

Passion  
Joan Juliet  
87

BOOKS

# Philosophers Should Stop Faking Sense

*With a cupboard of ideas barer than Mother Hubbard's, French intellectuals are reduced to writing about themselves.*

by ALEXANDRA TUTTLE

IN AMERICA MOVIE stars become presidents. In France they become intellectuals. This state of affairs is less a consequence of the quality of French actors than of the quality of their pretensions. Because the intelligentsia is the highest order to which a reasonably literate person can aspire in France, it constitutes a closely knit, self-serving and self-admiring political class that looks smaller than it really is. In truth, anyone can gain admission on the strength of a book and a slim idea or two about "modernity" or whatever the "pense-gadget" of the moment happens to be. But if the public insists on buying books, thereby supporting the intelligentsia, it has to settle for what it can get. And what it can get these days are essays from intellectuals about the intelligentsia, collections of thoughts about thinking with no clear idea of what we should be thinking about. In the absence of content we always get stuck with form.

Alain Finkielkraut's powerful but flawed essay *La Défaite de la Pensée* deals with the crisis that has beset a contemporary culture in which "thinking has no part," and "everything is of equal value...Shakespeare and Musil as well as the sublime pair of boots and the racehorse of genius." Finkielkraut blames the "defeat of thought" in culture on the romantic movement's repudiation of the Enlighten-

such thinkers as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault and Franz Fanon. Clearly, their arguments recognized the value of cultures other than our own and the right of every man, whatever his race or culture, to freedom and dignity. But the argument that assigns equal value to all the qualities that make up a society reduces the notion of

civilization judges its products. Bad culture has always been around, but it used to be quieter.

If Finkielkraut is to be properly judged, it is not in the light of his somewhat crotchety and reactionary vision of modern culture, for which he can be forgiven. After all, the present state of popular culture is enough to make even a reasonable and

tolerant person despair.

But Finkielkraut's analysis of the decline of standards over two centuries often neglects the subtlety of the Enlightenment culture he espouses in favor of the simplifications of the present age. For example, the "logic of the consumer society" vilified throughout the essay does not destroy culture; it simply makes bad (and good) culture more accessible. The technological revolution, a by-product of the age of reason, also makes bad culture louder, turning up the decibels to drown out

the subtler sounds of the elite. And the progressivist ideals of the Enlightenment—the belief that equal opportunity might make us into people of equally good taste—have proven difficult to achieve.

Furthermore, the romantic critique of the Enlightenment does not repudiate the Age of Reason so much as enlarge its scope. In appealing to the diversity of cultures, romanticism respects the needs of each society; it demands not the "culte de la différence," as Finkielkraut calls it, but tolerance, not the



Jacques Robert

Alain Finkielkraut ponders the "defeat of thought."

culture in its sense of "life with thought" to the set of behaviors in which thought and "value" may play no role at all. Hence, styles in eating are considered on the same footing as the composition of music and, in the West, a dress designer like Yves Saint Laurent is acclaimed as an "artist." This "confusionisme" is compounded by the equally painful "jeunisme" that values all that is young, new and, yes, probably immature. In Finkielkraut's version of modernity, the young can get away with murder and very often do.