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. 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.

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 faculties 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 news 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 the 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.

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

IN Stubborn Praise of Information
Serge Daney

Footnotes:
1 Originally “se retrouvèrent grosses Jeanes 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 have sex with all newlywed wives on their wedding night.
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)
TV reports on the...