

# The News as a Post-Literary Spectacle

Joseph F. Keppler

**Totalitarian-like, the news culture dominates thought during crucial times in our nation. Purposely neither scholarly nor spontaneous, this article examines the news of the Persian Gulf war from a critical reader/viewer perspective. It proposes that video news works like an intriguing alphabet, the forms and meanings of which are pronounced by a monopoly of interpreter reporters, anchors and media guests. During a crisis traditional ABC's in print second the immediate electronic coverage. Normally the viewer and the reader can go separate ways, but a crisis calls for speed and singularity of attention. In the ignorant absoluteness of the singular entertainment of the Persian Gulf war, the difference between being literate in print and being literate in video hardly mattered. What did matter was the facility with which rhetorical strategies governed the principles and actions of people at war. To think otherwise was rendered irrelevant and impolitic.**

## The News As a Post-Literary Spectacle

On the radio station I tuned into during the commute, the BBC reported that Americans were ready to watch the war on TV with popcorn and beer. It was already dark in Seattle when I arrived home to study the news.

The sun was just coming up in the Middle East. There was euphoria about successful nighttime air raids. The television had maps and analysts and hidden voices. One reporter described the air battle from his hotel room in Baghdad; I saw a map and heard his voice. I aimed the remote control, anxiously changing stations to determine how the news differs. It was all the same. As I manipulated the hand controls, was I to think of symbolic masturbation, inane self-absorption or possible understanding?

### Global coliseum

Perhaps Marshall McLuhan's insights about the electronic world fabricating a global village are in need of review. Television and radio may make the world a village, but the village now has a coliseum complete with armies in the night, vendors and partisan commentators interpreting fighting events. Guy Debord in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Malcolm Imrie. New York: Verso, 1990, 33.) describes, "Villages, unlike towns, have always been ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance, boredom and repetitive malicious gossip about the same families." These characteristics he extends to the global village. Yet when the struggle in the village seems important and personal, neither McLuhan nor DeBord express what makes it so.

I was angry and afraid in my own living room. I understood the war news was being telecast like entertainment. I knew that communication by language was being transformed before us every time we watched television. Why then did the news still surprise me with its critical impotence in times of crucial importance? Times like this gave the news its intensity and demonstrated its contrivance. This was a life and death contest we witnessed as a spectacle. Observers were filing stories from Riyadh, Washington,

Baghdad; stories, quickly stories, quick, quick, more stories with explanations, opinions, anecdotes. Words rarely heard before were suddenly commonplace — Scud, Cruise, Tomahawk, Patriot — the vocables old, the meanings new.

Dan Rather interrupted his own coverage for a few seconds and told viewers to pause and think about this: *The United States at War in the Middle East*. Continuing coverage meant continuous information with a momentary reflection on our own state of war. Dan Rather, firm in his resolve to bring us the latest from *Showdown in the Gulf*, looked tired and confused. Maybe this came as a shock despite months of preparation. Tom Brokaw earnestly sought to keep everyone calm and informed. Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel interviewed refurbished experts: retired military personnel. Unlimited spoken text was on the screen. The old written alphabet had all but disappeared before the oral onslaught spoken over pictures.

What did they mean? What did my audiovisual anxiety mean? I was mesmerized. What was I learning?

These broadcasters were flummoxed by the enormity of the events they were discussing. Since they didn't know, they admitted not knowing, I was left to investigate their nil investigation. Hardly news. Yet the feebleness, the mental ineptitude was on all the channels. My anxiety increased because the people behind and in front of the news cameras were in effect blind, and they blocked the global village from being seen by anyone.

Ah, but they were also dumb. I concentrated on their words. The new military vocabulary flew in to do its subtle work. These specialized words hit my mind with the resonance of déjà vu and without the definiteness a dictionary or larger community brought to language. Desert Shield, Desert Storm, smart bombs, Stealth bomber — these ad hoc specialized terms placed their users into a hip community much like the way teenagers form a jargon to separate themselves from the child and adult worlds. Here it was a jargon that separated the military and the media from broader, more critical communities.

Walter J. Ong calls television part of our age of 'secondary orality.' In *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 1990, 137.) he notes that "secondary orality promotes spontaneity because through analytic reflection we have decided that spontaneity is a good thing." Yet thinking of these news-casts and their spontaneity, I balance their chit-chat spontaneity with their informative journalism: the more spontaneous, the less expression. These shows are effective simulations of critical coverage. Are they giving me the bait-and-switch trick? There's no critical thinking and no "analytic reflection." There's only spontaneity by default.

## Alphabet of images

Is video a new alphabet? There's little writing shown on television; the news is oral with a lust for the seen. Is television writing in fact diacritical? The news comes by camera, and the pictures are then voiced over to mean something. The visuals illustrate and impress while the audio reports the thinking. Constantly changing screens of images without the character of enduring individual letters create a twisted writing of the war. My eyes move across text when I read; my eyes don't move before the screen. This new alphabet of still-mind, moving-video images is based on, not letters or written words, but visual frames per second. Reporters narrate the war, giving it a third person point of view. They please adults with a picture book.

This was a post-literary spectacle. I couldn't believe it. Exactly, I thought, because there was nothing to believe. My eyes and ears were busy, my mind was merely processing the spectacle.

The alphabet and writers have formed my mind. I've been a reader almost all my life. To see something seems insufficient because it's too simple, too passive, too, well, mindless. Often to witness a public event is only as important as what I study or analyze about it. Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation* was a great book because it seemed in retrospect another way of analysis, indeed, of interpretation. Now I'm faced with a media for which "against interpretation" truly applies. There's a perniciousness to not interpreting the news. I'm left with reporters' babbling to me a story which I watch and listen to like a good child with a good parent before a sweet dreams bedtime.

The dawn video pictures over a Moslem city seemed to me extraordinarily beautiful — a minaret in the blue air, the silver sunlight entering an open balcony. These video stills presented the light glinting through and around the archway of a graceful white pinnacle against a vivid blue sky.

## Traditional language — traditional time

The war coverage came with flaring lights, bombing sounds and officially cleared military videotapes. So much for independence of the press. This was the televisual language of real war as announced by the network-covered global coliseum. The days were being counted as were the number of jets lost and of U.S. soldiers missing or dead. This was like a score being kept for only one side. Would the American reporter-participant point of view be ruined with equal time granted to an Iraqi reporter-participant point of view?

The war continued. Diplomatic and military participants were interviewed. Anchor people who had never mentioned the word before on camera now

peppered their news with the word, *pray* — we *pray* for our men and women, or we *pray* that the land battle will not have to happen. Thus religion entered the news. Not news of religious scoundrels but actual moments of vocal piety: we sincerely insisted that all would turn out in our favor.

The video spectacle of a war, not the live spectacle of a war, continued, though the pace slowed after the first days. War as it was on the television and war as it was in the field, on the sea and in the air — what was war on television? Ah, the medium indeed was the massage. There was no war before me just the video stories. The emotional response oscillated with the stories. Scud evoked more television fear than Patriot, Tomahawk or Cruise. The Allies pounded Iraq from the sky, hitting everything they wanted to hit. Carpet bombing reentered the mouths and ears of America; how deceitful traditional language could become, imparting a warmth and domesticity to blind brutality. Though I heard the words, ‘carpet bombing,’ I remembered seeing trails of smoke following the long array of bombs as they fell and hit and exploded. Why was there no sign of pain, only of power? My eyes were blinded not by darkness but by imagery.

My ears? No longer did voices emanate from a map with Baghdad highlighted. No more expressions of *wow*, *terrific* or *terrible*. Information management settled into a routine the reporters could not crack. Since reports were hypothetical possibilities, statistical chances, the reporters and anchors had to reach my ears for me to understand. What I could not see, I had to hear about — the future, for example. Imaginative scenes for the future coliseum began to intensify in horror. Bored with what they had been given to report, broadcasters uttered suggestions about what they might be reporting on in the very near future. (What did this do for the already anxiety-ridden citizen?)

Future coliseums seem to be fantastic elaborations of the present suspense. Breakthroughs, when first arriving, are experienced less as extensions of the past than as radical departures. Future dangers realistically portrayed change broadcast ennui into fear, and fear means rapt attention in an electronic world. The future coliseum pits imaginary horrors against the audience’s capacity for astonishment. I’m intimidated through serious discussion of previously unthinkable atrocities. I continue to watch.

### **Nonfiction: science and fiction**

Would the Arab tyrant be simply assassinated or would he in anger let loose a flood of oil into the Persian Gulf and set it aflame? Would he sabotage water supplies? Would he contaminate the atmosphere? Would he fire chemical weapons at children? The scenes, though imagined, became debatable

possibilities for the audience. Speculation framed the war with the horror that advanced technology might be competently opposed with madness. Madness made the enemy invulnerable. The greatest superior force could only add to the madness to create an absurd victory over itself. Then when the enormities did happen, we learned of them within a scientific [hypothesis, test, conclusion] methodology. This added method to madness. Science rode in like the cavalry but contributed to the massacre till it was over.

What can I think of the spontaneous conjectures followed by the scientific explanations? Is this what I want, what entertains me, what educates me? Inform me, I ask the anchors, am I more American by birth or by television? This mixture of science and speculation clears the innocence from the airwaves.

### **Rhetoric and reality**

President Bush was on the phone with Gorbachev, Mulroney, Mitterand; President Bush awakened at Camp David: Israel was hit again. President Bush wrote the prelude to this war and he introduced the necessity to fight. Without him there wouldn't be a *War in the Persian Gulf* on one channel, or *The Gulf War* on another, or *Showdown in the Gulf* on a third. Through government and business, Bush's presidency offered this powerful but philosophically impoverished nation a chance to learn technological skills by letting the military teach and furnish experience and fund further education. He was the head of an overwhelming social administration which offered money and prestige and solutions for the nation. This was a just war. It was not about oil and power; it was about not letting a madman get away with aggression. The President's script called for escalating suspense and triumphant retribution against the evil Saddam Hussein. Like notes next to paintings, the explanations entitled the works of war. The President's philosophy commissioned this entire audiovisual production of the Gulf War.

### **Poetic life and death**

Language with the works — in bloody reality and then on cleared video — the Gulf War as a post-literary spectacle scaled back to prosaic briefings. News-people and politicians and soldiers star in their epic as real as poetry can be: It is life and death carried on precisely as if it weren't life and death but the ideals of life and death. Though no one can voice an epic poem in a culture no longer primarily oral much less literary, everyone can live as if their life were epic. It's privately perfect semiotics. Signs and signifieds cohere in

one's epic life poem. Life idealizes poetry; epic poetry idealizes life. Let the interviews begin. Some soldiers discriminate between the real and the ideal but others do not, and for them, war means live literature — live epic poetry in full living color. That's the transcendence available in poetry and in real life: communal and historical rhetoric shapes one's acts even unto death. One goes poetically to one's destiny.

Total rhetoric leads citizens to align with their soldiers in an integral conflict. The print, television and radio media in their continuity interject similar headlines about the war. Maps on the screen are matched with maps on the front page. The commentary on the air parallels the commentary on the page. The enemy has their whole version of the truth; we have ours. It is total: society vs. society. Or so it seems.

Journalists get along without blood in their language. They sell news and I go for it, a gripping documentary, a reality our language brings which is not over and won't be until death. Journalists don't tell you this. Even if they knew, they can't tell you all they don't tell you. It's not their job. Poets and soldiers do that sort of subtle and bloody work.

Journalists are cameras with voices. Their employers program their words as they program their pictures — program both in the sense of ordering and in the sense of presenting. If journalists are extensions of their employers, what am I watching and listening to but a post-literary spectacle orchestrated with all due spontaneity by a responsive and responsible media. Without any threat to their collaboration with political power, they continue their words and pictures as if these were the life and death occurrences of the war. The programming of the journalists, the programming of the soldiers, what am I watching but the program running its course. What am I expecting to happen? I'm programmed by my watching.

### **Technological timing**

The temporal space that moving images offer is electronic-culture's most interesting perspective. It is precisely that television can space temporal phenomena like language that gives it such force in our novelty-ridden age. In a prior issue (4:1) of *Visible Language*, Walter J. Ong offered in "Comment: Voice, Print, and Culture" that language as sound "is not only perishable but always actually perishing. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. When I pronounce the word 'existence,' by the time I get to the '-tence' the 'exis-' is gone and has to be gone. I can not stop a sound and still have a sound, as I might stop a moving picture projector and have a

still picture on the screen." Yet if we hear sound as the speed of the rolling cameras, we do not hear a sound and see an image as separate events. Of course we can analytically, but experientially the sound and image are constantly moving even if still.

Ong is right; yet compare the stills of video with the still lifes of painting. Not like paintings which are finished, still shots are felt as if they ought to be continuing. The moving picture apes moving sound, and together they go off to do their work on the mind. A camera differs from a brush in that temporal expectation. Language tied to a new alphabet of video frames leads to the spatial-temporal design of continuing messages.

### **History, please be seated.**

With daily measurements broadcast media replace history. There's no time for the past, the present engulfs everything. Media replace history the way our bodies do, subtly incorporating our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents . . . and our own aging while continuing along in a present. Everyday we get the news and like a big wall calendar each day's coverage fills one block's worth and we move on with a fresh day's events. If history once had meaningful themes, broadcast reporting jump cuts those themes and makes our understanding more of a vicarious witnessing of diurnal flux than of an actual participant in humanity. Watching these climatic moments on television allows me to see the making of history, but not to see it as part of history. History as known since the Renaissance has vanished.

Why do I feel so ambivalent toward the media of television, radio and print? Am I nostalgic for the grand texts of history? Am I addicted to the blindness which the media offer as a substitute for personal investigations, intimate relationships, subjective philosophy? How is the daily material world to enter so largely into my mental world without media mediation? Is it mediation or is it all there is, and is the truth behind the news unreachable and unknowable and delusory? It seems to me finally that the news of the world is only news, video phantoms not at all coherent with my personal world.

### **Post-postscripted**

For the United States the war is over. Media analysis began and rather quickly ended. Obviously nothing undoes what happened and all analysis is an afterthought, the closest we ever get to history. Commentators (like those on television or me) can hardly confront their own failure let alone change history.

Yet without counselors throughout this Persian Gulf struggle, the people were left with the post-literary spectacle as produced. No poets and no philosophers have the intimate contact and automatic respect people associate with those in the media. By ignoring such spirits, the media offer themselves and their experts as substitutes in a monopoly of thought.

Marshall McLuhan's devout Catholicism and reluctant Canadian identity helped him to discern the invisible global village. Now when the village stations are tuned into the coliseum and the network coverage guards the public mind as if it were a stadium of juvenile enthusiasts, villagers can hardly imagine anything but winning and losing.

This news about the news is bad indeed. It cannot help but make a spectacular fool of itself and us. Many have become addicted to blindness and can no longer see without our screens.

in relation to int

typography ...

**Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl** edits and publishes this journal and is an associate professor of design at the Illinois Institute of Technology's Institute of Design. She is currently writing a book, in the tradition of Moholy-Nagy's *Vision in Motion*, covering both the history and present thought at the Institute of Design from 1955 and into the future.

Institute of Design, IIT  
10 West 35th Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60616

*Visible Language* 28.2  
Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl, 172-192  
© *Visible Language* 1994  
Rhode Island School of Design  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903