

IN STUBBORN PRAISE OF INFORMATION *SERGE DANÉY*

In 1989, and then in 1990, news television achieved two Pyrrhic victories. In their haste to cover an impoverished Romania newly open to the media, news crews and editors, having mistaken a morgue for a mass grave and the smoke of a coup for the fires of revolution, found themselves forced to reexamine their basic assumptions.¹ Now that “Television and Romania” is a punch line and a conference topic, many of the humiliated have secretly sworn that in the future they’ll *look* at their images. It was about time, too.

However, hardly had Romania and its deceptions returned to Purgatory then the Gulf crisis presented a new challenge. This was no longer some small stage for the news; it was another theater entirely, that of “operations”: martial and dispersed, too disparate to *get a picture*. And yet it was here that news TV—CNN, really—had its crowning moment and exposed its limits. All it took was for George Bush and Saddam Hussein, the lords of the realm, to press the news system into service as if it were nothing but a giant Minitel.² This is why we didn’t get to see the Bushite message to the Iraqi people, broadcast directly to them, some kind of TV capable of bypassing us, its normal audience. As if, having finally broken free from direct political oversight, TV now had to cede back some of its technical facilities to politics. For who can’t see that in war, control of the small screen is a logistical necessity for each side.

In both of these cases, the outcome was a call to order. At precisely the moment it was becoming more “competitive” than ever before, TV media, with its news³ and magazine programs, its overemphasized servitude and overpaid stars, rediscovered an oft-forgotten truth: *you can’t always film whatever you want, however you want*. At the edges of the real, something resists homogenization. Furiously. The formal *droit de cuissage*⁴ that TV asserts over *all* subjects, the pathetic reheated zoom shots that reveal nothing and the running commentaries that say nothing, the blackmail of abruptly running out of time and switching back to the studio, the growing number of stylistic tics borrowed from clips and ads, the realization of the stalest fantasies in the guise of “emotion,” in short, the homogenization of the world, via an electronic surveillance that before our very eyes is threatened with the loss of all credibility.⁵

Let’s take the recent example of a segment of the TV news “magazine” *Audit*, reporting on the French army’s deployment to the Persian Gulf. A noble and foolproof subject, or so the

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¹ Originally “se retrouvèrent grosses Jeannes comme devant.”

² Minitel: French precursor to the internet, started in 1982; a small computer terminal wired through phone lines to provide access to online information.

³ In English in the original.

⁴ *Droit de cuissage*: allegedly a right possessed by medieval lords, allowing them to spend the wedding night with all newlywed wives.

⁵ **The truth is more bitter. At the end of the Gulf War, what does one notice? That the limits of television were tested by virtually everyone. But also that one mustn’t begrudge TV the fact it had to knuckle under so, for the good reason that the “law of the strongest” became, once again, the law *tout court*. (Daney)**

producers must be thinking as we find them standing in the heat of the Yambu⁶ night, mikes in hand, pulling grave faces. Here's how the plan goes: in Paris, SIRPA⁷ and General Germanos'⁸ jolly mug, in Yambu, some soldiers and a few superiors. Both locations share a single talking-point: we've got everything under control. The grunts basically seem to have as much of a clue about this "war" as they might have about the Boxer Rebellion. The officers, hands on hips, claim to know what's going on. SIRPA says it knows they know.

When the report's over, it takes only a bit of effort to bring oneself to face the awful truth: *it contained zero information*. What we saw, carefully framed according to the requirements of the "image" (that of the military, that of TV), was a slice of "current events," letting us know that it's a live feed, broadcasting from an Arabia that's one hundred percent Saudi, to which an actual news crew really, truly made the trip. The sole bit of information, then, is that TV went there (and we didn't). We've entered an era in which news is confused with sheer topicality.⁹

This example (among countless others) is all the more exemplary for the fact that *Audit* is a fine program, even a good one. It illustrates a law that is, alas, set in stone: television has no future, owing to the fact that *it's not a real workplace*. To fend off the cathode-ray squawking I can already hear rising in protest, I'll clarify what I mean by "work." Not the agitation, the stress, the abducted babies, the fear of ratings and trademark infringement. Nor the serious and heroic deployment of reporters to all ends of the earth. When I say "work," I mean the prerequisite exercise of a minimum of forethought. Such a minimum that it would be better to simply call it "common sense."

So what would common sense say about a report like this one? It would say that there's no reason why, in 1990, the army would cease being what it is at heart, which is a total mute.¹⁰ Common sense would go on to say that it's fine to devote a report to the French army, as long as you somehow hit on a way of making it talk to you. All that this "work" would require is maybe five minutes of discussion over a cup of coffee, but it's precisely those five minutes and that coffee that are missing.

Television reminds me of a boorish young upstart to whom it would be difficult to explain that, while he's certainly proved his power (a *technical* power, better suited to amplifying things than actually creating them), he has yet to turn to serious matters. Well, serious matters are upon us. Did the *Audit* journalists think it was enough to just touch down in the desert for the generals to bare their souls? Did F.-H. de Virieu¹¹ think that the presence of cameras in the Rabat palace would alleviate the fawning atmosphere, which, to the contrary, stifled the broadcast? Did those who "covered" Romania have any inkling that this pre-media population might pull a fast one? And did d'Arvor, in interviewing Mobutu, hope that, faced with "Patrick," he would suddenly tire of lying and burst into tears?¹² There are as many mistakes as there are lessons, and each is unique.

If it weren't in all likelihood already too late, you could say that this new order of things is a dream opportunity for televised news to make a fresh start. For, apart from all the nonwork, there's a certain naïveté to those who are used to adjusting other people's realities to their own Procrustean audiovisual bed. It's a naïveté we know all too well, resigned as we are to the melancholy and masochistic idea that this slick spectacle polluting our screens is the unhappy result of a treatment (in the medical sense) that we've imposed on all that lies outside of ourselves.

Documentary, Godard once said, is what happens to others; fiction is what happens to me. Is this always true? Certainly our cultures have scrawled across the surface of their values, like some house special, "*the other*." The other as an object to be reduced, but also as an enigma worthy of respect. Meanwhile, feeling the first stirrings of the dangerous sorts of Nationalisms that wracked the South, the North wants to know what's happening to it. But in order to do this, it entrusts itself less to fiction than to fantasy pure and simple.

Thanks to market research surveys and the group narcissism created by market research surveys, we're on the verge of embracing the notion that *fantasy* deserves the same status as "news information." *L'Evenement du jeudi*¹³ is one licentious expression of this profitable exchange, in which the "other," if Liberian, can be summed up solely in relation to Kouchner and righteous charity,¹⁴ while, if he's an Arab, he stands in for the empty spectacle of fantasy. No longer is there any need to analyze, inform, or witness for yourself: for a society entranced by its own constituent fantasy-opinions, antijournalism will do fine.

This isn't about decrying fantasy (the "us"), which would be pointless; rather, recall that fiction ("me") and documentary ("they") are together the twin supports of the audiovisual, which, short of collapsing under its own blunders, could hardly make it on one leg alone. Quick to notice this fact, TV's higher echelons benefit by devoting more screen time than ever to the philistine theme of "what's happening to us?"

If we are at a turning point in the history of information, and of information as the very condition of history, it's not because artists and moralists from Baudrillard to Godard have finally made their voices heard. For them, the "other" remains a luxury, or already a memory. Rather, it's thanks to the new issue of *war* that television, child of the North (and perfected under the Nazis) and peace (a peace born of Yalta), increasingly finds itself confronted with the apparent *bad faith* and cunning of the other, who seems increasingly inclined to let us know he hates us. For if the notion of East/West described two rival visions, that of North/South knows only an envy (more mutual than it seems) between two states, rich and poor. Which is to say, any Saddam Hussein knows how to use *the news apparatus of the North*,¹⁵ but for no Saddam Hussein does news information itself have any inherent "value." These are the rules of the game today. To ignore them would be folly.

Which is why, if we don't want the management of fantasy to usurp the news game, we must demand of our television journalists—who call the shots, in advance of print journalism, which generally follows their lead—that they seek out those subjects who have increasing reason to resist them. If they don't do this, they'll be reduced to filming small-town high school hazing rituals, as in the provincial "Perdu de vue,"¹⁶ where they barge into some poor person's kitchen to document—a shameful "extra," to the benefit of no one—the tears of the guilty mother, the mumblings of the long-lost big brother. Soon television will have to make a choice between opening up to the world at any cost, or retreating into its cathode-ray community.

Today, it's the most decommunitarian society in the world, the Soviet Union, which restores some dignity to the idea of "news," indeed, to the documentary form of old. Given the impossibility of maintaining our illusions about this defrosted monstrosity, *all* TV reports on the USSR are good. Because all of them, in their modest way, inform. Because our deficit of Russian images is practically endless. It was within the strictures of "Audit" that we were recently able to see the morning opening of Gum, with its empty shelves, its pale cashiers, its queues now speaking volumes.¹⁷ "*Stop filming*," protested the housewives. "*It's humiliating enough as it is!*" By sudden virtue of the image. By virtue of sound. And if the Soviets had been filmed earlier on, if they'd seen themselves reflected in the camera eye of the other, wouldn't that humiliation have caused them to rise up against the image of a bondage too readily endured?

Utopia? But it's this alone that's worth it. For information is not only what I pry from the other by force, it's what he learns about himself in having his portrait "drawn" (even withdrawn). It's true that news gives way, then, to something of which one must speak only with great delicacy: communication. But that's another story.

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⁶ Yambu aka Yanbu: a Saudia Arabian port city.

⁷ SIRPA: the French military office of information.

⁸ General Raymond Germanos: spokesperson for the French Ministry of Defense during the Gulf War.

⁹ Jean-Luc Pouthier does not make this mistake. (Daney)

¹⁰ *La grande Muette*: popular name for the French military ("The Big Mute").

¹¹ François-Henri de Virieu: celebrated French TV journalist (1931–1997).

¹² Patrick Poivre d'Arvor: widely known French TV journalist, news anchor and writer.

¹³ *L'Événement du jeudi*: French news magazine.

¹⁴ Bernard Kouchner: French humanitarian, cofounder of Médecins sans Frontières.

¹⁵ An overestimation of the aforementioned Saddam. Hence a question: is the North/South divide now deep enough that a leader from the South, even a dangerous and suicidal one, can no longer correctly interpret the (porous and gloomy) logic of the North? (Daney)

¹⁶ "Perdu de vue" ("Lost from Sight"): a French TV program with the aim of finding missing persons and reuniting them with their families.

¹⁷ Gum: a department store near Red Square.