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The Dominance of Visigoths

My Graduation Speech by Neil Postman, chair of the Department of Culture and Communication at New York University, describes two kinds of people, whom he compares with Athenians and Visigoths. The Athenians, who lived in Greece about 2,500 years ago, contributed many positive ideas still valued in the present. They believed in reason, beauty, moderation, and excellence. Postman also wrote about negative values, which belonged to the Visigoths in Germany about 1700 years ago. Visigoths did everything for their own benefits, lived only for overcoming others' culture and ideas; they were crude, brutal, destructive, and greedy. Since Postman wrote this speech, it appears that Visigoth values have become an even more dominant and powerful influence, as seen clearly from three media: the television program *Extreme Makeover* provides an example of the obsession with popularity and money; the movie *Mr. And Mrs. Smith* demonstrates the increase of violence in relationships; and the two articles from *The Globe and Mail* explore how people put Visigoth self-interest ahead of Athenian ethics.

The Visigoths believe that popularity is more valuable than true beauty, and money. An example is to take advantage of people's need to be excessively popular as on the television program *Extreme Makeover*. The program uses the desire for beauty as a means of attracting people who want to be beautiful and have the self-esteem that would go with a new appearance. The idea of the program is not about the Athenian appreciation of natural beauty or even moderately enhancing beauty with cosmetics.

“The participants undergo procedures using the skills of surgeons for the extreme change of their looks and, finally, the results are revealed to their families and friends. In addition, like any other television programs, *Extreme Makeover* tries to compete on ratings for money (Douglass). It aims at attracting an audience by trying to find needs that people are insecure about, which this time seems to be beauty. This program is an example the Visigoth’s attitude: for the participants, true beauty is less important than popularity; for the program, money gained through high ratings is more valuable than the health of the participants who are willing to face surgery. Many people might object that, if what the program is doing is considered to be excessive, why do people keep on watching? The answer must be that the way that the television audience thinks and reacts imitates the Visigoths.

Another example of Visigoth values is when people use force in relationships, rather than persuasion. In the movie *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, the story follows a couple of assassins who do not know each other’s secret career, and finally are hired to kill each other. The fighting, the violence, the cruelty are all Visigoth characteristics. Even though they are married, they lack the Athenian qualities of respect, consideration, and compromise between the two of them. For example, during a fight, Mr. Smith says “Come to Daddy.” Mrs. Smith responds by beating him to the floor and says “Who’s your Daddy now?” Mr. and Mrs. Smith always direct sarcastic remarks at each other. The characters in the movie, like the Visigoths, use rude, insulting language. Also, because Mrs. Smith says, “Oh, come on. It was just a little bomb,” she shows her own Visigoth idea that using force is very trivial. This movie imprints the bad Visigoth idea of force, opposed to the good Athenian value of persuasion, onto the audience’s minds. The concentration on the advertising of this movie in North American society and its success in the market show that people accept

Visigoth ideas. Insulting statements, brutality, and violence are accepted in this popular movie, indicating that people today ignore Athenian standards of fine language, comparison, and compromise, from watching such movies. The audience may also apply Visigoth ideas of using force in their real lives, as bullies and gangs ignore the ethics of Athenian society.

Many people in the modern world have adopted Visigoth ideas of cheating and lying, with no sense of the ethics and values of Athenians, as seen from the articles in *The Globe and Mail*. In “Upgrade How Far Will You Go?” the reporter tells the readers about the ways to lie to the staff in the airport for the chance to upgrade their seats (Globe and Mail, T6). The Visigoth attitude of the reporter is that cheating is a clever way to acquire the comforts of life, and that this knowledge should be shared among selfish people at the expense of others in the community. In addition, people might do evil things because of their greed, as in the article “After all it was only public money,” which tells about the greed of “Paul Coffin, the ad executive remorseless invoicer and Olympic biller,” (Globe and Mail, A25) who pretended to act as a moral person but was corrupt. By misusing public money, this self-centered person in a high-ranked government position in society reflects the lack of honesty and the lack of ethics, both Visigoth characteristics. From the evidence in two articles in *The Globe and Mail*, people in positions of power have self-centered, materialistic ideas as Visigoths did. They desired a luxurious life-style gained by no effort or wasted a million dollars without considering the Athenian ideas such as the sense of moderation, compromise, and dedication.

The crude, selfish, and self-centered behaviour of Visigoths, which competes with the respect for beauty, reason, and moderation of the Athenians, is predominant in our civilization: the obsession with money from the *Extreme Makeover* television

program, the violence in relationships in the movie *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, and the self-interest of humanity in *the Globe and Mail* newspaper articles. According to Postman, the numbers of people who see the world in the Visigoth way appear greater than the numbers of people who think like Athenians, because the majority of people do things for money, lack the sense of community, are not temperate, reject tradition, use rude language, and learn to manipulate other people for their own power. The only hope for society, according to Postman, is that among university graduates “the Athenians mightily outnumbered the Visigoths” (Postman).

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