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The Third Screen: Kurt Andersen on Nano-Seconds of Beauty, 2008

Third Screen: You're about to do some serious writing on architecture in China, another novel, and you've created media magnets including *Spy* magazine and *VSL*, hosted the public radio program *Studio 360*, and so forth. Are you pleased with your opportunities and abilities to weave together a personal view out of all these jobs and enthusiasms?

Andersen: Enormously, amazingly pleased by my opportunities, collaborators, and luck. Picking out individual things of which I'm especially proud is tough, though, like saying which children you love best. And it's always the next thing, the thing on which you're working now - in my case a new novel and a theater piece about Harry Houdini - that's most exciting. But *Spy*, while perhaps not an exemplar of "beauty" in the orthodox sense, was pretty amazing at its best. The *Studio 360* show I did with Susan Sontag about war just before the Iraq invasion was good, I think. But almost every project has its moment - for instance, *Very Short List*, the daily "culture" e-mail I helped start, recently discovered an insanely great Web video called "Charlie Rose by Samuel Beckett" that made me very happy to see and share.

Third Screen: In a recent posting on *Very Short List*, you talk about what you call "the rise of ostentatious virtue" and the "marketing of compassion." Has compassion always been "marketed"? Why does it sound so dire when put that way?

Andersen: I don't think there's anything, probably, including compassion, that's marketed as intensely today. And as far as I know, markers to demonstrate that one is "good" - pinning on colored ribbons or flag pins or wristbands or whatever - have never been so conspicuous or ubiquitous. Compassion is supposed to be a matter of deeds more than a symbol, and the balance between public credit-taking and anonymity is supposed to tip more toward the former.

Third Screen: Has "ostentatious virtue" replaced what we used to call charity or progress, subjects you write about in your last novel, *Heyday*?

Andersen: Well, we used to call "progress" the creation of sensible government programs to provide for the poor and weak and ill. And charitable impulses are great, but crowing about them, especially when you're crowing about a sentiment rather than an action, has gotten a bit out of control.

Third Screen: The triumph of intention or staging over action? How about conspicuous non-consumption for "just say no to drugs" or not wearing fur or eating meat, where what you don't do is the point?

Andersen: That's good. I remember becoming familiar with (and liking) the phrase "reverse snobbery" when I was a little kid in the 1960s - probably concerning the VW bug we owned and probably from my mother, who was both a snob and a reverse snob. The people who claim to watch no TV except PBS are, of course, conspicuous non-consumers as well.

Third Screen: How do you see it taking shape in the media? Are you concerned that journalists, readers, viewers, unique visitors, care too much about the safer sides of complex issues?

Andersen: Not so much. At least no more concerned that I would've been if you'd asked 10 or 20 or 30 years ago.

Third Screen: Is there a humanitarian underpinning then, behind your work as a novelist and journalist? For writers, is publication the ribbon on our lapel? And what does that say, then, about who our viewer/reader is?

Andersen: "Humanitarian underpinning" is way too grand a thing to claim unless you're Nelson Mandela or Elie Wiesel or Cameron Sinclair or somebody, but sure: trying, in our uncertain little ways in our tiny corners of the world, to tell some bit of truth or create some nanosecond of beauty ... that's a humanitarian effort, isn't it?