

TV TIME AND CATASTROPHE, OR BEYOND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE OF TELEVISION

Patricia Mellencamp

US network television is a disciplinary time machine, a metronome rigorously apportioning the present, rerunning TV history, and anxiously awaiting the future. The hours, days, and television seasons are serialized, scheduled, and traded in ten-second increments modeled on the modern work week—day time, prime time, late night, or weekend. Time itself is a gendered, hierarchized commodity capitalizing on leisure. Along with selling public time and service for private homes (paradoxically over an electromagnetic spectrum which "belongs to the people"), TV quantifies the body, collectively imagined by the networks as "the audience"—measured by statistics, demographics, and people meters, correlated with supermarket purchases, and bartered according to calculations of time spent/money made. (Subcultural, in-person studies of specific local audiences depict other, idiosyncratic versions of the TV homebody, rephrasing the network obsession with "shares.") The expenditure of time, in contrast to cinema's tallies of box office attendance receipts (and spatial aesthetics), is what counts. Our time is money. Television is a machine capitalizing on the fear of the passage of time—as aging and death; like sponsors for whom time is money, we can also buy or stop time.

TV's "flow" of entertainment is an economics, including libidinal, which resembles Newtonian time—an old-fashioned view of history as relatively static, slowing changing, a notion emblemized by Darwin. Along with its origin in tourism—reportedly Raymond Williams came up with "flow" in

a San Francisco hotel room—the structural model has another US lineage, a pragmatist dimension, from William James and others who argued around 1890 that time was a flux rather than a sum of discrete units, that human consciousness was a stream rather than a configuration of separate faculties; James wrote in 1894: "Consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up into bits . . . it is nothing jointed; it flows. . . . A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors . . . let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness."¹

(A recent two-part commercial for Excedrin demonstrates the confident hold of flow, of continuity rather than rupture. In part one, a man with a headache takes an aspirin, seemingly a conclusion; but after two ads and station promos, the commercial returns like a program, incorporating the time lapse into the sell and brief narrative: two minutes later, the man's headache is gone. The interruption itself has been fragmented, mimicking conventions of program and flow. This tactic is practiced in a different way by the Ragu spaghetti sauce commercials which are miniature sit-coms, replete with laugh tracks and applause, planned as a long-running series. Television or publicity is one step ahead of its theorists; theory is humbled, taken from the realm of academia into popular culture, made accessible and parodic; our cultural objects are, like physics' unpredictable atoms or terrorists, moving, unstable targets.)

Turn-of-the-century Joycean figurations of time split public time, the time of crowds—the newly instituted world standard time which crossed national boundaries like the wireless, regulating war, railroads, and masses alike—from private time which, like memory, was capricious; both added simultaneity to successive time. Freud's theory of childhood and memory elucidates this temporal model, perfectly applicable to television programming; TV reruns and remakes Freud's "repetition compulsion": "Theoretically, every earlier state of content could thus be restored to memory again even if its elements have long ago exchanged all their original connections for more recent ones."² For Freud, as for Newton, Darwin, and reruns of *I Love Lucy*, time is embedded in our embryonic beings . . . in which every experience leaves a trace.

However, the memories TV recalls via constant reruns, remakes, and parody, the past it recreates, rarely summon or echo personal experience, what Benjamin in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," referring to Bergson's "theory of experience" and Proust, called involuntary memory; rather, TV schedules memories of television, perhaps, as Benjamin argues, resulting in an "atrophy" of experience. TV's peculiarly democratic past is infrequently idiosyncratic; as exemplified by *Leave It to Beaver* and the return of June Cleaver in name to *Roseanne*'s promo and in body to *Baby Boom*, and by the appearance of TV game show history on the second episode of *Tattinger*'s embodied as the legit, New Yorkers Kitty Carlisle (*I've Got a Secret*) and Arlene Francis (*What's My Line?*) looking exactly as they did in the fifties and making bad puns, TV's history personally, parodically be-

longs to everyone. "Therefore Proust, summing up, says that the past is 'somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us). . . . As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die or whether we never encounter it.'"³ Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, came upon the material object, the old photograph of his mother as a child, before he died.

TV is rarely the material object setting off involuntary (personal) memory, causing us to assimilate "the information it supplies as part of [our] own experience." "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past."⁴ Rather than this amalgam of involuntary/voluntary memory, shifting from conscious to unconscious, from collective to individual past, in the realm of experience—as Marguerite Duras did in *The Lover*, or as occurred during the twenty-fifth-year commemoration of Kennedy's assassination—television's "intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader."⁵

TV triggers memories of TV in an endless chain of TV referentiality. The newspaper techniques Benjamin cites are applicable to TV: "brevity, comprehensibility, and above all, lack of connection between the individual news items."⁶ Instead of experience and memory, television's past, whether funny or not, evokes laughter and distance; it is a dissociated, dated history, out of sync with the present, with nothing, now, to do with us—it is over and thus, paradoxically, ahistorical or nostalgic—at least for most critics. With its raw appeals to and inscriptions of affect, television is a medium of remembrance more than memory: "The function of remembrance," Reik writes, "is the protection of impressions; memory aims at their disintegration. Remembrance is essentially conservative, memory is destructive."⁷ TV enacts the contradiction of destructive conservation.

However, Benjamin's model of history as revolutionary or catastrophic exists as an inside premise of television's rhetoric. Like Proust who "immediately confronts this involuntary memory with a voluntary memory, one that is in the service of the intellect," or Benjamin in his encounters with the everyday or artifacts of popular culture which set off memories of, for example, the Berlin of his childhood, and in his formulations of time in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," we can analyze the present of television through our personal, generational, and intellectual histories—a "dialectical" or materialistic analysis which might "blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework [which] is preserved . . . and at the same time cancelled,"⁸ what I call, following Freud's cue, television's overriding process of creation/cancellation. (For "specific work," we might substitute "program"; for "lifework," "series.") Like Benjamin's famous for-

mulation, TV partially gives us "a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time."⁹

This conception of the eruption of the past into the present as a simultaneity is inflected by Freud's model of shock which, along with the Soviet revolution, influenced Benjamin:

To articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger . . . fashion is a tiger's leap into the past. . . . The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one. . . . Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock . . . a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.¹⁰

While TV is usually a tiger's leap into fashion, a medium of remembrance rather than memory, it operates, particularly during catastrophe coverage—"the configuration of shock"—"as if" there might be a revolutionary chance. Catastrophe coverage, "the time of the now," is represented as a moment when thinking stops, a moment of danger that might portend change, which paradoxically is both thrill and preclusion. To suggest mechanisms of this containment is the goal of this analysis which, perhaps parrotting Freud's tedious style of rephrasing or like the depleted TV coverage of parades and elections, unstylishly resorts to a determined repetition. (Could anything be more tedious than watching parades on television?)

Paralleling TV's temporal effects, anxiety is television's affect. If this is so, then we might consider shifting our analysis from theories of pleasure to include theories of unpleasure (and paradoxically, from constructs of work to models of leisure as work), moving *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, away from desire, lack, castration, Oedipus, the unconscious and toward anxiety (and Colonius), loss, separation, the conscious (and, for Freud, women).

Successive, simultaneous time, measured by regular, on-the-half-hour programming (a historical expansion of the 15-minute radio and early TV base program unit), indefinitely multiplied by cable and satellite transmission, hypostatized by familiar formats and aging stars in reruns and revision, trivialized by scandal and gossip, is disrupted by the discontinuity of catastrophe coverage. So-called heterogeneity or diversity ceases as do commercials and TV continuity time as we focus on a single event. My temporal model of television incorporates the imperfect and aging body addressed by TV (including plastic surgery, masquerade, and sexual difference) and speaks about gossip/scandal (including talk show "pluralism" and differentiation as difference) which are figured elsewhere.¹¹

Newton's project of charting an unchanging universe—the equivalent of plastic surgery—was doomed, as are our sagging, wrinkled bodies, by his own laws of gravity: the natural state of matter (at least for now) is chaos, disorder. Einstein and relativity sketched an artistic universe where

space is curved, the path of light is bent, and time is slowed. TV time of regularity and repetition, continuity and "normalcy," contains the potential of interruption, the thrill of live coverage of death events. It is here, in the potential and promise of disruption—a shift between the safe assurance of successive time and story and the break-in of the discontinuity of the real in which the future hangs in the balance, the intrusion of shock, trauma, disaster, crisis—that TV's spectatorial mechanism of disavowal, which is retroactive, operates most palpably. If a program begins off the half-hour, or we hear the alarm "We interrupt this regularly scheduled program," a catastrophe or political event has occurred;¹² that it is still not on the air reassures us that it was not a nuclear catastrophe, at least in the US. Our disasters require "continual coverage," nation over narrative; those of other countries are not worth a missed soap opera. Most critically, the US network trade of time for money is suspended during catastrophe coverage, formatted events too portentous for commercials; the news division's takeover of entertainment is also the daytime replacement of women by men. The break-in or disruption of continuity flow or narrative normalcy has rigid rules: in addition to the rare, unscheduled presidential address, or news conference, it must be economic (commercials, station IDs, or profits) or deathly. Imagine a mid-program break to the zoo, the classroom, or an art event.

Theories of catastrophe—mathematical (René Thom), psychoanalytic (Sigmund Freud), socio/geo/logical (the journal *Disasters*), historical materialist or dialectical (Benjamin), artistic (Andy Warhol in painting, Bruce Conner in film and sculpture, and Ant Farm in video), biblical (the catastrophists and TV evangelists), figural/aesthetic (Baudrillard and Derrida's "nuclear criticism"), and literal (US nuclear actions, testing, and policy)—are predicated on models of time and fear of death (functioning as denial, disavowal, and loss, of power/mastery). I have briefly referred to Benjamin and here have space for only the first three constructs, although the comparisons are intriguing.¹³ In fact, catastrophe discourses echo each other across history, context, and discipline in quite remarkable ways, with a political distinction which breaks down into two opposing categories: those that embrace and detail the paradox of contradiction (and discontinuity), and those premised on apocalyptic, evolutionary, but invisible answers or originary causes—Derrida, Baudrillard, Jimmy Swaggart and cohorts, the biblical catastrophists, and the US government. (Sociology tries to treadle both ways via empiricism.)

I.

René Thom's mathematical system of topology (presented in academic papers in the late 50s, with his book appearing in 1972) is a qualitative rather than quantitative way of analyzing change that is not smooth but rather discontinuous. Rather than a scientific theory, Thom's is an "art of

models."¹⁴ While this resonates of simulation, suggesting Baudrillard, who, like Thom, has the will to totalizing answers, Thom is undone by observation, along with the magnitude of his "text" which includes the everyday. "Catastrophe theory" is concerned with "sudden and discrete changes . . . the stability of forms, and the creation of forms."¹⁵ "Form" and "model" are crucial terms for his analysis of catastrophe—"jump behavior"¹⁶ resulting from a state of conflict. Catastrophe is a problem of "the succession of form," and relies on "local models" applicable to common, everyday experience. "Our everyday . . . may be a tissue of ordinary catastrophes, but our death is a generalized catastrophe."¹⁷ "Many phenomena of common experience [are] in themselves trivial . . . but is it not possible that a mathematical theory launched for such homely phenomena might, in the end, be more profitable for science?"¹⁸ His homely examples are cracks in a wall and the shape of a cloud which suggest a "structural stability" of recurrent, identifiable elements. I would add television to the list of the homely.

As this theory is dependent on form, so is my model of TV catastrophe—real events and also form historically turned into learned convention. For Thom, catastrophe occurs for "formal reasons,"¹⁹ is a process involving the creation or destruction of forms, their disappearance and replacement. As Woodcock and Davis point out, the models must depict both continuous and discontinuous change, summarizing the appearance and disappearance of stability: "To change discontinuously is to pass through non-equilibrium states." "The abrupt bursting of a bubble, the transition from ice at its melting point to water at its freezing point, the shift in the unconscious in the process of getting a joke or pun"²⁰ are examples of shifting moments of discontinuity—transformations which resemble linguistic shifters. Thom argues that these transitions are discontinuous because the intervening states of passage from one state to another are not stable. However, they are brief eruptions, as they are rare on television, in comparison to the time spent in stable states. "Jump behavior" is a state of unstable passage, signaled by the network news announcer's vocal break-in with a visual logo and the abrupt cut-away, *off the half-hour*, to the news studio and the anchor, a discontinuous shift from the taped and rehearsed into the live, irregular, and unpredictable which disrupts TV's "structural stability"—a catastrophe of TV "normalcy," continuity, and narrative. The pleasure of familiar repetition of the same as difference turns into the dangerous unpleasure of repetition, moving "beyond the pleasure principle." Many viewers of afternoon soap operas express their displeasure via the mail, angry that Cherilyn replaced thirty minutes of *One Life to Live*.

II.

As Thom's allusions to the double dealing of the joke work suggest, and as Benjamin argued, Freud rather snugly adheres to a catastrophe model.

Two texts, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1925–26) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, are central to my argument. Revising his position in 1926, Freud wrote: "I can no longer maintain this view . . . of the transformation of libido into anxiety."²¹ Rather, "anxiety is a reaction to a situation of danger" (128) predicated on a fear of "being abandoned by the protecting super ego" (130). Anxiety both is an "affect" ("every affect . . . is only a reminiscence of an event" [133]) and is "freshly created out of the economic conditions of the situation" (130)—conventions of catastrophe coverage, the event being covered, and audience response. We respond to TV interruptions announcing earthquakes, airline crashes, and nuclear accidents with an affect of anxiety, which TV can decide to exacerbate by "staying on the air," eradicating the regularly scheduled entertainment, a narrative catastrophe. Anxiety is "something that is felt, . . . a very marked character of displeasure," (132) unlike tension, pain, or mourning—although these are later stages of catastrophe coverage. Anxiety is a "physiological, motor manifestation" based on "an increase of excitation which produces . . . displeasure and . . . finds relief through acts of discharge" (133).

The historical and crucial difference between Benjamin, Freud, and television is that television is shock and therapy; it both produces and discharges anxiety. Whereas for Benjamin shock came from the public "crowd" of modernity (and historical events), and for Freud the experience or affect was, with the critical exception of the war neuroses, individuated, TV administers shock and ameliorates the collective affects, imagined as shared, perhaps uniform. Via repetition, information, and constant coverage, TV is both source and solution.

The origin of anxiety is traced back to birth and then fear of castration, both of which are dismissed as explanations (to be honest, castration, Freud's favorite answer on *Jeopardy*, is abandoned rather sadly, or at least nostalgically); Freud finally settles on "missing someone who is loved and longed for" (136) as his favored analysis—not an answer/cause he savors as he does the former. "Longing turns into anxiety" for the child (the subject of psychoanalysis). "The situation, then, which it regards as a 'danger' and against which it wants to be safeguarded is that of non-satisfaction, of a growing tension due to need, against which it is helpless." In relation to the imperfect body addressed by commercials and explanations of the causes and even "facts" of catastrophe, TV preys on/creates dissatisfaction, all the while staying on the air, waiting, repeating. In this "situation of non-satisfaction the amounts of stimulation rise to an unpleasurable height without its being possible for them to be mastered . . . or discharged" (137). Zapruder's film footage of Kennedy's assassination was endlessly repeated; the thirty-second *Challenger* explosion was rerun hundreds of times—attempts at mastery and discharge.

Like the rest of Freud, sexual difference circulates; however, in this text, there is a fascinating, albeit awkwardly reluctant if not begrudging, reversal—an almost whispered inscription of female subjectivity: "It is precisely

in women that the danger-situation of loss of object seems to have remained the most effective." And, sounding like an ad copy man on Madison Avenue, aware of feminism: "All we need to do is to make a slight modification in our description of *their* [my emphasis] determinant of anxiety" which, he asserts, is the loss not merely of an object but of "the object's love" (143). Given the "determinant" of "their" or female anxiety (unstated though it is, from the mother's subjective position), Freud cautions us to "put ourselves on guard against over-estimating that factor [castration] since it could not be a decisive one for the female sex, who are undoubtedly more subject to neuroses than men."²² While I doubt the neurotic claim, castration is not decisive—for women and this theory of anxiety.

Along with backhandedly privileging women, albeit neurotic females, there is another crucial distinction from pleasure, his theory of desire and the unconscious. In displeasure and anxiety, "the ego is the actual seat of anxiety" (140). In current grey-tone ads for telephone and computer systems, middle-management/aged men and a few discriminately placed women with furtive brows and worried glances haltingly, quizzically fret anxiously in piercing, abrupt closeups about their wrongly chosen business system while, *vérité* style, hand-held camera shots literally signify "high anxiety." (TV coopts yet another tactic of the counterculture, *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema, or hand-held video, for commodity culture as "art"—a double whammy recuperation.)

Thus, while one dominant model of psychoanalysis developed for cinema is based on the unconscious, the male subject, desire/castration/lack, and Oedipus, this construct shifts to include the ego, the female subject, love/loss, with a subjective, hesitant place reserved for mother (no small gain)—critical distinctions which, for me, go a long way toward theorizing the mechanisms of both the TV text and its audience—with, however, historical differences, including the permutation and rearrangement of everyday US life, politics, and culture by television.

If the "danger situation" changes, "the impulse [anxiety] will run its course under an automatic influence . . . the influence of the compulsion to repeat . . . as though the danger-situation that had been overcome still existed" (153). That everyday and catastrophic television rely on repetition (an economic "compulsion to repeat") like no other activity (or medium) except assembly-line production is not without consequence. The sheer repetition of coverage serves a hypothetical purpose of "as if"—operating on the pretense "that the danger-situation still existed." Even Freud's description of anxiety resembles television. For example, as Freud often does, he tacks on an intriguing addendum which relates "anxiety" to expectation—"anxiety about something. It has a quality of *indefiniteness* and *lack of object*." As with television itself, a central trait of catastrophe coverage is indefiniteness; coverage involves a search for the answer, the explanation—in short, the object. On a metaphorical level, indefiniteness and lack of object define television—electronic, erasable circuitry with no visible, material

base until transmitted. Freud differentiates "realist anxiety"—"about a known danger"—from "neurotic anxiety"—"a danger that has still to be discovered" (165). TV vacillates between realistic and neurotic coverage. The live, videotaped murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, rerun like the Zapruder film, triggered neurotic anxiety; Black Monday anchors awaited, like network vultures, a crash after the fall, prophesying back to 1929, the realist harbinger of the neurotic future.

To doggedly restate my earlier argument: Freud argues that "there are two reactions to real danger. One is an affective reaction, an outbreak of anxiety. The other is a protective action" (165). With its strategy of creation/contradiction/cancellation, TV is both the outbreak and the protective action, the latter accomplished by repetition, finding answers, and the rare result of assigning guilt. Like a doctor detailing medical procedures to a patient before and after surgery, information here provides a therapeutic service, a ritual akin to prayer or chanting. Cloaked as an epistémé, a desire to know, it soothes our anxiety, protecting us from fear. Thus, information, the *raison d'être* of coverage, becomes story, therapy, and collective ritual. Later it will be known as myth.

I can find no better description of catastrophe coverage than "anxiety is . . . an expectation of a trauma, and . . . a repetition of it in a mitigated form . . . expectation belongs to the danger-situation, whereas its *indéfiniteness* and *lack of object* belong to the traumatic situation of helplessness—the situation which is anticipated in the danger-situation" (166). Although TV situations are mainly comedy, the TV spectator anticipates, fears, then relishes the danger-situation: "a recognized, remembered, expected situation of helplessness. Anxiety is the original reaction to helplessness. . . . The ego . . . repeats it actively in a weakened version . . . what is of decisive importance is the first displacement of the anxiety-reaction from its origin in the situation of helplessness" (166–67). Expectation is displaced anxiety. We await catastrophe as the ultimate promise and noble dream of television—when time is open-ended, commercial-free, and we are helpless. However, the audience is not passive but expectant; agitated by TV, it partakes of masochism, is soothed by mundane ritual, and is contained by contradiction.

The place of "mother" and the resolute determinance for Freud of sexual difference suggest that the response will necessarily be different for men and women. Deleuze's work on masochism is helpful in this regard because he argues that the scenario or contract revolves around "mother." As Sonja Rein has so lucidly argued: "what is important in masochism is the desire to return to the mother . . . thus, the masochist demands that he be beaten in order that the image of his father in him . . . is diminished." However, as Rein points out, "What is important for Deleuze is the nature of the agreement made between the masochist and his torturer . . . the contract functions . . . to invest the mother image with the symbolic power of the law."²³ The image of the mother in catastrophe events does not function

as law—rather as loss; the image circulates within an economy of anxiety, not one of desire. Yet, like masochism, mother is at least subjectively there, albeit left over. However, the audience does make a contract with TV during catastrophe coverage, a painful ritual which mirrors masochistic (un)pleasure.

BABY JESSICA AND BLACK MONDAY

US TV was on disorder alert, in a frenzy of disequilibrium, anticipating a danger situation in October, 1987. Daytime entertainment was interrupted, punctuated by crises that failed to escalate, at least for the time being, into catastrophe. Issues were conflated and strangely gendered. Milwaukee was in a virtual frenzy of local news as a result of fires in the racially segregated core district—black children were dying by the dozens. The image of conflagration was lifted off by satellite and picked up in Sydney. Eventually, this local spectacle was analyzed in the newspapers as an issue of poverty, migration from the South, families living together in crowded, flimsy homes, without heat and using space heaters to keep warm, families headed by young women, without jobs or husbands. The families were black, the landlords were white.

After the hideous deaths of so many local black children (and the single solution of installing fire alarms!) the local, revved-up audience saw the blonde Baby Jessica emerge as a national star on Friday, October 16, in a TV nightmare of entrapment. TV kept breaking in; Connie Chung was not at the scene but more prestigiously at the catastrophe helm in New York, the throne of power, prestige, and stability usually occupied by anchormen—in this NBC case, Tom Brokaw, who was off for the weekend. While diagrams delineated Baby Jessica's (and our) Freudian nightmare, the camera focused on the rigging, a cable surrounded by men and media—in a Texas town, Midland, depleted by the US oil crisis, an image right out of *Radio Days* and the Depression, this time with a happy ending. There was little to see except the same cable and the passage of time; little to tell except the local story of the uncanny accident, teenage parenthood, and community heroism. Drilling miscalculations were delays prolonging the suspense and time of coverage. Once the classic story of dead or alive had begun, the networks couldn't quit; it was only a matter of time, which would tell. She was rescued alive, looking like a little mummy, on NBC just before *Miami Vice*.

The next day, the story of Baby Jessica shifted to surgical details—her damaged foot and face. The drama of the separation of mother and child continued, but added Nancy Reagan's breast, cancer, and gender to the surgical agenda. Enter the symbolic mother. The two dramas were positioned together in the newspapers; the female body became headlines, a front-page event. Baby Jessica and Nancy were stories of loss for women. Although the coverage was mediated by men, particularly the medical news

briefings, Connie Chung was one initial narrator; the female reporter covering Nancy wore a remarkably similar red dress. On Saturday, Jessica was "serious but stable." By Sunday's headlines, Nancy was fine, and Jessica's foot would be saved. (The Jessica story continued: the Oprah Winfrey show visited Midland with a program dedicated to Jessica, capitalizing on the bizarre *vis-à-vis* personal compassion. Later, participants in the rescue wrangled over monies for selling the rights to the story—organizing into unions for profits.)

The coverage and the events were the made-for-TV reenactment of *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*, including birth, loss, and several mothers—Jessica's teenage mother, Nancy Reagan, and Connie Chung. Along with helplessness, there was no visible object, only waiting, indefiniteness, and the expectation of either alive or dead. The weekend bodily drama of anxiety seemed suspiciously anachronistic (like the emergence of high-style Bakhin), a symptom of something else. Black Monday and the stock market plunge interrupted *Days of Our Lives*, the soap in the twelve noon slot, with another version of the fall and loss—this time of money, not mother/child. Tom Brokaw was back as NBC anchorman, trying to explain this crisis of capitalism via talking heads, shots of the New York Stock Exchange, Wall Street, and later, international exchanges.

While it was argued that the problem was electronic, set off by computer trading via satellite transmission across standardized international time zones, it was difficult for the US audience to believe that the world and business carried on while it slept. The stammering reports, interspersed irregularly throughout the day, revealed a dual dilemma—significant for cultural studies scholars as well as the sad yuppies who were interviewed en masse on PBS financial programs, stricken with grief at the loss of million-dollar condos, BMWs, and Porsches: (1) the inability to analyze electronic, computerized conditions of production and (2) the difficulty of imagining international, rather than nationally determined, boundaries, economic structures, times, and points of view. The ultimate catastrophe for television would be a crisis of capitalism, resulting in change, which might unravel or alter TV's economic/commercial base above which catastrophe coverage is a superstructural *raison d'être*. (For example, one reason for TV's rigid temporality is to notify advertisers of the seconds their ads will air; different times have different costs.)

It is not surprising that these four days revealed a very old-fashioned sexual hierarchy of power: with women on the side of babies and the body—the visible referent, and men aligned with money and technology—the invisible symbolic. Yet, perhaps this move of the surgical body from scandal magazines to the nightly news might portend a challenge to the propriety or decorum called power. Granted that Reagan's (Ronald's) colon and nose had been spotlighted previously, Nancy's breast took over the headlines. And hers was not the only newsworthy surgical breast in 1987 (as Jessica Hahn revealed).

While it has been theorized in philosophy and art since the early 1900s that simultaneity has replaced succession, that electronics has annihilated space and time and extended the present, we are still caught in our thinking about television around the turn of the century (which, given capitalism and the snug fit of a Freudian model, might be apt). The stock market coverage frantically tried to locate a place or context, and an object—like the sinking of the *Titanic*. If, as for Stephen Kern, the *Titanic* is a historical border between the present as a series of local events (local news coverage and horizon-to-horizon transmitting towers) and a simultaneity of multiple, distant events (network, nightly news, and satellite transmission), then we have entered another historical phase. If in the *Titanic* "we recognize with a sense near to awe that we have been almost witness of a great ship in her death agonies," our history might be determined by what we cannot see.²⁴ In the 1987 crisis, electronic technology was no longer only the means of transmission and salvation but was also, like the *Titanic*, part of the problem—and an invisible, international, simultaneous crisis at that. As with time and money, the stock and trade of television, there was no stable, tangible object, only effects and victims (who made personal appearances on TV or committed suicide—an exaggerated re-creation of 1929). Our history might be determined by aftereffects.

III.

The field of disaster studies is a collaboration between academic sociology and behavioral psychology, sponsored by federal and local governmental agencies, with textbook titles such as *Organized Behavior in Disaster*, *The Disaster Handbook*, and *System Responses to Disaster* and professional journals such as *Disasters*. The field also provides a model for TV catastrophe, addressing a problem of contemporary theory as well—the conflation of natural with technological. "The problem of taxonomy is the most pressing issue confronting the field at this time."²⁵ *Behavior and Attitudes under Crisis Conditions* defines disasters as "forces of nature" and catastrophe as "man-made hazard actualizations"—the latter a good definition of TV coverage. "This text divides disasters accordingly: Natural (eighteen), Technology (nuclear, building collapses, energy shortfall), Discrete Accidents (with beginnings and endings, such as toxic fumes, industrial/transportation accidents), Socio-political (war, assassinations, hostage taking, terrorism), Epidemics and Disease."²⁶

The conflation of natural/technological by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in Washington is predicated on response—a "response to a crisis is phenomenological evidence of a crisis, which is dependent on perception which abruptly changes normalcy to crisis."²⁷ Also, as with the stock market coverage, "there are cumulative implications of trends of threat." No matter what the event, the response—termed "crisis expectant" and "crisis surge"—is uncannily similar and predictable. The public will (1)

seek information, (2) confirm warnings, (3) tend to evacuate, and (4) unite in groups, particularly families, to ease tension. However, rather than evacuate, TV urges us to stay home, to continue watching. Meaghan Morris argues that the ultimate catastrophe for the audience is silence on TV (which might occur if Los Angeles earthquakes into the Pacific Ocean during entertainment programming; we feared this had happened in San Francisco when transmission of the 1989 World Series was interrupted by a major quake); however, the ultimate catastrophe for TV networks would be coverage without an audience—either a ratings dilemma or a sign that disaster had eradicated viewers; for TV, both are economic issues.

Like Thom and Freud, disaster studies position "normalcy" against crisis, arguing that "daily life is dependent on continuities, on repetition . . . a disruption of normalcy produces stress," "either by the event or the perception of a threat."²⁸ Along with Thom's emphasis on form and structural stability, disaster studies add perception, as does Freud, a response not dependent on the type of event. For me, the conventions of catastrophe coverage, mapped over the event, trigger and sustain audience response, and hence are determining. These conventions can transform a personal accident such as Baby Jessica's into a national catastrophe watched by millions. Disaster studies emphasize temporality: the timing of crisis events "cannot be encompassed."²⁹ Catastrophe coverage is open-ended; it ceases only when it has an answer or becomes exhausted from repetition. Once on the air, Connie had to keep going, although there was little new to tell.

A contradiction emerges in these manuals: disaster analyses, like the stock market coverage, are predicated on the belief that people will panic. (TV participated in the stock market panic, creating a "crisis surge.")³⁰ Yet, studies repeatedly demonstrate that this is resolutely not usually the case; instead of panicking, people confirm, reconfirm, and often deny the message. TV, believing that it is in control and we are not, is a source of reconfirmation; rarely does it deny—if it did, we would not need to watch. Disaster subcultures are people with experience in "repetitive situations,"³¹ like the TV viewer familiar with conventions. That a subculture of catastrophe operates via TV is demonstrated by tele-evangelism and the creation of midday "newsbreaks" which combine the style of catastrophe break-ins (by a news announcer at a studio desk in New York or Washington) with the temporality of commercials and announcements. When a "newsbreak" comes on, Cher might have been married or England destroyed. Via metonymy and remembrance, catastrophe style, like avant-garde techniques on MTV, has become regular yet unsettling flow.

In the famous 1920 Halifax case study which poetically and rigorously analyzed the harbor explosion and fire that decimated that city, Prince points to the difference between catastrophe and crisis—"an instant when change one way or another is impending. Crises are those critical moments which . . . are big with destiny . . . the term . . . [precedes] change."³² Prince criticizes the failure to distinguish between that which occasions the crisis

and the crisis itself—a dilemma for television, and my argument, which conflates the two. For him, "crises . . . precede catastrophes . . . and catastrophes . . . generate the crisis-situation . . . the disintegration of the normal by shock and calamity" (21). After noting that change is only a premium in science, his crucial argument is that "catastrophe always means social change. There is not always progress" (32). TV mitigates against change by equating crisis and catastrophe and defusing both via repetition. Unlike the Halifax disaster which "smashed through social division, traditions,"³³ TV upholds institutions via containment. Catastrophe threatens "conventionality, custom, and law"—which TV, as exemplar, defends. In an argument remarkably similar to Freud's, Prince argues that victims repeat the initial shock, "reproducing the tragic or terrible scenes," deny them, or commit suicide.³⁴

Prince accords import to communication agencies which set a good example that can be imitated. Heroes, what he calls a "disaster protocracy" (53), emerge—"often men were surprised at their own power for prolonged effort under the excitement of catastrophe."³⁵ These heroes are the anchors or the chance reporters on the scene—established stars or emerging stars. Prince cites the "stimulus" of the lookers-on: "citizens of Halifax knew they were not unobserved. . . . Halifax simply had to make good. She was bonded to the world" (78–79). However, one notion is anathema to television: "A disaster event happens in a particular social context . . . our primary focus is on the community as the locus of the event and as the social system that copes with the physical impact." What media events do to "disaster events" is erase "the particular social context"—like "the society of the spectacle."

KENNEDY AND CHALLENGER

The assassination of John F. Kennedy set the pattern for catastrophe coverage. Zapruder's amateur/tourist movie footage was endlessly rerun on television and scrutinized for clues. Because it had been recorded, the image, aligned with reality and tragic drama, would yield an answer, a truth, if, as with the riddle of the Sphinx, we could only get closer, deconstruct it. A shift from cinema to television was dramatized by the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby, live on television and rerun.

It could be argued that the assassination, not initially covered by the networks, was the first and last time for a united television audience; everyone compulsively remembered and minutely described, again and again, like reruns, where *they were* in real life, and where they were in relation to television, representation, a cultural moment when television and our daily lives were still separate but merging. While our emotional experience of the event came from television, our bodies remained distinct from television; "meaning" occurred to us in specific places. This is comparable to Benjamin's use of Freud and "shock": "Perhaps the special achievement

of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents."

Along with a precise time as a shock defense, viewers remembered where they were when they heard the news—a place contiguous to a television set. We took our grief into public places and watched TV together. The assigning of a time at the cost of content for Benjamin "would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into a moment that has been lived" (163). The assassination—"a moment that has been lived" between individual memory and collective ritual, a moment that tended toward destruction rather than remembrance—and its coverage marked the passage from experience to information (the physical to simulation), from the *public crowd* as the source of shock ("collisions . . . nervous impulses . . . in rapid succession, like . . . electric energy" [175], an "experience" of the "passerby" which corresponds to "what the worker experiences at his machine") (176) to the *private audience* of television; in the 60s, we were still on the threshold. (Benjamin's argument, from Sergei Eisenstein [and Pavlov's reflex psychology along with William James], that "perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle" [175] in film marks a cultural shift from public to private, from work to leisure, from film to television.) We told stories about our personal experience of the event, set off by a film of the real; after this, we would speak of television and representation. (*Eternal Frame*, a performance/videotape by Ant Farm, restages the *film* of the assassination [and its reception] as simulation.)³⁶

The constant coverage of the assassination was cited as realizing television's potential for collective identification—television's democratic dream that by informing us and setting a good, calm, and rational example via the protocratic anchors, the populace will be united, soothed, and finally ennobled by repetition of and patient waiting for information. As I argued earlier, TV administers and cushions shocks, is both the traumatic shock and Freud's protective "shield" which "both protects against excess excitation . . . and also transmits excitation from the outside to the inside of the organism."³⁷ This double function of "transmission and protection" is temporal, and is accomplished by narration—"temporizing the traumatic effects of an excess of energy . . . the death drive as another name for a story," according to Samuel Weber (145). Like the joke technique (described by Freud as an envelope or container), TV envelops the shock, delivering and cushioning us from stimuli which it regulates in acceptable levels—like the dosage of microwave ovens—turning news or shocks into story and tragic drama. Rather than an excess of stimuli which set off for Benjamin private recollection and memory, such as the assassination coverage initially provided, TV administers then defuses stimuli in containing doses.

Television promises shock and trauma containment over time via narration of the real. As Weber states, Freud's analysis of abstract time was

connected to the psychic real as an *aftereffect* of events. This aftereffect is separate yet necessarily dependent on the event; examples are the "dream, in the narration that disfigures it, the joke, in the laughter that displaces it," citations which resemble Thom. Like "The Return to Space," as the October, 1988, *Discovery* flight was titled by CBS, "aftereffects repeat the event they follow, but they also alter it and it is precisely this process of repetitive alteration that renders the event psychically 'real'" (147). The stories do not repeat merely an event but each other, in a sequence that is both successive and simultaneous. Catastrophe coverage, rendering events psychically real, is "repetitive alteration" or disfigural representation resulting in aftereffects which read back, creating further disfiguration, in Weber's view. This process is stoppable for Freud, in the end, by myth and eros—a conclusion to which I will return.

Freud's analysis of consciousness as precisely "not consciousness of anything, and even less . . . self-consciousness," might describe the role of the anchor—along with repetition and narration, another means of cushioning excess. Covering catastrophes is the ultimate test of the top anchorman's mettle, his stamina measured by words, information, and calm demeanor. (The Los Angeles news announcer who panicked during the 1987 earthquake and ducked under his desk miserably failed anchorman protocol, becoming a joke for late-night comics.) Television fancies that if we have enough news, if it stays on the air with us, a vigil like sitting up with a sick or dying friend, we will behave like adults. Or, the stock market coverage of "Black Monday" demonstrates that television can also, like computer trading, panic us, creating a need for television. What was innovative then has become protocol which we have come to expect and which plays into and creates those expectations.

The *Challenger* catastrophe (January 28, 1986) exploded the modernist myth of technology (and also the Western frontier myth of the necessity of humans for space exploration) as unifying a dispersed audience. In this case the national audience was symbolically fragmented by images such as the unseeable and horrific imaginary nightmare of the human astronaut bodies, knowing and alive, for seconds plunging at unfathomable speed into oblivion. The technological catastrophe, our telescopic, distanced view from outside of an abstract speck, collided with the chance, personal drama of a mother and father at the liftoff watching—and then, in an instance and a glance, *knowing*, turning away, their teacher/daughter/mother blown up in space, unnecessarily. We were truly in the position of voyeurs, catching a glimpse of something private we shouldn't have seen and, in contrast to the Kennedy assassination, unable to really see what happened. We saw only the beautiful "aftereffect," the clouds of white, billowing smoke against a deep blue sky, reminiscent of the spectacular clouds after a nuclear explosion. This image of Christa McAuliffe's mother and father staged Freud's trauma of separation, as the images of Jacqueline Kennedy in the

motorcade car and beside the coffin restaged mother-child and loss. Mourning, with affects different from anxiety, was a later stage of coverage/response.

In keeping with the myth of the frontier which has dominated the US space program, MacAuliffe was the adventurous schoolmarm of the Western genre, an Easterner who had won a contest to bring civilization to space via the one-room satellite schoolhouse, conquering space and winning audiences with knowledge. Represented as mother/daughter/teacher/ama-teur, she dominated coverage before and after the explosion, an unusual situation of a woman being the focus of news and then catastrophe. That she was more like us increased (1) our identification and (2) our shock: because a mother of young children was aboard, we believed that the shuttle missions were sure-fire, foolproof occurrences. However determined by being "the first," the press became fascinated with a woman's work and home life which was news before her death became an event. (Notice how few obituaries are of women—like their lives, women's deaths are not as newsworthy as men's.)

While verbal facts and accounts detailing the horror of error and technological failure were piled onto that distant fragmentation to explain it scientifically, we imagined from the audio tapes the personal nightmare and terror inside the shuttle. Did they know? For how long? Afterward, the ocean floor was combed in mourning, the fragments of bodies and machine were brought back to create a funeral pyre—to retrieve, and later reconstruct, the real.

Standing by in Concord to record MacAuliffe's students celebrating her lift-off and subsequent space lecture, TV reran her death back in time, showing the initial register of the students' shock, disbelief, grief; twenty-five TV news crews descended on the town afterward and recorded weeping schoolchildren and trauma management—a pedagogical model for audiences of TV catastrophe, taking us from anxiety to grief and vicarious mourning, with psychological advice. The shift into mourning and pedagogy, for example, the historical details of a presidential funeral in Kennedy's case, is a significant part of the reassurance stage of catastrophe coverage, fear turning to grief, acceptance of loss, and a return to normalcy.

NASA was investigated as a trial of errors rather than murder, with videotaped evidence endlessly repeated. Seeing was not believing in this instance. While disavowal could not function in either tragedy as reassurance for onlookers or spectators, the difference between these two events is profound, and historical: the horror of Kennedy's assassination was in what we saw; the terror of *Challenger* was what we could not see—the bodies, the premises of the entire space program, the loss of technological superiority. The concern after the assassination was who shot Kennedy; the worry after *Challenger* was about communication satellites and space insurance—corporate purveys—and US space potency. The irony was that we saw so little of a communication mission for corporate profits which

included product tie-ins. Spiegel's 1986 catalogue advertised an indoor/outdoor *Challenger* tent where children could watch MacAuliffe's lecture.

CBS's "Return to Space" in October, 1988, reenacted the scenario of *Challenger*, remembering that primal scene of which this was the successful and professional remake. Countdown was scheduled for a lowly weekday morning (rather than a cynical prime-time slot), with a huge live audience of Florida tourists. Sitting behind a sleek desk in the modern studio mise-en-scène with Dan Rather was a former astronaut; rather than the usual tech talk, he described his *feelings* of anxiety when walking to the launch pad and sitting in the cockpit during lift-off. A teacher and a finalist in the contest that MacAuliffe had won was interviewed along with his students, remembering and rewriting the horror of that earlier scene; these students were older, fewer. The explosion footage was rerun as the danger situation—this horrific image had served as a trailer, rerun for two years to prepare us for the anxiety of this event. While the digital clock in the lower corner of the screen counted down, calm Dan reminded us of his and our anxious states. I was completely nervous—exactly as I was supposed to be. As in the second 1988 presidential debate, anxiety was a precondition or lure (or publicity) rather than a result of viewing. Without a catastrophe, the affects of coverage had been simulated by reruns, reminiscences. The return, both sequel and remake, resulted in mastery by NASA and the networks, who truly dazzled us with technique.

A telescopic, wide-angle zoom of the launch pad, clearly shot from a heavenly angle, opened the enclosed, framed, tiled broadcast which included *commercials*—blatant clues that they expected no problems. A concluding zoom of the launch from this same godly view was poetically repeated at the end. The critical seventy-three seconds were clearly and multiply visible this time; the editing, camera placement, and clarity were technically remarkable, efficiently scripted. The visual and verbal style was rehearsed, not catastrophic—we should have relaxed. Blue-screened or keyed in as backdrop, the rumbling, fiery rocket, shuttle, and launchpad appeared to be right behind Dan's desk, with coverage dominating or equated with its subject, visible through a "picture window." There were no glitches by NASA or CBS; the smooth professionalism, resembling an error-free simulation rather than live coverage, and a performed public emotionalism akin to the nightly news, as much as the successful mission, reassured us that the US had not lost its standing in technocracy or in space. The two-year run of the explosion ended its long engagement (only to return, further contained, as a made-for-TV movie).

One protagonist of the initial drama was resolutely absent but determinantly figured as memory—Christa MacAuliffe (the aftereffect that was contained, erased as women are in TV [and newspaper] news). There were no women on board this flight. While one critic has argued that the sick jokes, mainly focused on MacAuliffe, which circulated after the *Challenger* tragedy testified to regard for and identification with her, I suggest the

opposite, more in line with Freud. ("Where did MacAuliffe spend her summer vacation? All over Florida.")³⁸ Like the objects of Freud's jokes which are women, she is strangely at fault, guilty. While NASA took the rap, an unprofessional, a space amateur, is also to blame. When women assume subjectivity in masculine enclaves, claiming an equal if not superior status (as Joan Rivers did on Carson), disloyalty (not a better job) or disaster is the result. Thus, it is logical to banish women from that endeavor, at least momentarily. Women, as leftovers or aftereffects, become the objects of jokes or malicious gossip, their asserted subjectivity the real target, analyzed, as with Lucy, as lack of ability.

Baudrillard's prognoses of cultural elided with nuclear catastrophe are, like postmodernism, linked to or derived from television, particularly its instantaneous capacity to present "live" coverage of death events, both shocking and mollifying the audience, mediating and exacerbating the effects of the real—rerun and transformed into representation. We can await "live" catastrophe on TV, signaled by ruptures in the flow of programs, a disruption of time, TV's constancy. Catastrophe argues for the importance, the urgent value, the truth of television and its watching which will be good for us—providing catharsis or, better, mastery via repetition of the same which is fascinating, mesmerizing.

Catastrophe coverage thus functions *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an essentially verbal rendering of "fort/da" hinged on a "compulsively repeated" visual detail (Baby Jessica's cable, the thirty-second explosion, rifle shots) to acknowledge then alleviate fear and pain—the audience and the anchor, like the child, achieving mastery over loss, the departure, return, and, perhaps in the end, control of the mother, depending on who is throwing the ball. Perhaps masochistically, pleasure, aligned with death rather than life, a ritual determined by the mother rather than the father, comes from that game of repetition, with catastrophe as potent TV, coded as exception, yet one that doesn't come from TV techniques which are usually of extremely poor quality—shaky, minimal, indecipherable images, awkward editing glitches, missed cues and connections, filler speech and delimited language, endless repetition of the same facts and simple arguments—like muzak, yet overwhelming narrative, regular programming as we wait, with the anchor, either for further events and analysis or a conclusion before TV normalcy can return.

In the attempt to theorize, I have ignored specificity in two areas: textual analysis of crisis coverage and the variations among the three major networks. Different disfigurements create different aftereffects. In *Nightly Horrors: Crisis Coverage by Television Network News*, Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs operate on the now axiomatic premise that US TV news is story or narrative in which the hero-motif is central as is melodrama. Their detailed content analysis of recent crises covered by NBC, CBS, and ABC, ranging from Jonestown to Three Mile Island, revealed variant patterns—what might be termed symptoms of ideology. NBC was more educational and

contextual, acceptant of "the human condition"; CBS emphasized technology, which was sometimes represented as a monster, and searched for the high-tech causes of failures. ABC had the greatest appeal to anxiety, running interviews with survivors and heroes and citations of victim tolls rather than emphasizing the facts of the stories, whereas CBS appealed to experts and factual detail. While NBC had more and variant sources and location shots, ABC tended to remain in the studio. NBC's pluralist approach was more assuring than alarming, with more "straight" news placed in context. ABC, in contrast, depicted helplessness, chaos; Ted Koppel's ABC reports often contributed to a narrative of chaos and frustration in which no one was in control. (That Koppel is now the very powerful and famous host of *Nightline* is not insignificant; the program grew, like Topsy, from temporary coverage of the hostage crisis, the permanent, regular institutionalization of catastrophe as news format and content rather than the reportage of catastrophe on the news or as a special event; it is still a crisis program.) CBS had narratives of diplomacy, with technology a recurring star and issue; NBC used colloquialisms in a low-key, conversational style.³⁹

Although Mary Ann Doane has recently defined TV catastrophe as technological catastrophe, a conclusion in line with CBS and a definition determined by the disaster event, I argue, as does Thom, that form, including temporality, inextricable from audience response (in line with Freud, Benjamin, and disaster studies), is the central determinant. No matter what the content, the form of the three networks tended toward similarity. That our crises are frequently technological is a historical argument. That the technological might serve as a symptom or cover-up of economics is also historical.

IV.

While Freud's is an apt theory for television, there are historical flaws: television addresses an older audience, a generational audience, not easily recapitulated, as is cinema, by childhood and Oedipus, Freud's focus. The Cold War was television's context, a history predicated on a defensive nuclear imaginary—an image of death that turned many of us into neurotics. The Cold War qualifies the interpretation of Freud as analyzed by Weber: "the very impulse that drove Freud beyond the pleasure principle to repetition, and beyond repetition to the death drive, also impels him to move beyond the death drive . . . toward a very different 'place' . . . in which the repetition of the same becomes the repetition of difference" (130). Although Weber's fatal conclusion of sexual difference, or death in the form of "the passive female" (134),⁴⁰ is not new or unimportant, as the dead MacAuliffe and pink-suited Jackie illustrate, Weber finds at the end of Freud's thought "a myth which counterbalances the death drive"—love stories, eros, myth.⁴¹

contradictions about TV, often shamelessly blatant about its equivocations—particularly regarding gender. Speaking overtly with a forked tongue to males and females in the audience, TV is just not as seamless as cinema. Yet, TV is trickier—"it is as though neither action had taken place, whereas in reality, both have."

TV pinpoints our loneliness by providing companionship, advice, consolation, prayer, and therapy, assuring us we are not alone by assembling audiences who have fun together. It materializes reality by simulation; ob-sesses with time while eradicating it; and repeats catastrophes which tell us that we are safe. TV catastrophes construct us as victims and onlookers or audience, a division replicated by interviews with emotional eyewitnesses or actual victims, intercut with the anchor's direct address to us; thus, we are held between shifting identifications with the emotive participants and the unemotive or "rational" anchor—linked to the safety of him—not them—on an investigative search for truth or an outpouring of human compassion, as is TV. In relation to victims, our response is an anti-identification, the relief of "not me" resulting in gratitude. It might be argued that catastrophe coverage functions to ensure our feelings of well-being and good fortune. This would hold true for anonymous victims and bystanders. Celebrities or public figures elicit *very* different responses, however. The assurance for the viewer of catastrophe is that it is happening, but elsewhere; or it already happened and is now historical, over. The tantalizing threat, the true danger of catastrophe, is the here and now; if it were happening to us, we wouldn't be watching television. We exist as vicarious participants whose presence is critical, acknowledged, and flattered, yet we are never in danger of being touched, seen, or heard; neither do we need to act (the only action TV requests is dialing the telephone). Television's participatory nonparticipation of direct looks and address, structures of the joke and parody which incorporate us, the presence of on-screen audiences, laugh tracks, viewer mail, telephone polls, pleas for money, measuring us and charging accordingly, is the ultimate reassurance of our status as safe outsider, yet holding an opinion as involved, concerned, informed citizens. We are safe, at home, perhaps in bed, away from the crowd.

However, television is a medium of containment with a significant difference from nuclear discourse—TV invokes the palpable body, often female, which nuclear policy and criticism have disavowed, eradicated. Although the network "news" division is still a strong masculine preserve, TV's address within "entertainment" incorporates women as half-subject, half-object in need of physical improvement and domestication, but also critically as subjects. This enunciation, and its specific textual practices amidst the changing conditions of production which increasingly but sparingly include women as producers, writers, and directors as well as performers, bears careful scrutiny. Instead of merely being satisfied that television acknowledges that women do indeed exist, we must analyze the

terms of the enunciation. After all, contradiction and simulation are not new(s) to women.

NOTES

My gratitude to Mary Yelanjian for her splendid research efforts.

1. William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: 1890), p. 239. The earlier reference is to Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken, 1975).
2. Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 4 (London: Hogarth, 1959), p. 274.
3. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 158.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, p. 263. Obviously, this formulation is Hegelian.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 255, 261, 262 (collapsed together, in this order).
11. The "elsewhere" is in a book I am completing on television, the body, and anxiety.
12. Sports also cause network delays off the half-hour; this is an almost regular occurrence on CBS on Sunday evenings, pushing back *60 Minutes*, ironically, and hence the entire night schedule, to a frequently irregular scheduling. Along with sports, presidential addresses also cause off-hour temporalities. Because everything is so rigidly preprogrammed, there is no means of condensation to "catch up" other than eliminating IDs, promos, or commercials—now coded and hence necessary ellipses for program sense and continuity; TV can only run late, or over; it is never early.
13. The snug fit of Baudrillard, and to a different degree Derrida, with the early catastrophists (and their right-wing revival via tele-evangelism and US fundamentalism) and US nuclear tests and films of the late 40s and early 50s suggests a very distinct intellectual politics.
14. René Thom, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis: An Outline of a General Theory of Models* (Reading, Mass.: W. A. Benjamin, 1975), p. 323. In *Catastrophe Theory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978) Alexander Woodcock and Monte Davis trace the date of the appearance of Thom's seven archetypal structures, from "ideas contained in his paper published in the 50s . . . the book draft was finished in 1966, with a six year delay in publishing" (16).
15. A. G. Wilson, *Catastrophe Theory and Bifurcation* (Los Angeles: University of Calif. Press, 1975), p. 1. After Thom's book was published, there were hundreds of studies in countless areas using his models, including the work on urban retail structures by Wilson in *Aspects of Catastrophe Theory and Bifurcation* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1979); in another *Catastrophe Theory*, a Soviet mathematician, a professor at the University of Moscow, V. I. Arnold, scathingly critiques its mass media circulation (it appeared as a "pocket book," something which had not happened in math since cybernetics, from which "catastrophe theory derived many of its advertising techniques" [2]) along with Thom's mystical bent and his stylistic incomprehensibility: "Neither in 1965 nor later was I ever able to understand a word of

I want to partially disagree with Weber, and update Freud's historical assertion that "the unconscious seems to contain nothing that could give any content to our concept of the annihilation of life."⁴² The second half of the twentieth century has an image of doomsday and annihilation which Freud could not have imagined. This image haunts the unconscious, politics, art, and now criticism; it is not a love story and, like "The Return to Space," excludes the female. With the abrupt 1988 end to the Cold War as yet uncelebrated, hanging in a virtual suspension of disbelief, its image has shifted from testing in 1946 and Operation Crossroads to simulation and Troop Test Smokey in the 50s, from avid discussion to silence, from civil defense to its futility, and from visual representation in government experiments and art to theory. The logic of governmental, nuclear argument was one of contradiction: a process of creation—showing us the visual spectacle of the bomb's capacity in elaborately staged films—and cancellation—the verbal denial that nuclear power would be offensively used. If precautions were taken, radiation's harmful bodily effects were also denied disingenuously. The nuclear image with its logic of conscious disavowal, including our reception, is historical. Like a few of us, this imaginary real has aged, its terror contained by forty years of disavowal. We grew up with it, terrified; my very Catholic grandmother convinced me that every airplane sound signaled imminent death from Russian planes; duck and cover in school encouraged fear of Soviet attack—the contradictory premise of US *defensive* policy—the ultimate exemplar of a logic of creation/cancellation. This is the repressed of catastrophe coverage, haunting its form and our reception; this could be its content, and we are almost relieved when it is not. (That the imaginary hold of this apocalyptic fear of the Soviet Union is over is demonstrated by the recent governmental acknowledgment that nuclear plants do have real and destructive effects on the human body.)

Along with television comedy, which distracted us by the "liberation" of laughter, these two institutions of Cold War foreign and domestic containment determined the 50s and audience memories. The US imaginary appears to be arrested at that adolescent moment which refuses passage into the symbolic and resists aging (with the necrophiliac resuscitation and sightings of the real Elvis and the photographed nude Marilyn as rituals of this arrested process); the Cold War generations of parents and children addressed by television are now well into middle and verging on old age. The historical point marked a move away from the real which could destroy us, into the imaginary, into simulation as positive, with offense figured by the government as defense, the rhetorical disavowal (and lie) of safe nuclear policy, with television rather than cinema as culture's dominant "theoretical object"—only recently recognized, albeit usually unstated, in the boom in postmodernism. In fact, early stages of postmodernism can be glimpsed in the 50s selling of television, coincident with and partly to the rapid expansion of consumer markets, nuclear experiments, and the development of

nuclear rhetoric. Shopping in the new centers was sold to the populace as one patriotic way of easing fear of "the bomb."

Unlike the claims of disaster studies, of Thom, and of Benjamin for catastrophe, television is rarely a model of change but rather one of incremental stasis, continuity, repetition; rather than wild heterogeneity, the return of the same, often as the same, albeit on two hundred channels; along with desire and pleasure, unpleasure, anxiety. Repeats and remakes, like the instant playback of sports, are games of mastery via a compulsive yet voracious repetition. This is not without consequence and need not result in condemnation. However, critical models predicated on change, radical reception, or democratic pluralism (and theories which rely on referents/realism, cause-effect/either-or dualisms, along with detectable authors and tangible objects) are limited in relation to television.

Television contains (and pleasures) us by contradictions, posing us in a halfway house, a netherland between subject/object—half-subject, half-object: rather than an "either/or" logic, one of "both/and" (the oxymorons of "working mother" or "single parent," "the middle-class poor")—an inclusive logic of creation/cancellation in which mimicry and simulation are stolid cornerstones rather than lofty embellishments. The cultural logic of television imitates the "diphasic" quality of obsessional neuroses, what Freud calls "the power of ambivalence": "one action is cancelled out by a second, so that it is as though neither action had taken place, whereas, in reality, both have" (113; 119). Every week for seven years, in reality, Lucy, the chorus girl/clown, complained that Ricky was preventing her from becoming a star. For twenty-four minutes, she valiantly tried to escape domesticity by getting a job in show business; after a tour-de-force performance of physical comedy, in the inevitable reversal and failure of the end, she resigned to stay happily at home serving big and little Ricky. The ultimate "creation/cancellation"—the series' premise which was portrayed in brilliant performances then denied weekly—was that Lucy was not star material. For keeping her home and out of show business, Lucy throws a pie in Ricky's face during his solo performance at the Tropicana; in the twenty-second end, she says, "You were right all along, Ricky. Forgive me?" Laughter. Applause.

To rephrase Freud: "an action which carries out a certain injunction is immediately succeeded by another action which stops or undoes the first one" (113). (Gracie Allen, to the contrary, takes Freud's "diphasic ambivalence" literally, as she does the shaggy dog story; illogical cancellation and reversal are the very stuff of story and comedy. However, after winning the story, she loses, too, in the end, to other systems.) Paralleling the structure of the Janus-faced enunciation of jokes (but unlike Freud's jokes, which are for men only, about women), TV addresses gendered subjects, often both sexes at the same time; the effect, however, is "as if neither action had taken place." Thus, it is complexly easy, after arduous labor, to produce

Thom's own talks on catastrophes" (ix). Arnold links Thom with the catastrophists and God, in contrast to my model, arguing so on p. 89 by quoting Thom: "It is a fundamentally polytheistic outlook to which it leads us: in all things one must learn to recognize the hand of the Gods." For Thom, this is a Heraclitian battle between archetypes. After declaring that this theory has already been eulogized, Arnold presents his model of singularities, bifurcation, and catastrophes (Berlin, Heidelberg, New York, Tokyo: Springer Verlag, 1981, 1986).

16. Wilson, p. 5.
17. Thom, pp. 6, 251.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
20. Woodcock and Davis, pp. 40, 4.
21. Freud, vol. 20, p. 109.
22. On the same page (143) Freud contradicts himself. After aligning women with neuroses, farther down the page he links hysteria with women and "obsessional neurosis . . . with masculinity." However, by mentioning castration so often as an explanation for almost everything, he inscribes his arduous difficulty relinquishing it. Also, when he refers to mother, he does so as an afterthought, for example, "such as its mother" when referring to children's fear of the dark (136).
23. Sonja Rein, "Whose Whip Is It?" unpublished graduate seminar paper, 1986/87.
24. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 67.
25. Thomas Drabek, *System Responses to Disaster* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1986), p. 6. He goes on to assert that "certain natural disasters can be compared to effects of man-made and technological disasters," presumably operating on the premise that technology has little to do with human intervention—a critical dilemma of *Challenger* which was explained by or blamed on human error or technological failure, which also were frequently conflated.
26. Federal Emergency Management Agency, *Behavior and Attitudes under Crisis Conditions: Selected Issues and Findings* (Washington D.C.). The problem of taxonomy reappears in *Natural Disasters: Acts of God or Acts of Man*, published by the International Institute for Environment and Development, which argues that when the ecology and the balance of nature are destroyed, no longer can natural and man-made events be differentiated.
27. *Behavior and Attitudes*, p. 17.
28. *Ibid.*, a notion repeated throughout this federal publication. Their model is derived from "stress" studies, not specifically influenced by Freud; rather, they are derived from US psychology, tested by sociologists. Reading the lists of catastrophes, mentioned almost as asides in flat language, becomes parody, comparable to the nightly news which casually refers to horrendous events without emotion and poetry of thought or word. One means of containing shock appears to be the deadly use of dull and boring language; or, in order to be either academic or official, the writer, the scholar, like the TV anchorman, must be "objective," in control, unemotional, bland, and expressionless. Thus, most writers' models of disaster, like the weather on TV, level difference, dulling the landscape, turning tragedy into routine. The reason Prince's book is effective is that it is also affective—his language recreates the scene rather than turning it into a list, a statistic, a distanced, impersonal event; equally, his analysis encompasses many disciplines with the unusual commitment, not Marxist but close, that disaster can lead to change and that it cuts through class divisions.
29. *Behavior and Attitudes*, p. 17 (I think).
30. *A Brief History of Panics* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, Putnam, 1893, copyright by De Courcy W. Thom, who "Englished and Edited" this French book)

is uncannily applicable to journalists' assessments of Black Monday: for example, the symptoms of a panic (based on the silver standard!) are wonderful prosperity, rising prices of commodities, lowering of interest rates along with a rise in salaries, large number of discounts, loans, banknotes, and decreasing deposits and reduced reserves, plus, critically, "growing luxury leading to excessive expenditures." What he grandly but perhaps accurately observes is: "What must be noted is the reiteration and sequence of the same points under varying circumstances at all times, in all countries, and under all governments" (argued well before the Soviet revolution). After analyzing panics in thirteen countries, he asserts that the only common cause is overtrading, so credit and money become scarce. The difference is the focus on banks rather than the new brokerage institutions, which are replacing banks as gold did silver.

31. Samuel Henry Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change* (New York: AMS Press, published in 1968 from the Columbia University Press, 1920), pp. 16-17. In Chapter I: "About midway in the last two years of war—to be exact December, 1917—a French munitioneer heavily laden with trinitrotoluol, the most powerful of known explosives, reached Halifax from New York. . . . Suddenly an empty Belgian relief ship swept through the Narrows directly in her pathway. There was a confusion of signals; a few agonized maneuvers. The vessels collided; and the shock of their colliding shook the world!"

"War came to America that morning. Two thousand slain, six thousand injured, ten thousand homeless, three hundred acres left a smoking waste . . . such was the appalling havoc of the greatest single explosion in the history of the world. It was an episode which baffles description. . . . It was all of a sudden—a single devastating blast; then the sound as of the crashing of a thousand chandeliers. Men and women cowered under the shower of debris and glass. . . . To some death was quick and merciful in its coming. Others were blinded, and staggered to and fro before they dropped. Still others with shattered limbs dragged themselves forth into the light—naked, blackened, unrecognizable shapes. They lay prone upon the streetside, under the shadow of the great death-cloud which still dropped soot and oil and water. It was truly a sight to make the angels weep. . . . It was an earthquake so violent that . . . the city shook as with palsy. The citadel trembled, the whole horizon seemed to move . . . the mute record tells not of the falling roofs and collapsing walls which to many a victim brought death and burial at one and the same time. . . . It was a flood. . . . It was a fire or rather a riot of fires. . . . It was like the flight from Vesuvius of which Pliny the Younger writes. . . . And when the hegira was over . . . a succession of winter storms."

32. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 46. The psychologists Prince uses for his behavioral model of shock and the ensuing emotions are William McDougall (*An Introduction to Social Psychology*, 1917), William James, M. Dide, a French psychologist who analyzed the hypnosis produced by shock, and several others writing between 1917 and 1920.

34. Prince, p. 60. After the initial shock and calamity, the community begins to reorganize. This protoecology arises initially from "the part of society which is most closely organized and disciplined in normality." Prince cites the militia as his example, mentioning not only the army's speed, its power, but "the attending psychological effects of orderly bearing and coolness in time of general chaos, bespeaking a care that is at once paternal and sympathetic." This is a good description of the institution of TV and its stable, paternal anchors. Prince also describes and distinguishes the pattern of disaster events which have stages, over time.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79. In *Disaster and the Millennium* by Michael Barkun (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), studies illustrate that the effects of Kennedy's assassination were "unique": that there was little difference between the Dallas spectators and TV spectators around the country, that the death of Kennedy was

comparable to the loss of a parent or close relative. Eighty-two percent in Dallas, versus 68% nationally, experienced "extreme nervousness and tension." TV viewers had the following symptoms, which disappeared after the funeral: "loss of appetite, crying, difficulty sleeping, unusual fatigue." "Television temporarily created disaster victims." This is an intriguing assertion in a rather strange book; Barkun goes on to discuss the effects of induced and constant catastrophe, for example, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, suggesting that the secret of permanent revolution is permanent disaster—which, from another political position, accords with Benjamin and Prince who argue that disaster is one critical means of instigating revolution and change. Thus, there is a politics to catastrophe. Prince, quoting Professor Shailer Matthews, who distinguishes between a crisis and a revolution: "The difference between a revolution and a crisis is the difference between the fire and the moment when someone with a lighted match in hand pauses to decide whether a fire should be lighted." When I was a child, and older, we used to wonder what we would do if the bomb were dropped. Rather than running to church or falling to our knees in prayer, we most likely would turn on television.

36. I have analyzed this videotape and its context, the counterculture and Ant Farm, in "Video Politics: Guerilla TV, Ant Farm, *Eternal Frame*," *Discourse* 10.2 (Spring-Summer 1988):78-100.

37. Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 143.

38. Patrick D. Morrow, "Those Sick Challenger Jokes," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20.4:179; other examples of these jokes are "Did you hear that Christa MacAuliffe has been nominated for the 1986 Mother of the Year Award?" "Of course, she only blew up once in front of her kids this year." "What does Christa MacAuliffe teach?" "English, but she's history now."

39. Dan Nimmo and James E. Combs, *Nightly Horrors: Crisis Coverage by Television Network News* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985). See also W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Houghton, 1983); Barbara Matusow, *The Evening Stars: The Making of the Network News Anchor* (Boston: Houghton, 1983).

40. "Thus, if Freud's initial stories deal with men, betrayal, and ingratitude, death enters the scene with—as?—the passive female . . . a recurrent fatality linked to the female: she either eliminates the male or is eliminated by him. But nothing is more difficult to do away with than this persistent female." This, in Weber's interpretation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 134.

41. Samuel Weber concludes with the Greeks: the myth, as it were, of our cultural origins or consciousness, back, along with Freud, to the *Symposium*.

42. Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety*, p. 129.
NOTE: This essay was written before the 1989 California quake; however, the model developed here was a snug fit.

REPRESENTING TELEVISION

Stephen Heath

Discussion of television is extensive today; more than extensive, indeed, if we do not immediately limit discussion according to some criterion of seriousness (of what counts as "serious discussion") but allow it to embrace the range of discourses in which television is now talked through: from the government report or the sociological study to the feature in this week's *TV Guide* or the commuter-train conversation, to this or that program commenting on itself and all the others (television has television as an abiding concern). This more-than-extensiveness corresponds, of course, to the sheer size of television, its seamless equivalence with social life; or rather, it is part of that size, a reflection of it but also a material element in it, in the general substance and reality of television which cannot be merely envisaged as a totality of transmitted programs. Hence television is a somewhat difficult object, unstable, all over the place, tending derivatively to escape anything we can say about it: given the speed of its changes (in technology, economics, programming), its interminable flow (of images and sounds, their endlessly disappearing present), its quantitative everydayness (the very quality of this medium each and every day), how can we represent television?

Partly here there is a problem simply with the use of the term "television" which covers not just the extensive social fact but a number of things which are not at all homogeneous despite that fact. Think only of the historical volatility of the technology and of the realities of broadcasting: the television of the 1980s is not the television of the 1950s or 1960s, is not merely more of the same in some straightforward continuity of technological, economic, and social relations. Or think of the differences from television to television across the world, the differences we elide as we too readily extrapolate from and collapse into US television as television *tout court*, the essential realization and the certain destiny. Or think again, recognizing another dimension of the problem, of the uneasy relation of "television" to video: many artists work with television (television technologies), but the