and protruding chest? The spread hands of a pianist? In order to understand what music video does, we first need to understand what our eyes have to do with music at all.

II.

Nearly twenty years ago, in a small church in Rome, I heard a violin recital. The name of the soloist is lost to me, but what remains in memory is a combination of sound and image: the point and the polish of the violin's voice, accompanied by the player's concentrated gaze and flexible stance, the translucent, piercing clarity of Bach's partitas filling the nave of the church, which seemed to lift the sounds into the heavens.

I recall, too, a particular moment in one of Arthur Rubinstein's last concerts. I sat in the gods at Carnegie Hall, so the pianist himself was a distant figure, his physical presence seeming inadequately matched to the body of sound reaching my ears. At the climax of one piece—which one I don't recall—he lifted his left hand far above the keyboard, so that

it hung, almost like a vulture, above his head. Then he brought it down with such force that it seemed nearly to lift him off the bench. I gasped, then realized that everyone else had gasped as well.

In both these cases, the sight of a player was an essential aspect of a musical experience. In the case of my Roman violinist, the setting and the presentation of the sound made Bach's abstractions reveal the religious spirit that suffuses them. In the case of Rubinstein, the grand theatrical gesture was an image in space of the musical gesture that he was creating, a sweeping pause in which the music was latent with kinetic energy, followed by a sudden release, like water plunging through a dam. The gesture, I am sure, helped him to produce the proper sound and helped us to experience it.

These, then, are examples of gesture seen revealing gesture heard. The physical movement and expression becomes an image of the aural one, either deliberately or incidentally. That is what we go to concerts to see: tactile illuminations of sound. And musicians, too, need the instruction that is provided by the sight of music physically made.

Such physical images are not something extraneous to the music. Consider a long silence in a phrase. The significance of that silence must be thoroughly understood by the performer. Is it a break in the line or a breath? Is it a silence latent with possibility or is it an exhalation of satisfaction? Does it mark an end or a beginning? The expert interpreter will be able to communicate the nature of a silence, but only if the silence is made part of a larger gesture—first a musical gesture, then a physical gesture. They often illuminate each other.

In a concert the gesture is amplified, the appearance acting as a continuous commentary on the music. So strong is the power of sight that we can even be fooled into thinking that a gesture is happening in sound when it is only happening in the image; and so we sometimes listen to a recording of an extraordinary performance in dismay, as magical moments are revealed as hat tricks. More often, though, the image and the sound are inseparable. The performer is an embodiment of the sound that he produces, unintentionally bearing the image along with the music. But there may also be something deliberate about it: the performer may be a guide, a teacher, illuminating implications and connections that would not be obvious on first hearing. The listener, in turn, takes the image seen and uses it to inter-

pret the gestures heard. We should all be "playing" the music as we are listening, like participants in some grand chamber event.

The conductor is the apotheosis of these aspects of image. By showing how the music should look, the conductor is demonstrating to the players, in his every gesture, how the music should sound. Even the audience may be the object of the baton's attentions. When Leonard Bernstein was transported to heights of orgiastic gesture on the podium, he was criticized for theatricality, for pandering to the public and to the players, for exaggerating the music's details and intentions, for italicizing everything. Other performers, by contrast, turn all gesture inward, so their physical image is restrained, and every motion is minimal. Karajan was like this. Study his face and hands: they are engaged in an art of detached surgery.

Wagner's dream of the invisible orchestra notwithstanding, the only instrument whose playing has been totally divorced from the image of the player has been the organ. Even the keyboard is hidden from the churchgoer. The spiritual and didactic purpose is plain: the music must be heard as if it comes directly from heaven. Music of the invisible must itself be invisible. Very little about organ playing lends itself to seeing or being seen. The instrument, like the harpsichord, is unaffected by overt affect: pound the keys or pat them, stand on the pedals or touch them with the toes, the sound is the same. This absence of a need for image by seer and seen may be why there is also such a long and established tradition of blind organ virtuosos.

III.

The success—the dominance—of recordings has allowed us to forget all this, to forget how unusual sonic abstraction really is. Recordings have turned us all into blind, and seemingly happier, listeners. They have allowed us to discard the notion that the sight of the music, not just the sound, is part of its import, and that the image is more fragile and more mortal than the sounds of the score.

When listening to a recording, for example, what can we look at that bears any relationship to the sound? We can close our eyes, talk to friends, stare at the speakers, or watch the LEDs on the audio equipment. But wherever we look, listening is a different experience from watching, requiring more imagination and more concentration. There are no guides provided by bow arms and batons, no focus for our attention

and all too many distractions.

But an irony has occurred. The technology that disembodied the music can now re-embodiment it. Audiophiles, or cultists of the art of disembodied sound, spend tens of thousands of dollars on elaborate equipment to milk out of the grooves of LPs and pits of CDs the very physical elements that they were created to eliminate. Harry Pearson, editor of *The Absolute Sound*, has developed a vocabulary to express these goals. Thus, we audiophiles (I count myself among their number) speak of the "soundstage" created by a system: how clearly the record succeeds in reproducing the illusion of a physical space within which the instruments are playing. Or we speak, suggestively, of "imaging." A system that "images" well is one that gives a sense of location for an instrument; and sophisticated systems will even let us hear how a bassoon is raised in the air or how Heifetz turns his violin. Audiophilia often becomes an exercise in attempting to give a three-dimensional space back to disembodied sound, to create something a little strange and synaesthetic: aural vision.

But the ambition is a little quixotic. Even the most active imagination cannot spin the physical gesture out of sound. In addition, recordings are so completely undemanding when we play them, we generally give them less attention and imagination, not more. They become, alas, background. First our eyes stray to a nearby magazine, then so do our ears. I am writing this as the Schubert Octet is being played.

Into the fray, then, comes the art music video, going all the way, fully restoring image to sound. But it is not the mere image of the concert hall. Complications are added. As is well known, the camera transforms the physical reality. The image of a player is not the same thing as a player. The camera tyrannizes and becomes an unavoidable part of that experience: it selects the images we see. And while restoring the image of the playing body to musical experience, so many additional gestures are added that the result can be total confusion. What if the camera is busy zooming in on the cellos while the winds are playing their solos? What if the camera is focusing on the winds when the really interesting part of this interpretation is how the bass line is being treated? Should the camera show us the faces of artists or their executing fingers or veer off into pure Fantasia-like play? Recordings never had to worry about this. The microphone is a passive instrument. It "picks up" the sounds being made. It is an ear with permanent recall. But cameras are active,

determining what our eyes see as we listen. The viewer cannot turn to the cellos or watch the soprano; he must watch what the camera watches. The camera directs attention or constricts it, broadens it or dissolves it. It is an interpreter, not a reporter. And so when the camera becomes active, we become passive. Instead of our attention being given free reign in space, it becomes dependent on the directions given to our eyes, and directed to a limited plane. We listen differently. Our ears follow our eyes.

IV.

That is the price of the image, but it is also its power. The camera can reveal things unseen or unseeable in concert. And these images can affect the way in which we understand the music and the way in which it affects us.

Again, two series of videodiscs now being released demonstrate both the limitations of the camera and its contributions to musical experience. They allow us to comprehend aspects of conducting normally invisible even to the audience attending a concert. The first is a set of ten televised concerts given by Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra between 1948 and 1952. These are from the infancy of broadcasting, when the image was treated unself-consciously as something recorded for the listener's entertainment. The performers seem as unaware of the camera as the camera is unaware of them.

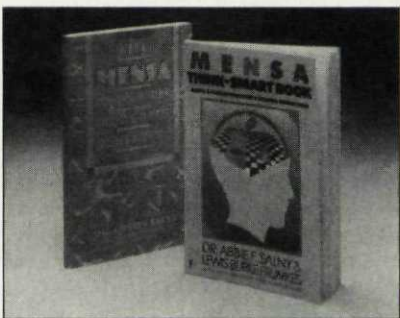
Harvey Sachs, in his notes to the Toscanini discs, quotes Stravinsky to the effect that most contemporary conductors give "a performance of a performance," thereby demonstrating their involvement with the music. But in these discs, Sachs writes, Toscanini "never mimics the music's content with his face or gestures." The face, never seen by the audience, but only by the players, is fierce, concentrated, without expression except when it nods in determination. It is, in short, the face of a pre-video age conductor. The discs of a concert performance of *Aida* even has Toscanini, absorbed in his job, singing along with the soloists, mouthing the words. This is not for effect, it is for efficacy. His hands, too, are functional rather than expressive. An index finger protrudes on the left hand, the right hand rolls with almost a band leader's swing, and the music emerges with vigor, ruthless energy, and occasional breathlessness. The conductor's image is a supplement to the communication that took place in rehearsal, a reminder to the players rather than a re-creation for the camera and the occasion.

This makes Toscanini less of an obvi-

ous "performer." But the images have invaluable documentary value. They capture Toscanini's communicative style and a good deal of his performing personality during his final years. They also present images that resonate with the performances: Toscanini using his baton to draw the patterns of a Mozart minuet in the air while behind him the lights of studio 8H are reflected off the listeners' heads, or the 85-year-old maestro raising a handkerchief to wipe the sweat out off his eyes under the hot lights, his attention to the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony unwavering.

Still, the images do not reveal too much about the music itself. In a 1948 performance of Mozart's Symphony No. 40, for example, the cameras seem almost restless in their attempt to provide variety for the viewer. Of course, there are the shots of Toscanini's broadly sweeping baton, and of the left hand restraining the players with small and inhibited gestures. But why, in mid-phrases, are there sudden breaks in the continuity of the image, unexpected shifts in camera angles, unnecessary pans across an instrumental section—all unrelated to the musical events? Why, for example, at the end of the exposition of the first movement, does the camera focus on the back of the first violins and

SIGNALS



Give your brain a workout with these challenging Mensa Quiz Books. Signals catalog offers a unique collection of educational toys and games, videos, books, cassettes, sweatshirts, T-shirts, and jewelry. Many products related to Public Television.

For your free one year catalog subscription mail coupon below.

☐ Yes, please start my **FREE** one year **SIGNALS** subscription.

Name _____
Address _____ Apt. _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____

Mail to: **SIGNALS**
1000 Westgate Drive, Dept. 410
St. Paul, MN 55114

slowly sweep in close-up to the front, then begin to move backward again before jumping to a close-up of Toscanini's face? The images stand apart from the music, and even distract from it. Even in 1952, four years later, with all the additional experience broadcasters gained with the new medium, at a concert in Carnegie Hall, the cameras seem to have a will of their own, ignoring the oboe cadenza in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in order to focus on Toscanini waiting to lead his players into the fray.

As if to answer these objections, Herbert von Karajan began work almost a decade ago on the series of videos he thought of as his legacy. He was one of the first modern conductors to understand the power of technology in the communication of music. He believed that the video represented the future of home music, that it should be treated as an art form. He multiplied the number of cameras usually used in taping a performance, radically increased rehearsal time, and conducted the editing himself, splicing the images as if they were recordings.

In Berlin two years ago a woman who worked with Karajan on editing the videos told me of his obsessive attention to detail, his hours of splicing a single phrase. The intention was to create video phrasings to match the musical phrasings. Karajan may have invested \$50 million in the project, which was still unfinished at the time of his death. A member of the Berlin Philharmonic told me that Karajan even hired individual sections of the orchestra, lined them up on chairs and benches of different heights, and adjusted the lighting to reflect ghostly off the wood and the brass of their instruments. What he wanted was a straight line, simultaneous finger movements, and no sweating. The image would be dubbed into the final version, where it would appear as if these perfectly aligned players were simply at work in the orchestra.

The first discs in this "legacy," the Nine Beethoven Symphonies, have just been released. Despite my reservations about Karajan's musical style (see "Karajan: The Nazi Recordings," *TNR*, November 7, 1988), they are an imposing achievement, substantially more affecting in their incarnations as videos than in Karajan's relatively bloodless sound recordings of these works in his late years. They are highly stylized, but not egoistic. The camera angles are dramatic—the blurring strokes of the timpanist's mallets, their fuzz glowing in the light, or a row of winds silhouetted against a spaceless black background, or violins so close up and shot with such a

long focal length that they seem shut off from any other world than the music. And of course, there is the conductor himself, not standing apart from the players but seeming in their midst. The players are angled up from him, as if they composed a single instrument. With the bows whipping the air around him, Karajan sometimes seems like the captain of a ship in the midst of mercurial seas.

The finale of the Seventh Symphony, for example, brings these elements together so that they emphasize the drive and the excitement and the obsession of the playing itself. The swift cuts from one section to another, the recurrent shots of Karajan returning like a theme in a rondo: these allow one to attend to the music more carefully. Karajan sometimes goes too far, usually in the direction of emphasizing his own power, as in shots during the "Eroica" in which he seems to hover ten feet above the player's space, or in which the violins in a near military array fill the screen; but the technique and achievement are considerable. If the Toscanini and Kleiber recordings show the power of music video as a revelation of the "interior" of music making—the image the conductor presents to his instrument, the orchestra—the Karajan discs show, even with their flaws, the possibilities of music video as an aesthetic form.

V.

I have made little mention thus far of opera on video, trying instead to make the stronger case for image added to abstract music. But concert videos are likely to remain a minor form. Though they may reveal the limitations of recordings, they will still be secondary to disembodied and casual sound. For music in the home can never again become the center of a listener's attention as it was when learning an instrument was as commonplace as hearing one.

But with the increasing transposition of opera to the television tube, video will find, I think, its most powerful and important musical role. All the risks and the dangers still exist, of course: filmed staged performances are almost always flawed in one respect or another, requiring a narrowing of vision, cutting out as much of the director's staging as is put in, focusing often on sweaty and straining singers to the detriment of their roles. Too often the star singer becomes the center of attention and eclipses the work itself. And there are also plenty of poor examples of opera on video: even the Bayreuth *Ring* from a decade ago, conducted by Pierre Boulez and directed by Patrice Chereau and now

available on laserdisc, sometimes seems haphazardly filmed, the camera sometimes seeming almost to stumble on its subject.

Still, the defects pale before the form's achievements. The Metropolitan Opera *Ring* was finely scripted for the cameras and turned out to be more engrossing in the living room than in the opera house. Most of the singers also seemed to be actors; and most of the essential, and endless, dialogue was caught in English subtitles. The living-room opera may take the joy out of the grand spectacle (a blessing, certainly, in the case of Zeffirelli's overblown productions), but it emphasizes the human, and begins to make opera seem closer to filmed drama. My children now know *The Magic Flute*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and even parts of *Siegfried* in ways they never could from either recordings or the opera house; and so do I.

Video can turn opera into a chamber art—useful for education, for study, for private enlightenment, even for new insight into the repertoire. Video may even turn out to be the remedy to one of the biggest problems in opera direction today, which is the lack of attention to character. This problem is owed partly to the contradiction between the grandeur of the form as it developed in the nineteenth century and the intimacy of meanings and relations in some of the greatest works. The opera stage is built for spectacle, for tableaux; but this suits only certain operas. In *Figaro*, for example, how are we to get a clear impression of Susanna's character from acting and staging viewed all the way from the third tier? The music tells us that she is sweet and cunning, gentle in love but unsentimental, yet all that can be shown on stage is stage business. Video allows staging to be intimate, not schematic, full of nuance rather than spectacle: a pianissimo medium.

This might seem strange, arguing for the subtle powers of, well, television. And of course the possibility of subtitles and close-ups is no guarantee of consistency and taste. The television broadcast of Peter Sellars's *Figaro* still had Cherubino crudely humping the air while lying on Susanna's bed and singing the aria that Ponnelle treated with such imagination. And Ponnelle's laserdisc version of *The Barber of Seville* is intoxicated with the special effects possible only in a television production, even treating Figaro's famous introductory aria as a surrealistic nightmare.

But the video and film form has already left us classics. Could a staged *Elektra* have precisely the disturbing

effect as the filmed version directed by Gotz Friedrich, with Karl Bohm conducting and Leonie Rysanek as the deranged princess? Can any version of *The Magic Flute* match what Ingmar Bergman did with the character of Papageno in his extraordinary filmed version? And will any *Figaro* give me the hours of pleasure that Bohm's and Ponnelle's has?

Opera on video will eventually begin to have a profound effect on our experience of the art form in general, making it more accessible and more intimate, and it may even affect the way productions are mounted in opera houses, just as recordings have irrevocably changed the style of modern performance. Indeed, the proliferation of music and video may amount to nothing less than the reversal of the musical ideal that was installed at the heart of our musical culture by the recording. The age of disembodied sound may be coming to an end.

Righttalk

BY CASS R. SUNSTEIN

Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse by Mary Ann Glendon

(Free Press, 288 pp., \$22.95)

The Bill of Rights has now been part of the American Constitution for 200 years. In the very recent past, that short document has helped to inspire reform movements throughout the world—not merely in the Soviet Union, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and East Germany, but in such places as South Africa, China, and Taiwan as well. It is nothing short of remarkable, therefore, that this bicentennial year for the Bill of Rights has come at a time when the very concept of rights, or of a polity pervaded by rights, is under sharp attack in America.

The attack is growing in influence, and it cuts across ideological lines. Many of the Supreme Court's recent decisions embrace the idea that the creation of rights can be destructive to democratic governance. In their recent deliberations, Congress and the executive branch have been increasingly attentive to the view that government, instead of recognizing rights, should encourage people to exercise greater responsibility. On this view, those who are disadvantaged should take their welfare into their own hands; and those who are advan-

Insularity, abstraction, purity, artifice, a certain sort of impersonality, the elimination of everything circumstantial and contingent from the experience of music—all these once admired attributes of musical presentation may be retired by the music video. Music will seem less like a form of grace, more like a form of activity. Of course there will be losses; the prosaic will almost certainly gain ground. And yet there will be poetry gained, too, in the images of Kleiber's face, Cherubino's eyes, Rubinstein's hands, Karajan commanding a sea of musicians, Toscanini sweating with discipline, Wotan trembling with despair, Falstaff bobbing with laughter, Elektra howling in the mud, Papageno and Papagena singing as the world of winter turns to spring. And mixed in with those images, supporting them and supported by them, the abstract sound of the music, this time made concrete. •

tagged should respond not to rights laid down by the state, but to their own sense of responsibility to people in need. If the 1960s and the early 1970s were an era of rights, it seems likely that the 1990s will be a period in which responsibilities move increasingly to the fore.

Of the many recent challenges to rights-based thinking, Mary Ann Glendon's book stands out for its clarity, its moderation, its appreciation of the good things that rights do, its sense of history, its compassion, and its use of comparative materials. Glendon defies easy categorization as a "liberal" or a "conservative," and crosses disciplinary boundaries, too. Her book provides an especially good occasion for a general assessment of an important new movement.

Glendon's basic claim is that American political debate, especially since the New Deal, has come to center on a bewildering and proliferating array of "rights." These include "preventing the abuse and neglect of children, improving the treatment of the mentally and physically disabled, eliminating discrimination based on lifestyle, protecting consumers from sharp practices, preventing

cruelty to animals, and safeguarding the environment." Some people think that the growing list of rights is an important or precious social achievement, supplementing a catalog of protected interests started but hardly finished in the founding period. Glendon disagrees. She believes that America's transformation into "the land of rights" has had harmful, even disastrous consequences.

She offers three objections. First, she complains that rights have a strident and absolutist character, and for this reason impoverish political discourse. They do not admit of compromise. They do not allow room for competing considerations. They impair and even foreclose deliberation. Rooted in nineteenth-century ideas of absolute sovereignty over property, they are ill-adapted to what we usually need, that is, a long discussion of trade-offs and competing concerns. If rights are (in Ronald Dworkin's phrase) "trumps," they are for that very reason harmful to the difficult process of accommodating different goals and considerations in deciding about such thorny problems as, say, abortion and plant closings.

Glendon's second objection is that rights are overly individualist. They miss the "dimension of sociality" and posit selfish, isolated individuals asserting what is theirs rather than participating in communal life. They neglect the moral and social dimensions of important problems. The right of privacy, for example, has emerged as an individual right, rooted in the "property paradigm" and loosened from connections to others. Inattentive to the unborn or to the situation of mothers, American law has truly left the pregnant woman alone, without people "willing to help her either to have the abortion ... or to keep and raise the child..." Similarly, American law is unequipped even to describe the harms faced by a community destroyed by the closing of a plant employing most of its members, which include the loss of "a rich neighborhood life; shared memories and hopes; roots; a sense of place." On Glendon's view, Americans face a crucial "linguistic and conceptual deficiency," and rights talk is a principal culprit. And because rights are claimed by individuals, they promote and encourage a community whose members think of social problems in the most narrow, self-interested terms.

Glendon's third objection is that an emphasis on rights tends to crowd out the issue of responsibility. In our law and our public discourse, it is rare to find the idea that people owe duties to each other—or that civic virtue is to be cultivated, prized, even lived. Glendon

© 1991 The New Republic. All rights reserved. Copyright of New Republic is the property of TNR II, LLC and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.