

Cultural Hegemony Goes to the Fair: The Case of E. L. Doctorow's *World's Fair*

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The New York World's Fair of 1939/1940 promised its visitors a glimpse into the "World of Tomorrow," and some forty-five million people—a good proportion of America's population at the time—journeyed to Flushing Meadows, Queens, to view the Fair's vision of the future. Despite its popularity, the Fair was largely ignored by historians for many years, its history preserved only in visitors' memories, in the reams of publicity and journalistic coverage that appeared while it was open, and in a little-noticed official history published in the 1950s. However, the past decade has witnessed an explosion of interest in the New York World's Fair. Starting with Jeffrey L. Meikle's brilliant critique in his 1979 book *Twentieth-Century Limited*, a number of authors have offered a revisionist interpretation of the Fair that challenges any nostalgic assessment of it as a benign assemblage of technological marvels. These writers have focused on the Fair planners' attempts to manipulate visitors' reactions. They argue that the World's Fair presented a vision of an American future dominated by business interests, a utopia of consumption where the good life could be measured in goods consumed, where freedom and democracy were defined as the ability of all Americans to choose among competing brands. The Fair's critics describe how the most popular exhibits shepherded passive visitors through rigidly controlled displays, revealing corporate America's plans for the future while training fairgoers to assume the limited role of expert consumers.¹

For the most part, the recent writers on the World's Fair base their analyses on models of cultural hegemony and social control that assume the existence of an active cultural elite who successfully manipulate a largely passive audience.

In this view, cultural control comes from the top; the mass of people are little more than uncritical consumers of a firmly defined cultural product. However, it is possible to take another view. Without denying the ways in which an elite can shape cultural products, we can also give attention to the process by which consumers receive, respond to, and in turn reshape the culture in which they participate. As William R. Taylor writes, "Understanding how popular culture is consumed requires abandoning any facile hegemonic assumptions that producers of culture have their way with the cultural consumer."²

E. L. Doctorow's 1985 book *World's Fair* can provide a case study for understanding how the New York World's Fair was consumed. A novel cast in the form of a memoir, Doctorow's book is narrated by Edgar Altschuler, who recounts a childhood in the Bronx during the 1930s. The novel concludes with descriptions of two successive visits to the World's Fair, which take up the book's four final chapters. These trips to the Fair are described in copious and historically accurate detail. Doctorow, who achieved fame for his imaginative playfulness with history in his 1975 novel *Ragtime*, plays it straight in *World's Fair*; all but one of his references to the Fair are historically verifiable.

The historical veracity of *World's Fair*, combined with its many correspondences to Doctorow's own life—the narrator shares his first name, the family members in the book have the same names as Doctorow's parents and brother, and the Altschulers live on the same street in the Bronx that Doctorow's family inhabited during the 1930s—led many reviewers of the book to call it an autobiography.³ In interviews at the time of *World's Fair*'s publication, Doctorow rejected the label and called the book "the illusion of a memoir."⁴ However, the generic label affixed to *World's Fair*, whether novel or autobiography, is irrelevant. More important is that the book offers an extensive narrative of one middle-class person's reactions to the Fair. That account stands in vivid contrast to recent historians' hegemonic interpretations, which, in their exclusive attention to the planners' intentions, imply that the meaning of the Fair rested solely in the hands of its designers. Doctorow's narrative serves as a useful corrective, showing how visitors to the Fair might have constructed its meaning for themselves. *World's Fair* suggests that however much visitors admired the Fair's exhibits, the designers' attempts at cultural control could encounter, even on the part of a child, complex and formidable varieties of resistance.

I

During the four years of its development, the planners of the New York World's Fair settled on the unifying slogan "Building the World of Tomorrow," and they erected on the site of a former garbage dump in Queens what they hoped would be an exciting and broadly appealing model of an American future made possible by technology and commerce. Clustered about the Fair's enormous, sleek and futuristic theme buildings, the needle-like Trylon and the globular Perisphere, were dozens of exhibits offering a preview of late twentieth-century America. They showed an American landscape that could have been lifted from

science fiction movies, a place filled with rocketports and electrified farms, radio-controlled superhighways and talking robots.

Those responsible for creating this futuristic landscape were almost all members of the new profession of industrial designers. Today, most industrial designers' work is limited to creating new products and packaging, but in the beginnings of the profession during the 1920s and 1930s, designers took a more ambitious view of their task. They saw themselves as designers of culture as well as of products; Norman Bel Geddes, one of the leaders of the profession, spoke of designing "social structure" in the same breath with designing "objects of daily use."⁵ In his book on industrial design in America, Jeffrey L. Meikle writes that the profession's founders "hoped to create a coherent environment for what they self-consciously referred to as 'the machine age.' Industrial design, they thought, would both reverse the Depression's plummeting sales and create a harmonious environment unknown since the industrial revolution."⁶ In the writings of Walter Dorwin Teague, who, like Geddes, was both a well-known industrial designer and one of the principal planners of the New York World's Fair, the designers' sense of mission took on a messianic tone. Industrial design, Teague wrote, "offers the only hope that this mechanized world will be a fit place to live in."⁷

The New York business leaders who initiated plans for a world's fair at first regarded it as a stimulus to the metropolitan economy. However, after control was handed over to industrial designers, the fair began to assume a grander purpose. Historians of the World's Fair argue that the designers used the opportunity to display their vision of how rational design, realized through a beneficent capitalism, could create a utopian America in the near future. The industrial designers, in concert with their corporate employers, promoted capitalism as the solution to America's woes: increased consumption would bolster the economy and lift America out of the Depression. As Meikle describes the union of designers with capitalists, "Industrial designers . . . concentrate[d] on consumer engineering to create public demand for a future society that would give most benefit to private corporations."⁸

Meikle, along with other recent writers on the World's Fair, concentrates on its planners' intentions. In this view, the Fair was a major move in a master strategy of cultural hegemony, designed to transform visitors into passive consumers. Certainly, there is much truth in this view. Most exhibits at the Fair were sponsored by corporations and frankly intended to stimulate sales. The architecture of much of the Fair was indistinguishable from advertising. Exhibits were housed in buildings that mimicked consumer products: the American Tobacco Company building was shaped like a pack of cigarettes, the RCA building like a radio tube, the Continental Baking Company exhibit like a donut, while the National Cash Register exhibit had a giant cash register on its roof (Fig. 1). This *architecture parlante* was, in part, a playful mode of design appropriate to the Fair's carnival atmosphere. But it also created an environment in which commercial messages were encoded into the surroundings in a way that made them omnipresent and inescapable.⁹



Figure 1. National Cash Register building. Courtesy New York Public Library.

The Fair's critics charge that the design of the exhibits' interiors was equally manipulative. Meikle cites Douglas Haskell, an architecture critic who observed at the time of the World's Fair that it witnessed the emergence of architecture as "environmental control" rather than "the mere enclosing of space."¹⁰ Meikle himself notes, "Nineteenth-century exhibition buildings were vast sheds meant only to shelter typical objects, machines, and cultural artifacts of civilization. By 1939, however, attention had shifted from objects to their potential consumers."¹¹ The Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 illustrates Meikle's contention. On the outside, the buildings in the White City, the Chicago Exposition's central area, were held together not only by plaster of paris but by a powerful aesthetic ideology that attempted to impose Greco-Roman uniformity upon the disparate and conflict-ridden social landscape of late nineteenth-century America. Yet on the inside, the White City's buildings achieved simply an undifferentiated "enclosing of space," to use Haskell's term. The buildings surrounded visitors with a spare structural steel shell, a vast open space in which they could roam at will, lingering at whatever exhibits took their fancy.

In contrast, Meikle and other writers portray the New York World's Fair as an early exercise in crowd control. Visitors' progress through the exhibits was rigidly determined; frequently, decisions about what to observe and how long to look were made by the designers. For example, visitors to Democracy, the Fair's theme exhibit located inside the Perisphere, stood in place on a rotating platform to watch a six-minute sound-and-light show involving a scale model of a carefully planned utopian metropolis. The greatest degree of control was achieved at the Fair's most popular exhibit, the General Motors' Futurama. Visitors to the Futurama were seated on a conveyer belt that moved them at a set rate past another model landscape of the future, while a recorded narration came from speakers located within spectators' individual chairs. This visual and aural control over fairgoers led Haskell to compare the exhibit to "some vast carburetor, sucking in the crowd by fascination into its feeding tubes, carrying the people through the prescribed route, and finally whirling them out."¹² While no other exhibit so rigidly controlled its visitors, many of the displays can be seen as "machines for processing people," in Meikle's phrase.¹³ Designer Walter Dorwin Teague expressed his intention to lead visitors "craftily through a planned maze" so that "the spectator's interest is stimulated and his responses are involuntary."¹⁴ Teague's design for the DuPont exhibit was a masterpiece of streamlining, in which architecture, lighting, and even the pattern of the floor's linoleum combined to guide visitors on a predetermined path.

Meikle argues that in their attempt to control visitors' responses, the Fair's designers "considered the average person only as a consumer, a passive individual receiving impulses, prodded, stimulated, and living packaged experiences."¹⁵ While Meikle speaks only of the designers' intentions, historian Francis V. O'Connor goes further and argues that these intentions were fully realized. After describing the "latent fascism" of the designers, O'Connor writes, "The Fair was a carefully contrived conditioning experiment (Germany was another, at the

time) and few among the multitudes entering its gates were ready in 1939-40—or subsequently—to ‘psyche out’ the reasons they suddenly yearned for television sets, superhighways, foreign foods, and a streamlined life.”¹⁶ Though his charges of “latent fascism” are extreme, O’Connor states explicitly what is implicit in the view of other historians: visitors to the Fair passively absorbed its intended messages, and the designers were successful in their attempts at psychological manipulation.

Doctorow’s *World’s Fair* challenges what William R. Taylor labels “facile hegemonic assumptions” that cultural producers always succeed in their attempts to manipulate consumers. In Doctorow’s narrative, each of the characters who attend the Fair determine its meaning for themselves. *World’s Fair* shows how individuals can mold the experiences that mass culture offers to fit their own needs, thus finding pleasure within mass culture while at the same time ignoring or subverting its designers’ intentions.

II

As mentioned earlier, Doctorow’s narrator Edgar Altschuler twice visits the New York World’s Fair. One of the visits occurs after Edgar wins a contest, and he and his family gain free entry to all exhibits for a day. The reactions of Edgar’s parents vividly illustrate the potential complexity of fairgoers’ responses. Edgar describes the family’s visit fondly and considers it a great success; the outing serves to dissipate tensions and to heal family rifts. At the same time, both of Edgar’s parents are critical of many aspects of the Fair. Dave, Edgar’s politically leftist father, is quite aware of the Fair’s ideological underpinnings, and in a gently didactic fashion he shares his critique with his two sons. While the rest of the family peers at the Westinghouse exhibit’s Time Capsule, a metal container intended to be opened five thousand years in the future, Dave examines a list of the contents, which range from a Mickey Mouse plastic cup to a Lilly Daché hat to a copy of *Gone with the Wind*. Dave asks his sons why there is nothing in the capsule “about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman.” He goes on, “There is no hint from the stuff they included that America has a serious intellectual life, or Indians on reservations or Negroes who suffer from race prejudice. Why is that?”¹⁷ Edgar and his brother do not respond to their father’s question. But the episode suggests that, despite the Westinghouse Corporation’s effort to preserve for posterity a sanitized version of a unified American society, Dave is able to use the exhibit to remind his children of America’s diversity of race, class and ethnicity, as well as its history of racism and tradition of dissent.

Dave is equally critical of the Fair’s efforts to promote consumption as the key to the good life in the world of tomorrow. At the General Motors Futurama, Dave points out that GM is promoting its corporate self-interest as much as the general welfare of Americans. As the family exits the exhibit, he remarks that the fourteen-lane superhighways that lace the Futurama’s landscape will have to be

built with public money. General Motors, he says, “is telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars” (285). Edgar’s mother Rose does not share Dave’s political perspective. Yet she too is skeptical of the Fair’s materialistic utopia. As she walks through the Town of Tomorrow, a collection of model houses, Rose voices the reaction of those battered by a decade of depression, critical of any assurances that the American economy could play Lady Bountiful to all. “What’s the point of showing such houses,” Rose exclaims, “when they cost over ten thousand dollars and no one in the world has the money to buy them?” (284).

At the same time that they are critical of many aspects of the World’s Fair, Doctorow’s characters enjoy the experience. Edgar observes a paradox in his father’s reaction: “He could be critical of something and admire it at the same time” (284). Such paradoxical reactions were presumably common among visitors to the Fair—and are widespread among consumers of mass culture. Dave’s simultaneous criticism and admiration show how “people do not ingest mass culture whole,” in Janice Radway’s phrase.¹⁸ Dave and Rose embrace some parts of the Fair, reject others, and, in all, enjoy themselves “tremendously,” according to Edgar (284). Whatever the intentions of the Fair’s designers, the members of the Altschuler family use the Fair for their own ends. For them, the visit becomes an occasion to cement family ties. Torn by personal and economic problems in the lingering Depression years, fragmented when Edgar’s older brother moves to Philadelphia to escape an unhappy home life, the family comes together for their day at the Fair, their spirits raised by the celebratory, carnivalesque atmosphere of the fairgrounds.

This family visit to the Fair is Edgar’s second; he makes his first in company with his schoolmate Meg and her mother Norma. During his initial tour of the Fair, unaccompanied by his articulate parents, Edgar is in general neither able nor inclined to voice any criticisms. But this does not mean that he passively accedes to the designers’ efforts at control or swallows the Fair’s propaganda for the consumerist way of life. Instead, we see Edgar mentally transforming the Fair, turning it into something familiar and comforting, using it as a medium to support his personal growth. When he first catches sight of the Trylon and Persphere from the train station, Edgar feels a surge of joy. Their images made famous by the mass media, the Fair’s two theme structures strike Edgar as old friends; they serve as beneficent presences overseeing his visit. The first exhibit Edgar heads for is the General Motors Futurama, intended to awe visitors with its vision of a utopian future. However, Edgar reduces the awesome to his child-sized scale: in a flash of insight, he realizes that the Futurama is “the largest most complicated toy ever made!” (253). The cars remind him of the toys he played with when he was smaller; the buildings are like the models he and his brother constructed. And when he and Meg go to the Amusement Zone, Edgar feels right at home; he sees it as simply a larger version of the boardwalk at Rockaway where he spent a summer vacation.

The World's Fair becomes for Edgar a stimulus to his growth to maturity, enabling him to resolve the issues of autonomy, ethnicity and sexuality that are at the core of Doctorow's novel. The very act of visiting the Fair with Meg and her mother Norma requires Edgar to assert his independence. The domineering, overprotective Rose disapproves of Norma, a single mother and the subject of kitchen-table gossip that declares her to be outside the pale of middle-class respectability. After Meg invites him to the Fair, Edgar has to prepare a campaign to convince his mother to allow him to go, marshaling his arguments over a glass of milk and some Oreos. Once at the Fair, Edgar feels liberated. Norma, who has a job at one of the Amusement Zone sideshows, allows Edgar and Meg to explore the Fair on their own while she works. The two children set their own agenda and plunge excitedly into the hectic pleasures of the Amusement Zone.

The Amusement Zone of the 1939/1940 Fair was extremely popular, but it was peripheral to the Fair planners' intentions of displaying the benefits to be realized in corporate America's vision of the World of Tomorrow. Yet the Amusement Zone provides Doctorow's Edgar with the most significant experiences of his narrative. This frail, overprotected boy discovers courage that he never imagined himself to possess when he must comfort the frightened Meg as they dangle in the air high above the fairgrounds on the popular Parachute Jump ride. More significantly, in the unlikely setting of a cheaply produced peep show, Edgar recognizes the dangerous, thrilling freedom that is open to him as he grows into adolescence.

Norma, it turns out, works in a sideshow known as "Oscar the Amorous Octopus," where she swims naked underwater in a glass tank.¹⁹ After dark, unnoticed, Edgar slips into the sideshow and watches Norma perform. He emerges excited, disturbed and confused, yet with the sense that he has achieved a partial initiation into manhood. Watching Norma, Edgar gains an understanding of the thrilling freedom that her life represents. Norma reveals the possibility of transgressing the rigid categories of middle-class Bronx life; she mixes the supposedly disparate categories of motherhood and sexual enticement. The peep show also gives Edgar a glimpse into his own anxiously awaited future as a sexually mature man. He need no longer worry about that future, Edgar realizes; it will come to him naturally. As he and Meg ride home together in a taxi, leaning sleepily against one another, he has a foreshadowing of the closeness felt by lovers, as sexualized images drift through his mind: he and Meg are Siamese twins, they are swimmers undulating about each other underwater. As they drive away from the fairgrounds, Edgar imagines the sound of the nightly fireworks display to be a pounding in his own chest, a confusion that is emblematic of his experience of the World's Fair. He appropriates and absorbs the Fair, inadvertently turning its designers' intentions on their head, so that the Fair becomes for Edgar a locus not just of commerce and control but of maturity and independence.

Doctorow's chapters on the World's Fair show how visitors could resist and subvert its planners' intentions. Beyond that, the central themes of the novel as a whole stand in opposition to the Fair planners' efforts to define and shape

American culture. Much of *World's Fair* concerns Edgar's struggle to come to terms with his Jewish identity, a struggle that contrasts with the Fair's suppression of America's racial and ethnic diversity. As noted earlier, Edgar's father Dave criticizes the Westinghouse Time Capsule for denying America's pluralism. This denial was common throughout the Fair's exhibits. Most of the exhibits, attempting to cast all viewers in the role of consumer, portrayed Americans as essentially identical; they made generalizations about capital-M "Man" or presented small audio-visual dramas of consumption that featured "Mrs. Modern."²⁰ A recognition of American pluralism would have detracted from the Fair's vision of a unified consumer society. The planners' failure to acknowledge American diversity goes hand-in-hand with their decision to relegate the foreign pavilions to a remote site on the grounds. Both actions can be seen as part of an attempt to minimize difference and to emphasize the potential of American business to create a common international culture.²¹

Doctorow's novel, however, subverts this notion of a consumerist melting pot, repeatedly reminding us of the era's anti-Semitism. The newspaper and radio bring into Edgar's apartment news of Hitler's advance through Europe. Closer to home, Edgar learns about the prejudice that surrounds, and sometimes penetrates, his largely Jewish South Bronx neighborhood. He awakes one morning to discover a swastika chalked onto his family's garage doors. And on his way home from the library one Saturday afternoon, he is mugged by two teenage bigots, who slam his head against a fence and yell, "Fuck you, Jewboy" (237). The incident leaves Edgar feeling nauseated and humiliated, not least because in his terror he denies being Jewish. Afterwards, he regains his self-respect by entering an essay contest sponsored by the World's Fair on the theme of the typical American Boy. Edgar's essay reads in part:

The typical American Boy is not fearful of Dangers. . . . he should traverse the hills and valleys of the city. If he is Jewish he should say so. If he is anything he should say what it is when challenged. . . . He reads all the time. . . . Also, radio programs and movies may be enjoyed but not at the expense of important things. For example he should always hate Hitler. In music he appreciates both swing and symphony. In women he appreciates them all (244).

The essay is a way of taking revenge on the muggers: the only way these illiterates could enter a contest would be to steal somebody else's essay, Edgar tells himself. But the essay is also a means of asserting pride in his Jewishness and celebrating diversity—qualities that contrast with the cultural values of the World's Fair. Like the descriptions of Edgar's visits to the Fair, the essay contest shows us how people can participate in mass culture while ignoring, at least in part, its producers' ideological intentions and using that culture to shape their own values.

World's Fair reprints in full the actual winning essay in the 1940 "Typical American Boy" contest (Fig. 2). Written by twelve-year-old Alfred Roberts Jr. of Manhattan, the essay, as reprinted in both *The New York Times* and Doctorow's novel, begins:

The typical American boy should possess the same qualities as those of the early American pioneers. He should be handy, dependable, courageous, and loyal to his beliefs. He should be clean, cheerful and friendly, willing to help and be kind to others. He is an all around boy interested in sports, hobbies, and the world around him (277).

Edgar's highly personal and idiosyncratic essay contrasts comically with the mind-numbing clichés of the winning entry. While he does not win the contest, Edgar does not lose by the experience; his essay gives him a way to participate in the mass culture at the same time as it provides a means to define an independent identity.²²

The New York World's Fair planners not only suppressed references to America's diversity but also ignored its history. Previous expositions had looked to the past at the same time as they provided a model for the future; for example, the Chicago Columbia Exposition offered the neoclassical heritage as its model for American development, while the 1933/1934 Century of Progress celebrated Chicago's history. But the New York World's Fair, ostensibly held to celebrate the 150th anniversary of George Washington's inauguration as President in New York City, slighted the past and focused on the future.²³ In contrast, *World's Fair* celebrates historical continuity. The novel, cast in the form of a memoir, is in essence an exercise in memory—in an individual's detailed reconstruction of his earliest years. Moreover, in his recollections, Edgar emphasizes the continuity of family and religion. One of his earliest memories is of his grandmother, who emigrated from Russia during the anti-Semitic pogroms. Each Friday evening the old woman prays over Sabbath candles, in a ritual that reminds Edgar, the child of secularized parents, of his centuries-old religious legacy. And in episodes of senile dementia, his grandmother talks about the Cossacks who drove her from Russia, a reminder of an equally long legacy of persecution.

Edgar's memory also absorbs and transforms the World's Fair. In his role as narrator, he places the Fair at the climax of his memoir and takes its name as title. This textual use of the Fair reveals once again how individuals participate in the construction of culture. Edgar transforms the World's Fair, intended by its planners to determine the shape of future American society, into a textual element in the narrative of his own past. In Edgar's narrative, the Fair becomes the catalyst that brings to a fitting climax the central thematic thread of the memoir: Edgar's search to find an independent identity that can accommodate his varying roles as brother, son, male and Jew. The World's Fair functions in the narrative as a sort

CITY'S TYPICAL BOY WINS TITLE AT FAIR

Alfred Roberts Jr., 12, Named on Basis of Appearance and Essay on Contest

TO POSE FOR A STATUE

Mayor Pledges Full Help in 'I Am an American Day' to Be Staged Oct. 15

New York City now has a "typical American boy" in the person of 12-year-old Alfred Roberts Jr., of 128 MacDougal Street, who is in the eighth grade Public School 68. Yesterday afternoon Alfred earned that distinction in the World City Building at the World's Fair after a group of judges, headed by Mayor La Guardia, had decided that not only did Alfred possess the physical attributes but that his short essay on "A Typical American Boy" was a novel creation on the subject.

With hazel eyes and sandy hair, Alfred, who weighs 86 pounds and is 5 feet 1 inch tall, has an easy smile and wears in his dark blue shirt, tie to match, black shoes and a beaming smile. He is the only child of Alfred Roberts, a printer with the Patterson (N. J.) Herring Call, and Mrs. Roberts. The youngster's ambition is to be a naval aviator.

Alfred's prize-winning essay read: "The typical American boy should possess the same qualities as those of the early American pioneers. He should be hardy, dependable, courageous and loyal to his beliefs. He should be clean, neat, friendly and friendly, willing to help and be helped in return. He is usually very interested in sports, hobbies and the world around him."

"The typical American boy takes care of his body, is neat in his dress. He enjoys the games, the movies, outdoor games, pets and radio programs. He usually has at some handcraft or hobby, and is always thinking up something new to do or make. That is why American still has a future."

Alfred's mother was slated over the choice, concluding that "modern are overly critical." Mayor La Guardia also was considerably proud of Alfred, as well as of the nine other finalists. The finalists were selected after a preliminary shew-wide search by the Bureau for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency among the public and paraded school youngsters.

The Mayor, after the selection of Alfred, confessed that he had "hardly pronounced the name of the boy in lines," adding that "every one is a typical American boy, and we can pick out typical American boys every public school and paraded school in New York." The Mayor then lauded the clean-cut appearance of the finalists, declaring that the boys could be "stuck up" anywhere against "any other boys in any city in the country, both for health and intelligence."

Alfred will pose for a statue to be unveiled by Harry Poono Canden for the museum. The statue, Justice Stephen H. Jackson, director of the bureau, concluded, will be presented to the school whose pupils were the best record for the year in the prevention of school property. Justice Jackson added that Mr. Canden would make a symbolic composite statue of all ten boys, although Alfred will be the model. In addition to Mayor La Guardia, Mr. Canden and Justice Jackson, the judges were James Marshall, president of the Board of Education, and Dan Board, national commissioner of the Boy Scouts.

Alfred earned a percentage of 98. In these second place was Harry Bernstein, 12, of 17th Street, fourth Street, Jackson Heights, Queens, in grade 81 at P. S. 68.

Mayor La Guardia turned in an essay from the World's Fair, now gathering when he accepted honorarium of "I Am an



"TYPICAL AMERICAN BOY" AT THE FAIR
Alfred Roberts, who was chosen for that title yesterday, is shown with Mayor La Guardia and James Marshall, president of the Board of Education.

American Day," to be sponsored at the exposition on Tuesday, Oct. 15, by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Mayor La Guardia pledged his full cooperation to Basil O'Connor, general chairman of the event, declaring: "I shall give 'I Am an American Day' every possible cooperation and shall work for its success. With such a man as Basil O'Connor at the head of it, it's not going to be a 'day at the Fair'—it's going to be 'the day.'"

"Though no records were broken, the fair, crisp weather brought out a large crowd yesterday. The paid attendance was 271,000."

In another event at the Fair, Alfred E. Colby, president of the Pacific Mills received the Goodrich award of merit for distinguished public service. Augustus Richard, vice president and director of the company, accepting the honor in behalf of Mr. Colby, pointed out that the textile industries today are capable of "producing the full requirements of our national defense program" without disturbing their output of commodities needed by the civilian population.

There were other ceremonies and programs elsewhere throughout the grounds. The Irish Society of Columbia University staged a program of Irish dances and music in the outdoor plaza of the New York City Building and heard Leo T. McCauley, Irish commissioner general in the Fair, praise the group for "spreading knowledge of genuine Irish things in the university and the city."

In the Court of Peace a group of Baltimore citizens, headed by Mayor Howard W. Jackson, celebrated the 125th anniversary of the writing of "The Star-Spangled Banner." A group of "Bismarckian Dutch" had a gathering on the American Common, where costumes and folk-dance of fifty years ago were shown.

Patent Plunges to Death
Mrs. Mae Seber, 42 years old, of 122-23 114th Street, Ozone Park, Queens, was killed yesterday morning when she plunged from a fifth-story window to the roof of a three-story structure at Polytechnic Hospital, 335 West 174th Street. Mrs. M. A. nurse in charge of Ward 7, said Mrs. Seber had her bed. Ten minutes later the nurse missed her and saw the window was open.

FAIR CAT SHOW ENDS

Prizes Are Presented by Radio and Screen Celebrities

With the awarding of prizes last night, the World's Fair cat show closed after a two-day exhibit in the Hall of Special Events. Grand prizes were awarded in a special program at 8 o'clock by radio and screen celebrities.

Outstanding among the award winners was Arnie, the Miss of Blam, owned by Mrs. Karl B. Norton, which carried off the blue ribbon and prize for best Siamese of the show. In the Maine cat competition Ginger of Maine of Glad O'ry, winner of a long list awards both in the United States and abroad, took first honors. Ginger is owned by the Misses Ruth and Ellen Carlson and proved to be one of the leading attractions of the show.

Winner of the prize for best cat of the show was Imperial Wimp, owned by Mrs. Arvid G. Ohlin. This cat is a Persian blue male. Best champion of the show was Champion Bonnie Jean of Arctur, owned by Mrs. A. E. Townsend. The winner is a shaded silver female Persian.

3 POLICE GET LEAVES

Request Granted So They May Enter Military Service

Police Commissioner Valentine announced yesterday that three members of the department had received indefinite leaves of absence for military service. The men, the first of seventeen accepted by the police as members of the organized reserve, are Patrolman James E. Durso, who is 32 years old, and Delahanty, 30, will serve as first lieutenant with the Seventy-first Infantry, N. Y. G., at Fort Dix, N. J. Priole, 32, will go on duty as a major in the reserve detachment of the regular army at Washington. The Police Department now is conducting a survey to determine how many of its members will be affected by conscription.

CCC ADDS TO OCTOBER LIST

79,039 Juniors Will Be Enrolled to Maintain Full Strength

Recall to the New York Times—WASHINGTON, Sept. 28.—The October replacement enrollment program of the Civilian Conservation Corps has been increased from 75,000 to 79,039 juniors to bring the corps up to its authorized strength of 300,000 juniors and was released, the CCC announced today. The new enrollment period begins Oct. 1.

The replacement program is designed to fill vacancies caused by the discharge of men to accept employment and those who drop out on completion of their enrollment terms. James J. McInnes, CCC Director, said today that job opportunities had increased in recent months not only for enrollees but also for reserve officers and firemen who had gained practical experience in the CCC organization. Expansion of the armed forces also had opened opportunities, he said, which had been accepted by more than 600 of the CCC's reserve officers and 1,912 of the enrollees.

TEACHERS IN THE GUARD

Survey Reveals 150 School Aides Face Training Call

A survey made in the New York City school system has disclosed that 150 teachers and other employees of the Board of Education are members of the National Guard or Naval Reserve, and thus liable for military training, according to Dr. Harold G. Campbell, Superintendent of Schools.

Several hundred officers are found among the teaching staff. One teacher is a lieutenant commander in the Naval Reserve, and would be called to active service if \$1,200 if called to service. A high school principal, receiving \$10,000 annually, who was an aviator in the World War, is a captain in the Air Corps and would receive \$300 a month for active duty. What action to take regarding these men, if they are called, or in part-time service, is now under consideration by school officials.

PROGRAM FOR TODAY AT THE WORLD'S FAIR

The official World's Fair program for today features: The location of events to be indicated by parentheses by letter and

of America; M. J. Duryea, manufacturer of the first automobile; president of Buick; Charles King, designer of the first car

gram with speeches. Assembly Hall (B-3); Great Britain Round-broadcast. Speakers: (C-1)

John-Manuel Veterans ram participants in "American Jubilee"

Figure 2. "Typical American Boy" winner. *The New York Times*, September 29, 1940. ©1940 by the New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

of deus ex carnival, allowing Edgar to resolve the issues of autonomy, ethnicity and sexuality that he has struggled with in his growth to maturity.

Edgar's second visit to the World's Fair, like his first, concludes with the thrilling explosion of fireworks. But these pyrotechnics do not form the conclusion of the novel. Doctorow adds a brief coda. On a blustery fall day at about the same time that the New York World's Fair of 1939/1940 closed its gates for good, Edgar and a friend decide to bury in Claremont Park their own time capsule, constructed from aluminum foil and a cardboard mailing tube. Unlike the Westinghouse Time Capsule, the contents of which represent a blandly homogenized version of American culture, Edgar's time capsule is filled with personal, well-worn items of daily use: a Tom Mix Decoder badge, a harmonica, a cracked pair of eyeglasses. Ceremoniously, Edgar slips the time capsule into a hole he has dug, tamps dirt into the hole, and camouflages his handiwork with leaves before walking away. The scene could be described as a parody of the World's Fair's grandiose ambitions to capture American culture. But Edgar's solemnity during the ceremony proclaims his intention not to parody but to pay tribute to the Fair. The scene is a fitting ending to *World's Fair*, a novel that can correct any assumption we may have that individuals react in only two ways to mass culture, either passively accepting its messages or rejecting it whole. Edgar's time capsule reveals how individuals can participate in mass culture and at the same time transform it, making it their own. In this final scene, Edgar appropriates the Westinghouse Time Capsule—the product of industrial designers working for a major corporation and a symbol of the entire New York World's Fair—and turns it to personal use. In burying his foil-lined mailing tube, Edgar affirms his faith in the world of tomorrow. At the same time, he cherishes his personal past in a Janus-like gesture that stands as an appropriate final emblem for *World's Fair*.

Notes

I want to thank Helen A. Harrison and Mark Speyer for help with research and David Jaffee, Randall Knoper and Richard Trenner for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth-Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia, 1979), 188-210. Almost all of the many essays on the 1939/1940 New York World's Fair published since Meikle's book appeared have followed to a large extent his cultural hegemony analysis. See the following general interpretations of the Fair: Joseph P. Cusker, "The World of Tomorrow: Science, Culture and Community at the New York World's Fair," in Helen A. Harrison, ed., *Dawn of a New Day: The New York World's Fair 1939/40*, (New York, 1980), 3-15; H. Bruce Franklin, "America as Science Fiction: 1939," in George E. Slusser, et al., eds., *Coordinates: Placing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, (Carbondale, 1983), 107-23; Folke T. Kihlstedt, "Utopia Realized: The World's Fairs of the 1930s," in Joseph J. Com, ed., *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology, and the American Future*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986), 97-118; Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Hopes and Ashes: The Birth of Modern Times 1929-1939* (New York, 1986), 187-231; Francis V. O'Connor, "The Usable Future: The Role of Fantasy in the Promotion of a Consumer Society for Art," in Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, 57-71; Robert W. Rydell, "The Fan Dance of Science: American World's Fairs in the Great Depression," *Isis* 76 (1985), 525-542; Ernest H. Schell, "A Brave New

Future: The New York World's Fair, 1939." *American History Illustrated*, October 1982, 8-15; and the television documentary *The World of Tomorrow*, Lance Bird and Tom Johnson, producers, John Crowley, writer, Non Fiction Television, WNET/Thirteen, 1984. Alone among recent writers, the late Warren I. Susman challenged the cultural hegemony analysis of the Fair; see "The People's Fair: Cultural Contradictions of a Consumer Society," in Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, 22.

2. William R. Taylor, "Toward the Launching of a Commercial Culture: New York City, 1860-1939," paper prepared for the Social Science Research Council, New York City Working Group, March 16-19, 1984. My understanding of how individuals react to mass culture has been influenced by Taylor and other American Studies scholars, particularly Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London, 1987); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986); and Janice A. Radway, "Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor," *Book Research Quarterly* 2 (1986): 7-29. Radway's article explores issues she initially raised in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984). These four writers, along with numerous other critics over the past few years, have argued that we need to broaden our analysis of mass culture, moving from a Frankfurt School-influenced criticism that focuses exclusively on mass-culture *products* to an analysis that considers also the *processes* by which individuals interpret mass culture. Various British and Continental critics have influenced these American Studies works of mass culture interpretation. Stuart Hall's essays "Encoding/Decoding" in *Culture, Media, Language* (London, 1980), 128-38, and "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'" in Raphael Samuel, ed. *People's History and Socialist Theory*, (London, 1981), 227-40 are major theoretical documents of what has come to be known as the British Cultural Studies school, which is based at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. John Fiske offers an excellent survey of the Birmingham group in "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, (Chapel Hill, 1987), 254-89. Influential Continental writers include Roger Chartier, "Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France," in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, (Berlin, 1984), 229-54; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, 1980); and Jacques Leenhardt, "Toward a Sociology of Reading," in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, eds., *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, (Princeton, 1980), 205-24.

3. See, for example, the following reviews: Hilton Kramer, "Yesterday's World of Tomorrow," *Wall Street Journal* February 7, 1986, 19; R. Z. Sheppard, "The Artist as a Very Young Critic," *Time* November 18, 1985, 100; Robert Towers, "Three-Part Inventions," *New York Review of Books* December 19, 1985, 23-24.

4. Bruce Weber, "The Myth Maker: The Creative Mind of Novelist E. L. Doctorow," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 20, 1985, 76; Alvin P. Sanoff, "A Conversation With E. L. Doctorow: 'Writing Is Often a Desperate Act,'" *U.S. News and World Report* 99, December 16, 1985, 73.

5. Norman Bel Geddes, quoted by O'Connor "The Usable Future," 59.

6. Meikle *Twentieth-Century Limited*, xiii.

7. Teague quoted in *Ibid.*, 139.

8. *Ibid.*, 199.

9. Eugene Santomaso discusses *architecture parlante* in "The Design of Reason: Architecture and Planning at the 1939/40 New York World's Fair," in Harrison, *Dawn of a New Day*, 35-36.

10. Haskell quoted in Meikle *Twentieth-Century Limited*, 198.

11. *Ibid.*, 198.

12. Haskell quoted in *Ibid.*, 200.

13. *Ibid.*, 198.

14. Walter Dorwin Teague quoted in *Ibid.*, 199, 198.

15. *Ibid.*, 199-200.

16. O'Connor, "The Usable Future," 61.

17. E. L. Doctorow, *World's Fair* (New York, 1985), 284. Subsequent quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

18. Radway, "Reading Is Not Eating," 26.

19. No "Oscar the Amorous Octopus" actually existed at the World's Fair; this fictitious show is Doctorow's only departure from fact in his description of the Fair's exhibits. However, there were a number of similar peep shows at the Fair. *The World of Tomorrow* documentary includes film clips of "The Dream of Venus," a sideshow which featured a bare-breasted woman swimming in a glass tank.

20. See Cusker, "World of Tomorrow," 6-10 for a detailed description of the Fair's "focal exhibits."

21. See Santomaso, "Design of Reason," 15 on the foreign exhibits.

22. Interestingly, Edgar receives honorable mention in the contest and wins free tickets to the World's Fair for his family. His victory shows Doctorow's generally benign appraisal of the Fair.

23. New York City's Robert Moses, who played an important role in developing the World's Fair, wrote at the time that "the patriotic background of the New York World's Fair of 1939—that is, the 150th Anniversary of the Constitution and of the inauguration of Washington in New York—. . . was the excuse and not the reason for the Fair." Quoted in Robert A. M. Stern, *et al.*, *New York 1930: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Two World Wars* (New York, 1987), 727.