

Chairman Znaimer's "Sensual Pagan Torrent"

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The title scene, to which we periodically return, is a goose-stepping column of cardboard soldiers, marching, in mechanical cadence, with television sets under their arms. They seem to be storm troopers of television, off to do battle with print and the book people.

That, in brief, is the plot. Moses Znaimer, Toronto's maxi media mogul and mini guru, produced it, oddly enough, for the CBC. As Znaimer says, the telling is as important as the story, and the teller perhaps even more important, especially if the narrator is also the producer. Therefore, we can be assured that *TVTV: The Television Revolution* must be the very (single-minded) model of the walking, talking, moveable feast of sensual, liberating imagery that it claims television really is.

So let the plot unfold. "Unfold" may be a book word, so let it gush forth in a dazzling profusion of images and—inevitably—print in the form of subtitles with factoids and quotations from other gurus, and people just like me.

The saga's cosmic sweep begins in prehistoric times. Humanoids scamper about in a desert until they come upon a television set. They gawk and whimper and don't know what to do. Neither does the scene, so it shifts.

Enter Znaimer, with a quizzical expression and a tone at once imperious and querulous, suitable for all occasions. We who work in television, he explains, are the people of the image, "the eye." Deployed against us in this Wagnerian encounter are the critics, the "print people," the politicians, the regulators, and all those who whine about the scarcity of quality.

But now—*Götterdämmerung!*—no more scarcity. With the coming of "perhaps hundreds of channels" the very thing that was supposed to have ailed us has vanished. This is the revolution, Znaimer argues, "beyond the

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wildest dreams not only of those who, like me, love TV, but also of its critics." Yet the struggle continues because "they" just do not get it.

Cut to the "next generation"—MTV, rock, rap, and "the secret of TV's irresistible force" which is, "in one word, entertainment." Camille Paglia makes an early appearance to add the phrase "sensual pagan torrent" to the mix. Znaimer then announces, with a straight face, that "those of us in television have remained largely silent while the advocates of print damned TV." Well, no more Mr. Nice Guy. Now "we will have our say," and high time, too, because "print has become a medium of mistrust . . . inculcating cynical habits of mind, its visionaries replaced by constant carpers, notable mostly for mean-spiritedness."

Speaking of that, movie producer/director Oliver Stone also has scores to settle. He inveighs against "parasites" who "infest" *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. But no matter. The people of "the eye" who saw *JFK* know the truth. "What you saw you believe in your heart. . . Kennedy was killed by a conspiracy, no matter what the print people say. . . The picture speaks, it can't lie as you lie with the word." The subtitle says: "Neil Postman, Communication Scholar: 'Richard Nixon's dishonor was not that he lied but rather that he looked like a liar.'"

A long series of industry executives talk about the business of television. It boils down to: "Anybody who has a product to sell has got a chance in this country." So we cut to the best sell of all, graphic violence and expertly choreographed brutality all too familiar to viewers and, contrary to conventional wisdom, repugnant to most (of which more later). Appearing to justify the mayhem, the subtitle quotes me saying that "Heavy TV viewing does not increase violence, it increases our fear of violence." (More of that, too, later.)

Success stories of "hard-edged" investigative reporting are lovingly detailed. (There are no duds, invasions of privacy, entrapments, or other abuses of media power.) A subtitle cites Marshall McLuhan saying that "Television feels a revulsion to all centrist bureaucratic and political organization."

Predictably, the scene shifts to Moscow. The Znaimer party line on Soviet television is that it was not so much Party- as print-dominated. This must have been so because, on one occasion, a television program ran out of voice-over script when the Politburo was seven minutes late to a Party Congress. As the text was already in press for the next day's *Pravda*, and as print is sacred in Moscow, the commentator fell silent for seven minutes and picked up his script again when the Politburo arrived on the scene. (No mention is made of the spectacle of American presidential candidates engaged in TV debate standing like dummies, waiting for the sound to be restored. But that was, no doubt, in deference to the benign power of television, and not to the tyranny of print.)

"Print," we are told, "creates hierarchy, judgmental minds; TV seeks an opening to the heart. . . ." "It is immediate, inclusive, liberating, and democratic." "It is not controllable because humanity is not controllable." Hints that it might be just a bit controllable, after all, are swamped by the random cavalcade of "reality," such as Rin Tin Tin, World War II artillery barrages, Nixon, Sergeant Friday, Superman, an atomic mushroom cloud, and Marilyn Monroe—all in a dizzying, if hackneyed, succession of appropriately grainy black-and-white images. Carefully engineered illusions of informality and unrehearsed spontaneity are projected against backgrounds of bars, streets with shadowy passersby scurrying in the foreground, circus barkers and pitchmen, and even an interview in a cafe while the foreground figure seems to be carrying on another conversation. But I digress.

"The best TV tells me what happens to me here today in my own neighbourhood." That, of course, is mostly crime. A news director at a Miami television station, notorious for its "if it bleeds it leads" formula, explains how to grab the grazing viewer before another channel does. Talk-show hostess Jenny Jones relates how she had to reveal her own personal secrets in her climb to success. Her producer tells the story of the inevitable slide to lurid tabloid from the initial "kinder, gentler" format: "We had to play the game like everyone else."

At their Banff conference, public broadcasters confer and conspire on how to jettison their mandate in order to capture a bigger share of the market. Then on to a cathedral and a discourse on the origin of television imagery in medieval religious iconry. I am quoted again, via subtitle: "Sooner or later TV includes all the explanations of life we need. It is like the coming of a new religion."

Maybe we should become "showmen of God," a minister muses, as we switch to the real showmen of the global market, who exude much greater confidence. "We do business in 140 countries," says the President of Warner Brothers International, subsidiary of the Time-Warner global mega-conglomerate. Now we are sailing on a yacht while the Warner chief explains: "The U.S. product has the largest market. The nets pay us 80% of our cost; I only have to generate the rest plus profit from the world market." Later we see how he wines and dines his international clients before he presents them with an irresistible business deal: high-cost programming at bargain-basement prices.

There is talk about a "new brand of politics." Italian media baron Silvio Berlusconi "packaged himself well" on his way to power. But Znamer assures us (again) that television "cannot be controlled because mankind cannot be controlled."

Marshall McLuhan's "probes" find television "an inner-directed depth-medium of all sorts of meditation." Camille Paglia returns, amidst sports, spectacle, rock, shock, smoke, drink, and fire, to extol, again, "the pagan sen-

sual torrent that is television." Furthermore, this is not decline but "reversion to an earlier state of 'deep meanings.'" "So, if a grieving widow is interrupted by a commercial—well, that's life."

Henry Kissinger is summoned to warn that image politics can drive foreign policy. True enough, but the point is blunted when we are also told that "governments think television is a medium to be managed while it is an instrument to be played"—transforming the Chairman into the conductor of an orchestra. A flag waves, a scroll unfurls. The 10 sayings of Chairman Znamer roll off, one by one, in print for weaker minds. The first, "The Triumph of the Image," also happens to be the title of our book on "playing the media" in the Gulf War.

Well, okay . . . now, let us see what have we here. The thrust of my quotation on violence, and of our TV violence studies, is that its contributions to desensitization and to a sense of insecurity and meanness are even more pervasive than its contribution to real-life violence. Our work also demonstrates that, far from being popular, violence depresses ratings; but it's still profitable because, being image-driven, it "travels well" on the world market where most of the industry's profits come from. Therefore, violence is not an expression of freedom but part of a global marketing formula imposed on the creative people and foisted on the children of the world.

Second, my comment on "television as a new religion" is not meant to suggest deep spiritual meanings. I was comparing the medieval power-nexus of state and church with its modern symbiotic counterpart, the relationship between the commercial-political establishment and its chief cultural arm, television.

Tendentious use of quotations is, I suppose, part of trying too hard to construct a self-serving story that is, at the same time, just "entertainment." (The great emphasis Znamer and other doggedly commercial entrepreneurs place on that word is significant. If "entertainment" as a singular concept has any meaning at all beyond the box office, it means stereotyped stories devoid of sharp edges and a tragic sense of life, mixed with sanitized violence and bland political mishmash. These stories are celebrations of the conventional.)

The main theme of *TVTV*'s story collapses of its own pretentious weight. There is no battle of media, only competition for advertising moneys. The total cultural orchestration includes all media in complementary and only partly distinctive roles. As sensory experience, print is as "visual" as pictures but, by abstracting, it can explain. By contrast, pictures "reveal," easily trapping the viewer in the illusion of witnessing "reality" rather than the inevitably selected and slanted bits of it.

The real media differences are institutional. All media are managed, involve a point of view, and confer great power to their owners. Increasingly, there are

a few mega-conglomerates dominating the world market. This is not "an opening to the heart" so much as to the minds and pocketbooks.

While channels proliferate, ownership consolidates. Every merger denies entry to newcomers, reduces alternative voices, and shrinks jobs and freedom for creative people all over the world. But such mergers concentrate power to tap into the largest number of consumers at the least cost and to sell them to the largest constellations of bidders, people who have nothing to tell but lots to sell.

Television documentaries have become an endangered species. With cheaply obtained footage of crime and violence, balance in local news is hard to find. (Our own study of Philadelphia "local" television news found that 8 out of 10 stories of crime and violence were not even local.) Serving up fake "reality" is made to seem more authentic by turning the camera on the storytellers' fake reality of the working newsroom. Anchors and reporters sitting behind a desk and just reading the news might be suspected of presenting what actually happens in the world rather than a "reality show."

Far from telling "what happens to me here today in my own neighbourhood," many local news, talk, tabloid, and "reality shows" present the most lurid, grotesque, and mean "real" people, acts, and events they can find, from wherever they can get them. They speak to a sense of fear and mistrust, arming and destroying, not liberating, communities. A University of Miami study of the very station Znaimer sets up as a model (and, no doubt, emulates) found that up to half of the stories involved crime (averaging 32%), while violent crime in the city remained constant, involving less than one tenth of 1% of the population. The price for grabbing a few viewers for marginal commercial advantage in both entertaining drama and news is the intimidation, alienation, and disgust of most viewers reflected in every poll about television violence, and the huge international embarrassment for the dumping of "action" programs on the rest of the world.

TVTV is an extended apologia for all that, perhaps seeking some latent mystical potential for the medium, but hiding its actually existing face behind a pagan sensual torrent of obfuscation and nonsense.