

Worrying Signs of Infantilisation

by [James Stevens Curl](#) (October 2022)



SIR JOHN SOANE. (J. JACKSON. R.A. B.1778. D.1831.)

Portrait (1828) of Sir John Soane (1752-1837), wearing his Masonic regalia, by John Jackson, RA (1778-1831), held in Sir

John Soane's Museum, London (from James Stevens Curl [2022]: *Freemasonry & the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols, & Influences* [Holywood: The Nerfl Press], xxv).

I have become increasingly concerned with creeping dumbing-down, not least in the field of education, where it became obvious to me many years ago that standards were dropping through the floor in the dishonest campaign by politicians and professional 'educators' to claim that they were getting better every year, with resulting 'grade-inflation.' When I worked in Academe I occasionally interviewed prospective students, still in their last year at school, who were said to have expressed an interest in a University education: I write 'said to have expressed' because most did not seem to be interested in anything much, and I suspected they had been pressurised into making such claims. I devised some very simple tests to augment some gentle questioning regarding ambitions, interests, hobbies, etc., the results of which were shocking, quite apart from that fact that the answers to my questioning revealed a void, a scary emptiness, untempered by any evidence of intellectual curiosity, cultural foundations, or much else besides. I selected a short paragraph from a published work, and asked candidates to read it to me: many stumbled over some quite common words, but one could not read at all. Only very few were able to get through the paragraph fluently, without making mistakes. Simple tests in spelling, use of punctuation, and so on revealed abysmal ignorance. It was obviously a massive lie, a confidence-trick, a disgraceful piece of jingoistic nonsense for politicians and pundits to claim for the nation a 'world-class education,' getting better every year.

In broadcasting, too, things have been declining. It is not a question of 'regional accents,' for we all have accents of one sort or another, but intelligibility: if a radio announcer cannot be understood, or only a small percentage of what he or

she says is intelligible, then something is clearly wrong, and 'dumbing-down' hits new levels of imbecility. I recently heard a female announcer, on what is supposed to be a channel broadcasting serious music, state that F.J. Haydn (1732-1809) was prompted to compose *The Creation* (*Die Schöpfung* [Hob.XXI:2]) by hearing a performance of G.F. Händel's *Messiah* 'in Westminster Cathedral.' As the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Westminster (1894-1903 and after, designed by John Francis Bentley [1839-1902]) was not even a twinkle in the Cardinal-Archbishop's eye when Haydn was in London, the Austrian composer must have been far ahead of his time! He actually heard Händel's great oratorio in Westminster Abbey in 1791. Other recent clangers include claims that Mozart's 'Prussian' Quartets were written for King Frederick the Great of Prussia (r.1740-86): the quartets (KV 575, 589, and 590) were composed 1789-90, and the *flute-playing* Frederick the Great died in 1786. Those quartets were actually composed for the *cello-playing* King Frederick William II (r.1786-97): there is a difference, but that does not seem to matter now when dumbing-down and ignorance are the norm. Other inaccuracies include the oft-repeated claim that W.A. Mozart (1756-91) was buried 'in a pauper's grave,' which is manifestly untrue, and that the chorale By J.S. Bach (1685-1750) quoted in the Violin Concerto (1934-5) by Alban Berg (1885-1935) is *Ich habe genug*, whereas it is actually *Es ist genug* from the Cantata *O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort* (BWV 60), of 1723, composed for the 24th Sunday after Trinity, and which, in its intensity, ingenious harmonies, and originality, is one of Bach's loveliest creations. The Cantata *Ich habe genug* (BWV 82), of 1727, was composed for the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin (2 February), and is a purely *solo work*, without any Chorales at all, so there is really no excuse at all for such crass errors.

One could go on, notably about the widespread 'data ... is,' media ... is,' indicative of the jettisoning of Classicism in education. It is true that the plurals of Latin words

sometimes become singular in English, but until recently this was regarded as a solecism: nowadays the BBC actually favours solecisms and excludes Latin plurals, presumably to avoid daft accusations of 'élitism.' The anti-Latinist levellers, who have ostentatiously preferred as plurals *bacilluses*, *lacunas*, and *genuses* to *bacilli*, *lacunæ*, and *genera*, seem to have prevailed: however, I shall always prefer *formulæ* to *formulas*, *indices* to *indexes*, *narcissi* to *narcissuses*, *miasmata* to *miasmas*, *nimbi* to *nimbuses*, and *vortices* to *vortexes*. And in the field of historical architecture, I regard *mausolea* as the only acceptable plural of *mausoleum*: *mausoleums* seems to me to be teeth-grindingly, cringe-makingly awful.

Another trend has been deliberate changes made to pronunciation. 'Estuary English' (meaning the kind of *patois* spoken around the Thames Estuary in Essex and North Kent), which involves the removal of consonants from speech, has become ubiquitous, even among supposedly educated persons, radio and television announcers and presenters (of course!), and even some younger Royals. This phenomenon, allegedly linked with trying not to appear 'out of touch,' produces corruptions such as 'buh' (but), 'foo-bawh' (football), 'Lunnun' (London), 'mow-ah' (motor), and so on. Decent English is now a rarity, found in parts of the Highlands of Scotland; among a few rather ancient aristocrats, landed gentry, and dons; and in parts of the Eastern States of the US. It is noticeable how many educated Germans, Scandinavians, Netherlands, Belgians, Poles, and now Ukrainians actually speak better, more grammatical, correct English than do most natives.

As Winter gave way to Spring this year, my despondency did not lighten: almost every day there was some new event, statement, or report that confirmed my perception that everything was being eroded at an ever-faster rate, and that misinformation, carelessness, and the corruption of language proceeded at an increasing pace. It was not only language: in architecture,

too, and art (especially abhorrent 'installations' in cathedrals, churches, and public spaces), things became uglier, more remote from reality, alien, and inhumane. In places where students are indoctrinated, notably 'schools of architecture,' certain repulsive individuals as 'Le Corbusier,' Walter Gropius, etc., are deified, and barmy art-schools such as the *Bauhaus*, are placed beyond criticism or even questioning. Yet Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1903-71), who was closely involved with her husband, László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946), in the Modern Movement in its early years, devastatingly described the impact of German Modernism on America as 'Hitler's Revenge.' Referring to the arrival of the *Bauhäusler* in the US in the 1930s, she [wrote](#), in *Art in America* (Sept./Oct. 1968), 42-3:

In 1933 Hitler shook the tree and America picked up the fruit of German genius. In the best of Satanic traditions some of this fruit was poisoned, although it looked at first sight as pure and wholesome as a newborn concept. The lethal harvest was functionalism, and the Johnnies who spread the appleseed were the Bauhaus masters Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Marcel Breuer. Recoined by eager American converts as "The International Style," functionalism terminated the most important era in American public architecture ... [when, for] the first time in its history, [the US] was on the way toward an architectural self-image. Gradually the eggshells of historical styles dropped from the vertical shafts and there emerged a native delight in articulation, ornamental detail and terminating form, born from steel and concrete ... The function of American functionalism was form. The function of German functionalism was ideology. In a straight line of descent from Ruskin's "morality in architecture," Gropius's Bauhaus Manifesto of 1919 called for "the new building of the future ... which will rise toward heaven as a crystalline symbol of a new future faith." By ... 1933, "the building as prophetic idea" had undergone a radical redefinition.

Gropius identified functionalism with anonymous teamwork "relating only to the life of the people." Mies van der Rohe celebrated technology, indifferent to the fate of the individual, as the only valid architectural expression of the *Zeitgeist*; and Marcel Breuer, carrying the functionalist torch into the second Bauhaus generation, wrote: "We search for the typical, the norm, not for the accidental form but for the form defined ... employing scientific principle and logical analysis." Hannes Meyer, Gropius's successor as Bauhaus leader, summed it up: "Building is social, technological economic, psychological organization, product of the formula: function times economy."

The bearers of this peculiar brand of ideological pragmatism arrived in the New World at the most auspicious historical moment. The Great Depression had shaken the barely won self-confidence of America and had revived the hereditary national disease of looking for imported solutions ... The new functionalism entered America through university appointments. Harvard, M.I.T. and the Illinois Institute of Technology established through their European design teachers a totally new curriculum which was eminently mass-producible because it was based on a subtractive set of caveats—no façade, no visible roof, no ornament, no regional adaptation, no separation of enclosing form from enclosed space, no replacement of standardized materials and techniques by "individual taste"—and back-to-back plumbing!

Perhaps America would have awakened to the plain paucity of actual buildings turned out under this formula by Mies van der Rohe and the Gropius-Breuer team if the financial straits of the 1930s had continued. But after the non-building war years, the greatest building and speculation boom since the 1850s sent city cores sprouting upwards like overfed asparagus fields, and covered millions of farmland

acres with federally subsidized unit houses. Architectural schools proliferated as the building tide spread across the continent, their curricula derived from the Harvard program which combined three unbeatable prestiges: Ivy League pedigree, a genuinely imported ideology, and the adaptability of a credit-card system. Everything that was "functional" could be charged to Harvard. Mies van der Rohe's undeviating curtain-wall module, mixed with liquid capital, was sure to result in an Instant Architecture that was unassailable because the original product had been certified for its refinement, scale, and the obvious fact that "God is in the detail." The Gropius T.A.C. team, so anonymous that it has left to its leader the glaring spotlight of world publicity, dutifully turned its pencils in the same groove of a stuck conceptual record. But it was only fitting that Marcel Breuer ... should present to the world an apotheosis of the Functionalist Era ... [with] ... the browbeating symbolism of a negative ideology that was already bankrupt when the dying German Republic unloaded it on America ...

The emerging generation of mega-structure functionalists will want to honor their ancestor using his masterpiece as foundation for a High Technology Center of Computerized Existence. Above that the ape men, returning after the hydrogenic holocaust, might want to worship the divine slabs salvaged from the set ... And in the zenith of heaven will float the dazzling satellite of a Gold Medal, "highest award of architectural excellence," which falls automatically, like an oxygen mask, from the Parnassus of the American Institute of Architects whenever hardening of conceptual arteries and gross income have reached genius level.

Quite so: and of course Gropius dismissed what Sibyl Moholy-Nagy called 'the most important era in American public architecture ... with a uniquely American profile ... [when], ...

for the first time in its history, this country was on the way toward an architectural self-image.' Indeed, he insultingly referred to that great era as 'a particularly insignificant period in American architectural history, ... a case of pseudotradition.' He was referring then especially to the Pennsylvania Railway-Station, the great masterpiece of the distinguished American architects, McKim, Mead, & White, built 1902-11, the demolition of which (1963-5) was certainly a low point in American cultural life, and America is the poorer for its loss. I have had the misfortune to find myself in the subterranean rat-run of what is now called Penn Station, a hell on earth: if you want to see Modernism as it really is, go there. That any nation could destroy a Sublime masterpiece of Classical architecture and rational planning as great as McKim, Mead, & White's superb *American* creation, and then make a reality that is wholly unpleasant, suggests not only a massive failure of national self-confidence, but a pathetic eagerness to embrace the assertions, dogmas, and demands of unscrupulous leaders of a cult in which reason, sensibility, and appreciation of beauty were entirely absent.

Moholy-Nagy's words clicked with me, and indeed I recalled them during a depressing day when it became obvious to me that things have got even worse. What Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (*née* Pietszsch) would have made of it must remain in the realms of bemused speculation. My once-frequent visits to London have been somewhat curtailed recently, thanks not only to the COVID business, but to advancing years and the regrettable tendency in modern England to close everything down at the first sign of anyone having a cold, the excuse being to 'protect' that sacred cow, the National Health Service. I happened to be staying at my Pall Mall Club for a few days in July 2022, and on Friday 8 July I decided to refresh myself by seeing some pictures, so started out by popping into a favourite little gallery in Mason's Yard, St James's, to enjoy the delights on show. These included exquisite drawings and watercolours by the likes of John Varley (1778-1842), William Callow

(1812-88), and others of that period. The deft handling of watercolour in glimpses of quieter, less overpopulated, unpolluted landscapes, in what seems to be known now as The Atlantic Archipelago (British Isles being a no-no, for obvious reasons, as a large chunk is not British anyway), always pleases me, and this time was no exception: having made drawings in pencil and ink, and used watercolours all my life, I am always fascinated by the genius and craftsmanship of those artists of the past, especially those active in the first half of the 19th century. Skill; impeccable taste; assured use of colour; unerring, professional draughtsmanship; mastery of composition; and much else add to the æsthetic pleasures that abound in such delightful collections. I left the gallery purring with pleasure, and walked slowly up Duke Street towards Burlington House as the heat of the day perceptibly increased in ferocity.

As I walked through the court around which several Learned Societies are housed (the façades of which are mostly the work of Robert Richardson Banks [1813-72] and Charles Barry Jun. [1823-1900]), I ruefully reflected that in the philistine rush to charge commercial rents, all the Societies face an uncertain future. The wonderful, peaceful atmosphere of the fine Library of the Society of Antiquaries of London provides an environment in which scholars can work, without distractions, and I have been privileged to have enjoyed labouring in those dignified rooms over the decades. The other Societies too have excellent collections, the dispersal of which would be a national catastrophe. My mood became sombre, filled with unease. That unease was to change to shock, then to rage.

I decided to give the Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibition a look: I used to attend those annually, but had not done so for some time, so paid a hefty entrance-fee, and climbed the stair to the galleries. My first impressions were of a cacophony of jarring, crudely executed, ugliness, unredeemed

by any hint of craftsmanship or even of basic skills. Beauty, of course, true to the tenets of Modernism, was, like felicity, entirely absent, even without Shakespeare's injunction, but then Beauty was a word the Modernists eschewed from the very beginning, for it, like Ugliness, is held to be 'relative'. Aghast, I walked slowly from room to room, and nothing, absolutely nothing, did anything but scream its insults at the beholders, most of whom seemed oblivious to the barrage, seeing not with their eyes at all, but with sensibilities so blunted by Received Opinion that they could no longer make any judgement whatsoever: here was proof positive that all values had been corrupted by being inverted; that what was ugly was not only acceptable but compulsory; that craftsmanship and skills were not only absent, but deliberately suppressed, evident in the loutish daubs of thick dollops of crudely applied paint; and that millennia of civilisation were being deliberately jettisoned.

In the *List of Works* published to accompany the Exhibition, we read that the 'riot of texture and the sheer scale of the works here make ... an assault on the senses ... It's an odd selection of stuff ... [making] ...the room feel rather like a gothic abattoir ...'. Elsewhere viewers could enjoy a 'pile of discarded rubbish behind their own reflections in the dichroic glass of the showcase' as well as a small painting of 'the stretchy netting often used to protect papayas.' And in the central hall we are assured that a 'translucent hanging work ... brings another layer of texture to the space; the red abstract forms are reminiscent of a topographical map.'

Having spent much of my life working on maps, topographical and otherwise, they do no such thing. I reflected that gothic abattoirs, discarded rubbish, and stretchy netting held limited attractions for me.

It was once a skill of architects to create Order out of Chaos: as with everything else Modernism has corrupted, this has now been inverted, for Chaos rules. One could admire the

skills of model-makers, but what those modellers had modelled left one reeling. Architectural exhibitions used to display admirably drawn and rendered work of real sensitivity: all that has been dumped. One of the blurbs says 'we wanted to focus on a feeling of hope; that artists and designers can lead the argument for change.' If that were the intention, it had the opposite effect on me: I abandoned all hope as I surveyed an inchoate, ill-assorted, mess, with labels on some models illegible because they were too far away from the viewers, who would have needed binoculars to read them. There is, we are informed, 'a common sense of vulnerability', and an 'engagement with materials is a strong thread running through the selection:' ... X and Y 'have created their asymmetrical shelf sculpture entirely from recycled steel, pots and plastic; ... Z's ... 'slick, wall-mounted structure uses harsh, reflected fluorescent light to draw the viewers' attention.' By this time I needed a cold compress on the fevered brow, made more urgent when we were assured that the Pompidou Centre model 'makes you feel as though you are right back there in the moment,' what ever that is supposed to mean. One exhibit, of plastic, was available in an 'edition of 13 at £750.' its crude lettering announced that THE WORLD IS FUCKED. Standards, skills, taste, and art certainly all are just that. I tottered out into the sunshine, by that time somewhat fierce, where stood the statue (1929-31—by Alfred Drury [1856-1944] on its pedestal designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott [1880-1960]) of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), first President of the RA, holding his paint-brush and easel. Was it too much to hope that the old boy would descend from his perch and paint over the sign above the building's entrance to read ROYAL ACADEMY OF PSEUDS?



The Royal Academy, with Sir Joshua Reynolds's statue, photographed in 1962 (© London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, London Picture Archives 137390).



Sir John Soane's Museum, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London (© James Stevens Curl, 2010).

In need of an antidote, I repaired to Lincoln's Inn Fields, to ease the soul in the cool interiors of the Museum established by Sir John Soane (1753-1837). Every detail of that ingeniously designed series of spaces still delights me, and I admired once again glorious renderings of the great man's stupendous schemes by Joseph Michael Gandy (1771-1843). Here was civilisation, Beauty, thought, culture, skill, hard work, effort, and just about everything so painfully absent in the Royal Academy. With joy I looked at the spines of the finely

bound volumes that are part of one of the greatest architectural libraries in the world, and enjoyed once more the vigorous drawings by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78) of the Greek Temples at Pæstum, and much, much else, including that portrait of Soane wearing his Masonic regalia which seems to cause many English architectural historians to run for cover. But even in that glorious repository of learning, a shrine devoted to real architecture, an alien note was struck: to my horror there was a new installation. 'Multidisciplinary design duo Space Popular invite visitors to experience the magic and mechanics of virtual travel in an exhibition that bridges the technologies of Soane's time and ours ... Space Portal present their research on "the portal" through time and across media, providing opportunities to travel to other realms through a virtual reality film and installation.' Dear God! Infantilisation proceeds apace!

Sir John Soane's wonderful Museum needs no such interventions, to interpret it or anything else, for it still speaks eloquently to all who have eyes to see and whose brains have not been addled by the poisonous seedlings so eagerly imported and planted in America, and therefore, inevitably, cultivated in these islands too, with horrific results.

I had had enough. My visit was ruined, so I walked, in a haze of disbelief at such unnecessary crassness (it ended in September), to Carey Street, and sought the shady comfort of the interior of *The Seven Stars*, one of my favourite boozers, mercifully free from Musak or any of the other horrors almost ubiquitous these days. I gratefully sank a couple of pints of proper beer, and gave thanks that at least one small corner of the world was unfucked.

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Professor James Stevens Curl is the author of *Freemasonry & the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols, & Influences* (now available in a reprint from jscurl@btinternet.com), *Making Dystopia: the Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (2018, 2019, Oxford University Press), and, with Timothy M. Richards, *City of London Pubs: A Practical and Historical Guide* (Newton Abbot, 1973).

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