

Spectacle for Sale

Overflow from the image/info gutter

I was trained in the trenches of overload from an early age but I don't think any amount of image/information saturation could have fully prepared me for the job I have now. I am a video researcher for Video Monitoring Services of America (VMS), the video equivalent of a newspaper clipping service. VMS provides corporations and public relations firms with taped segments and transcripts, mostly from news programs. These clients use this information to monitor their products' (human and otherwise) image, and to determine how successfully they are manipulating the media. My job is to locate the chosen segment from a prerecorded tape which is then given to an editor who dubs the segment onto a tape for the client.

VMS tapes the local network affiliates 24 hours a day, every day, plus some programs from the independent New York stations, MTV and major radio stations. Each news program from these stations is monitored daily, which is to say that short descriptions of each segment of each news program (with particular attention paid to product names, companies and celebrity commodities) are handwritten by a usually bug-eyed "monitor" - the actual job title of these dungeon dwellers of the company flowchart. These notes, along with the tapes, are kept on file for one month. VMS also has branch offices, affiliates and outposts all over the country which provide access to practically every news broadcast in America.

At 11 p.m. my shift begins and I settle myself before the small cube that pumps stimuli into my senses for eight hours a day. Tiers of VCRs and televisions surround me like an information womb. I see other flickering images reflected in my screen, out of the corner of my eye and everywhere I turn. My TV monitor, my girl; my lifeline to the exciting rumblings of the world outside; the dangerous, decadent, colorful world that gives me such a buzz via the magic of satellite saturation.

Yessir, TV's a surreal banquet of image frenzy where the lethal and brutally absurd mix with the abysmally trivial. Look! It's Oprah Winfrey on maneuvers with the Khmer Rouge at the Thai border. That roly poly queen of banality sure knows how to handle a grenade launcher. Hey! ZZ Top's doing videos with Colonel Khadafy. "Dis is de most fun I've had since de Rome airport massacre." A slight shift in concentration reveals the pudenda of Donald Trump superimposed upon the shanty towns of



Illustration by 96 Eyes

Soweto.

What a job I have! I'm so informed. Hyperinformed. My memory bank is brimming with arcane tidbits from the glut gutters of provincial uplinks around the nation.

Television's real purpose is to peddle - things, services, lifestyles and images. Most news programs fit snugly within this consumerist agenda and function as extended commercials.

Hey, big fire in Schenectady the other day. Didja hear about the convenience store food handling controversy in Sioux Falls or how 'bout simply fantastic advances in tornado research? EEEEEOWWW!!! That Bonita Rojas from *San Antonio Tonight* is really a hot number.

I am essentially an information apeon and have come to feel about the television the way industrial age drones must have felt about their sewing machines or lathes. But working at VMS provides me with the opportunity to view electronically generated information, and information per se, in a way which is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the way media civilians usually perceive these staples of their existence.

Every day I am confronted with ominous wall shelves overflowing with videotapes, tangible reminders of the fact that vast amounts of ephemera are actually preserved and part of the collective data pool. My already well-honed sensitivity to information inundation has also been heightened by my daily stints rifling through the image files of the globe (via the magic of fast forward) and ingesting highly concentrated doses of spectacle. The speed, volume and boundlessness of modern information gathering produces a very concentrated version of the barbarism, disaster and miscellaneous sensationalism that occur throughout the world every single day. My version is an exaggeration of an exaggeration.

(over)

TV news magnifies distant military, government and celebrity rumblings to a deceptively close range and presents them as a series of disjointed, almost interchangeable images. This fundamental media truth is inculcated by the ludicrous amount of repetition I endure on the job. While searching for a news segment I have to pass other stories which are sometimes repeated two or three times during a single hour and a half news broadcast. I may have seen the identical stories four or five times before on other programs; meanwhile someone near me may be watching the same story on another channel. Such scenarios of simultaneity occur daily. The most memorable repetition gorge happened the day the space shuttle blew up. At one point every TV screen in the small office showed a different stage of the catastrophe (see Warhol's "Disaster Series" for another take on repetitious disaster iconography). Events seen (and seen and seen and seen and...) in this mode readily dis-

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solve into pure spectacle – devoid of context, emotional content and immediacy.

My hyper-mediated window screen on the world is further mediated by my fingertip control of the images before me. Forward, reverse and pause buttons allow me to

penetrate the seamless flow of "real time" and toy with TV fodder like image puppets. The R. Budd Dwyer suicide was especially fascinating to toy with because it was such pure spectacle to begin with. Dwyer was the former Pennsylvania state treasurer who, having been convicted of corruption and about to be sentenced, called a press conference where he fatally shot himself. I must have watched this splatter scene at least 15 times, in slow motion, fast motion, single frame real time and reverse. After several viewings I realized that the control which I gleefully exercised over this sensational image was not merely a product of my own morbid whims, but also an obedient response to the taped version of the event which seemed to beg for voyeurism and manipulation rather than empathy or compassion.

The relentless barrage of Rehash, Epidemic, Scandal and Terror (welcome to the REST decade, everybody) and sundry other

media chimeras are the backdrop for television's real purpose: to peddle – things, services, lifestyles and images. Most news programs fit snugly within this consumerist agenda and function as extended commercials. Corporate and PR image-mongers are well aware of this fact and utilize the medium accordingly. VMS provides the information lubricant for the big business-media machine. We are nourished by the spectacle; it is our provider. And we can't lose because image is something we don't have to worry about, only supply. The Tylenol poisonings provided the company with its most profitable month ever.

I would go on, I could go on, but some tawdry pop icon has a new movie out and a bunch of people just died of food poisoning, so there's lots of work to do. ■

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