

'No More Peace!': How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events¹

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We sense a retreat from the genres of "media events" (Dayan and Katz, 1992)--the ceremonial Contests, Conquests and Coronations that punctuated television's first 50 years --- and a corresponding rise in the live broadcasting of disruptive events such as Disaster, Terror and War. We believe that cynicism, disenchantment and segmentation are undermining attention to ceremonial events, while the mobility and ubiquity of television technology, together with the downgrading of scheduled programming, provide ready access to disruption. If ceremonial events may be characterized as "co-productions" of broadcasters and establishments, then disruptive events may be characterized as "co-productions" of broadcasters and anti-establishment agencies, i.e. the perpetrators of disruption.

I

Media Events, as defined by Dayan and Katz (1992), are public ceremonies, deemed historic, and broadcast live on television. The genre, and its study, owes a lot to Anwar Sadat, president of Egypt. In 1977, Sadat announced that he would personally come to Jerusalem to offer peace in exchange for the territory which Israel had taken from Egypt in the war of 1967. Live television accompanied almost every moment of his three-day visit to Jerusalem, enthraling Israelis as well as Egyptians, attracting the reluctant attention of the other Arab countries, and the fascination of the rest of the world. His message – especially in his address to the Israel parliament (Liebes, 1984) – was "No More War."

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Observing this near-hypnotic event, and its successful outcome, a first thought was to frame it as "media diplomacy," but clearly it was more than that. Negotiation was certainly part of the picture, and implicit within it – indeed in Sadat's very arrival – was the recognition that Israel had so long awaited. Second thoughts led to the narrative underlying the event whereby a heroic leader crosses an enemy border unarmed in order to put an end to a long-standing conflict. This scenario applies equally well to the first visit of the Polish Pope to his homeland, then still under Communist rule, and, in certain respects, to the Astronaut's first flight to the moon (Katz, 1973). More than diplomacy, even more than ceremony, these events were "performative"; they actually enacted change! The key to such events, we thought, was in the charm of the televised hero, and his decision to risk the "breaking of a rule" in order to reach a goal; this is what the concept of charisma is about (Weber, 1968).

Katz and Dayan (1986) decided to call broadcast events of this kind "Conquests" – great steps for mankind. Soon after, we added "Contests" – referring to sports events such as the World Cup and political events such as Presidential Debates – and "Coronations," weddings, funerals, commemorations, etc., that mark the role-changes of the mighty. The common core of all three is (1) the live broadcast, (2) the interruption of everyday life and everyday broadcasting, (3) the preplanned and scripted character of the event, (4) the huge audience – the whole world watching, (5) the normative expectation that viewing is obligatory, (6) the reverent, awe-filled character of the narration, (7) the function of the event as integrative of society, and typically, (8) conciliatory. To succeed, these events require the assent of their organizers, broadcasters and audiences – affirming that they are worthy of this kind of special attention – otherwise they are doomed to failure.

II

Critics complained that Dayan and Katz had omitted "major news events" – the kinds that shock the world (Scannell, 1996). What is the point, they asked, of separating the Kennedy funeral from the Kennedy assassination, or, in other words, why focus on ceremony rather than on the disaster that provoked it? In reply, we pointed out that shocking news events are disruptive, not integrative, and – unlike ceremonial events – are not pre-planned. They are, of course, interruptions, but they are unexpected and mostly unwelcome. In short, they are a different genre.

But even if this distinction holds good, it is now clear that such major news events deserved inclusion. Doing so would have made it possible to juxtapose the two types of events – disruptive and integrative – and also might have raised a question about their changing proportions over time. For the fact is that media events of the ceremonial kind seem to be receding in importance, maybe even in frequency, while the live broadcasting of disruptive events such as Disaster, Terror and War are taking center stage. Hence our title, 'No More Peace.'²

² One wonders what Eric Hobsbawm (1983) might say about this shift in light of his functional (for the ruling elite) explanation of the proliferation of national ceremonies in Europe of 1870-1914. Our explanations here, like those of Dayan and Katz (1992), are more media oriented, but there may well be room for sociological speculation about the "need" for political spectacle in the second half of the 20th century.

III

That media ceremonies are being upstaged, as we think, can be readily explained. First of all, there have been major changes in the technology and organization of broadcasting institutions. Channels have multiplied, and, because of fierce competition, they are less likely to band together, or to join hands with establishments—as once they did—in national celebrations. Television equipment, moreover, has become highly mobile—and ubiquitous. These institutional changes (1) have scattered the audience and undermined the shared experience of broadcasting (2) have taken the novelty out of live broadcasting, and (3) have socialized us to “action” rather than ceremony, to a norm of interruption rather than schedule.

Increased cynicism offers a second set of reasons for the declining centrality of media events. The credibility of governments – cosponsors of most media events – is at an all-time low. And so is trust in the media (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). Altogether, people to believe in – Great Men – appear to be in short supply, says Scannell (1996). Establishment meddling in the media is widely suspected, and the media are thought to be bowing towards these pressures.

Widespread realization that the miracles of media events are short-lived constitutes a third sort of explanation for their apparent decline. The live broadcasting of “historic” ceremonies has lost its aura. Nixon’s landslide triumph is soon followed by Watergate; drug scandals and hints of corruption have tainted the Olympics, not even to speak of the tragedy at Munich in 1972; the sentimentality induced by the Royal Wedding of Charles and Diana in 1981 is tainted by divorce and death; the stardom of John Kennedy, Anwar Sadat, and Yitzhak Rabin all end in assassinations.

The fate of Middle East summitry provides a cogent example of this process of disenchantment (Liebes & Katz, 1997). The meeting of Sadat and Begin on Jimmy Carter’s lawn was welcomed with breathless anticipation of a new era of peace in 1978. Lesser enthusiasm and less hopefulness accompanied the live broadcast of Clinton’s attempt to bring Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin together on *his* lawn (1978); President Clinton fared even worse with Arafat and Ehud Barak at Camp David (2000); and the thrill had altogether dissipated when George Bush presided over the shotgun marriage of Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen, the new Palestinian leader, in the tent at Aqaba (2003). A rare redeeming moment for the genre, and for Clinton, was the ceremonial signing of formal peace between King Hussein of Jordan and Yitzhak Rabin in 1994, muted by the fact that the parties only sought legitimation for their de facto marriage. On the whole, then, the live broadcasting of diplomatic summits seems to have turned sour, at least for now.

IV

Not all media events are benign. In fact, the very subgenre of “contest”—in sports, or politics or legal confrontations—engender tension; but it is the shared commitment to fairness and justice that unites the fans on each side. Of course, certain media events are intrinsically disruptive (see Rothenbuhler, 1988; Lukes, 1986; Carey, 1998). Protests and strikes are agreed forms of sanctioned disruption. Watergate is an extreme example. The event is preplanned, even scripted, and, in spite of the ostensible

conflict, there is, even here, an integrative aspect to the shared experience, as Lang & Lang (1983) and Alexander (2003) have argued. Moreover, ceremonial events may suddenly yield to an unplanned disruption. However much the producers try to avoid showing opposition, part of the thrill of live broadcasting is that something may go wrong. Thus, the Munich Olympics in 1972 were interrupted by the attack on the Israeli team (and the killing of 13 of its members), Lee Harvey Oswald was murdered in 1963 during the mourning over Kennedy, the Challenger exploded a moment after its ceremonial takeoff in 1986. Even scheduled media events – designed to celebrate or commemorate achievement – can go wrong.

The key difference between the two genres is in the element of preplanning. As already noted, it is the difference between the shock and anxiety of learning that the President or the Prime Minister has been assassinated versus the carefully scripted grief during their funerals. Anticipation, and perhaps the comfort of orderliness, differentiate them.

V

The apparent decline of ceremonial events in both frequency and centrality does not, in itself, explain the reciprocal rise in the live broadcasting of traumatic events, and, more important, the extended, even obsessive coverage given to them by mainstream media. Liebes (1998) has dubbed these broadcasts “disaster marathons,” alluding to the hours, sometimes days, spent recycling gory portraits from the scene, the heroics of rescue and relief workers, the mandatory interviews with experts and politicians speculating on what went wrong and why, and the implications that official neglect or worse may be involved.

Of course, these elements are legitimate aspects of journalistic inquiry, but whereas traumatic news events in the past were contained, mostly, in major “bulletins” and followed only later in the main news and in cooler analysis, the new coverage proceeds directly from the dramatic announcement that cancels regular broadcasting to the marathon mode that ensues. Of course, we know this formula from the Kennedy assassination (Greenberg & Parker, 1965), but such extended interruptions were relatively rare at the time; by now, they seem to have usurped the place of ceremonial events. Thus, in addition to noting the ostensible displacement of scripted ceremonial events, it is worth noting also that these unscripted traumas have moved from “bulletin” mode to marathon mode.

Are major disasters really more frequent? It is difficult to say. Is paranoia more prevalent? That is probably the case. Are governments building on such events to legitimate their trigger-happy interventionism? Are the mainstream media trying to show off their newly mobile technologies in order to recapture their unfaithful audiences? Maybe.

VI

To get a better close-up, let’s have a look, however superficial, at the live broadcasting of Terror, Disaster and War – the three types of trauma that seemed to have resolutely moved to center-stage and

give no sign of abandoning it. A fourth type, which might be called Protest and that may, however, also include Revolution, deserves attention as well, though we will not elaborate here.

1. Terror

Much has been written about the symbiotic relationship between terror events and the media. From the days of celebrity kidnappings, to airplane hijackings, to political assassinations to suicide bombings, it is well established that the perpetrators would have far less impact without media publicity, and that the media can hardly be expected to resist.³ It is only recently, however, that such events have begun to be broadcast outside the regularly scheduled news.⁴ From its beginnings, journalism saw such events as "major news," but they seemed somehow unfit – we are guessing – and unmanageable for full-scale treatment as live "specials." In most such cases, the event itself was over before even the most nimble television teams could arrive on the scene, and the equipment was far less mobile. Even the cameras at the ready at the Munich Olympics did not dwell long on this aberration of the ceremonial media event which it interrupted—at least partly because it was considered "incorrect" to do so. Only rarely is television there to witness such deeds in the doing. The explosion of the Challenger was such an example – again, like in Munich, because the cameras were already there – and September 11th is the extreme exception. Nevertheless, long before September 11th, the aftermath of terrorist events became a familiar, and frightening, part of television in Israel.

Liebes (1998) argues that marathon coverage of terror events puts pressure on governments to act more hastily, and more impulsively, than perhaps they might (or should) have. Kellner (2004) argues, on the other hand, that such coverage is just the pretext that certain governments welcome; it allows them, he says, to speak in Manichean terms and to mobilize popular support for action against Evil. The difference between the two is in Kellner's assumption about the pre-event eagerness of governments to act; but the effect of the marathon broadcast may be the same.

September 11th directs us to the question of whether terror events are properly called "unplanned" when media schedules and availability are obviously implicated in the perpetrators' planning (Liebes & Blondheim, 2003; Weimann, 1996). The media also figure in the calculus of revolutionaries as seems to have been the case in 1989, at the overthrow of the Communist regimes in Czechoslovakia and Romania. For all their differences, both from each other and from terror events, the media were there *during* the event, not only in its aftermath (Dayan & Katz, 1992). But to the extent that the element of surprise is central, it argues against their inclusion in the well-rehearsed integrative category of media events. Yet, it is not hard to envisage certain disruptive events where public and media are invited to attend, as is also the case with major protest events, which, because of their ceremonial aspect, approach

³ Hillel Nosssek (1994) pioneered in the discussion of "fashions" or "genres" of terror. He also argues that terror events often integrate societies.

⁴ This shift is difficult to date, although nightly "action news" was surely its harbinger.

the category of media events.⁵

2. Disaster

In the case of natural disasters or train wrecks (Boorstin, 1964), the media cannot be said to have been manipulated by the perpetrators.⁶ Yet, it seems to us that the marathon mode has been increasingly deployed here as well. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 or the Tsunami of Southeast Asia (in 2004) may be the equivalents of September 11th in the realm of nature. Live broadcasting of these attacks and their aftermath mobilized world sympathy and support, but one wonders why the television systems of the world did not go outside their newscasts to portray other disasters of even greater magnitude. It is well known that the tragedies of starvation and disease in other parts of the world, and even other natural disasters, are all but ignored. Why the broadcasters suspected that their viewers would identify with the victims of the distant Tsunami is a good question, except perhaps for its allusion to Biblical catastrophes such as the Flood, much as 9/11 inevitably recalls the pretentious builders of the tower at Babel. If one daresay that the God of the tidal wave or the hurricane imposes surprise and disruption that parallels the work of the terrorist, it is no wonder that many a terrorist sees himself as an agent of God.⁷

Reality, however, suggests that terror may be experienced as more traumatic than natural disaster. The latter may be the work of an arbitrary God but is not due to a personalized, looming, demonic operator intent on the destruction of the nation, soul and body. Having said that, we must also report that we have evidence that the increasing frequency of massive terror attacks may not necessarily increase their effect (Liebes and Kampf, in press). The experience of the second Intifada in Israel suggests that repeated incidents of terror lead to a *decrease* in marathon-type coverage and are increasingly experienced as routine—even as in automobile accidents.

3. War

War is a third example of how the broadcasting of trauma has been upstaging ceremonial events. Of course, war is perhaps the most-studied case of tension between governments and the media. Putting surprise attacks like Pearl Harbor aside, it is likely that post-WWII military actions by Western powers have been publicly scheduled in advance, and that the problem of controlling the media has repeatedly arisen. These wars are more circumscribed than their predecessors, and fit the TV screen more readily,

⁵ Broadcasting facilities are often the first targets of revolutions (and of military action). This was the case in 1989 Romania, but not in the more “democratic” Czechoslovakia. During the mass protest in Israel against the government’s decision to “disengage” from Gaza, live radio coverage included the leader of the sometimes-violent protest as its on-the-air commentator. The mass protest at Tiananmen Square is another example (Calhoun, 1994).

⁶ For Boorstin (1964), the ultimate news event is a train crash (before the PR personnel arrive on the scene).

⁷ Interestingly, in the case of the Flood, God gave Noah seven-days advance notice of his intention (Genesis 7:4), deviating from “our” rule that disasters are always a surprise. Early-warning systems have a good model to emulate.

but hardly satisfactorily. Television has hardly been able to penetrate the smoke at the front, but the media attempt to frame what is happening is alleged to have had major effect. In Vietnam, we know, it took days for filmed footage to be delivered to TV stations in the West, amid the implication that the huge American commitment would finally prevail, until the Government began to believe –rightly or wrongly– that they were losing media support (Arlen, 1982; Hallin, 1994). Subsequent forays into the Falklands, Granada, Panama all placed restrictions on media access; in the Falklands, for example, a pool of journalists was invited aboard ship to wait, under surveillance, until the British Navy fired its first broadside at Argentina.

Even greater control characterized Gulf War I where journalists were kept away from the fighting, forced to report from General Schwarzkopf's regular briefings. Instead of presence at the front, television showed models of the new weapons that were being deployed (Katz, 1992). Only the exceptions – Peter Arnett on the roof in Baghdad and Bob Simon who wandered off in the desert – called attention to the rule. The frustration of journalists during Gulf War I led to the brilliant idea of "embedding" in Gulf War II, where journalists were free to report what they could see from a front-line tank or helicopter, and, inside, to experience the morale of being a member of the crew. The extended, often live, coverage went on for weeks amid much speculation about WMD, about the capitulation of Saddam's troops, the mystery of the whereabouts of Saddam himself, and very little evidence of loss – on either side. Wars of this kind are staged; certainly this was true of the live coverage of invasion, where the obvious interest of Government is to keep journalists on its side by playing up the threat, and the evil of the enemy, and minimizing our own losses. Yet, disaster marathon it is, albeit of a different kind.

VII

To repeat, we assert that marathons of terror, natural disaster, and war have become established genres on mainstream television, each somewhat different than the others. We proposed explanations for the decline in salience of the live broadcasting of ceremonial events, and the rise of live coverage of traumatic events, even if these are mostly concluded before the media arrive, and mostly seen from afar. We speculated that the new media ecology, together with cynicism vis-à-vis establishments and media, have undermined the awe of ceremonial events and that the new mobile technology plus the paranoia of our times have propelled major news of disaster from the classic "bulletin" of tragedy to extended coverage of the trauma itself, or what remains of it.

In comparing ceremonial and traumatic events, we noted that the former are preplanned and integrative, even when they end badly, whereas the latter are unwelcome outbursts of disruption and despair.⁸

In conclusion, we wish to emphasize another factor that distinguishes ceremonial from traumatic events, and that is the large difference between the extent to which establishments, and even the media, are able to maintain control. Thus, underlying the integrative versus disruptive character of each type of event, and the factor of preplanning versus surprise, lurks the question of control, of who's in charge.

⁸ See Cottle (2006) for a somewhat similar typological effort.

Media events, of the ceremonial kind, are essentially co-produced by broadcasters and organizers such as the International Olympics Committee, the League of Women Voters, the Royal Family. They are establishment events, with wide public support, based on mutual agreement as to how the event will be staged. Disaster marathons, on the other hand, are obvious threats to establishments, in which the organizers – the perpetrators – are an invasive force, far out of the reach of establishment control. Thus, terror events, of course, are obvious co-productions of perpetrators and broadcasters; natural disasters are collusions between broadcasters and God; the script for war may well be in the hands of the enemy. The media, too, may lose control. Such events recall Molotch and Lester's (1974) paper on how establishment sources are in control of the news – except in the case of accident and scandal, where government loses control. While agreeing with Molotch and Lester that these are moments in which journalists achieve power vis-à-vis establishments, it is important to consider that the marathon treatment of terror events may deprive the journalist of the time and distance he needs to think, to investigate, and to edit. Ironically, even though he has attained the power to criticize establishment failings, he may find himself in the service of another master (Liebes and Blondheim, 2002). In other words, if media events cause journalists to feel queasy about being exploited in the service of establishments, they should also be wary—in marathon mode—of unwittingly serving the anti-establishment.

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