

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

Eighty-One Seconds of Videotape

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America is a nation awash with moving images. Twenty-four hours a day, fifty-two weeks of the year, hundreds of television stations compete intensely with each other and with thousands of cinemas and the video industry for a share of the audience's attention. The variety of possible television, cinematic, and video experiences is quite staggering. Yet in this year of our Lord 1992, eighty-one seconds of videotape recorded by an amateur managed not only to grab the nation's attention, but to rock it to its very foundations.

The tape showing the beating of Rodney King has already entered television mythology. According to *Newsweek* magazine it quickly became one of the half-dozen most widely watched clips in the history of the medium, putting it in the same league as the assassination of President Kennedy, Ruby shooting Oswald, and the Challenger explosion. In the run-up to the trial of the L.A. police officers charged with King's assault, it was played and replayed constantly on the tv news shows. The prosecution case seemed cut and dried. But perhaps we should have been a little wiser. For if the other famous tv clips - particularly those connected with JFK - tell us anything, it is that in the world of the moving image *nothing* is cut and dried.

The lawyers for the police in the Rodney King case argued quite explicitly that the videotape of the beating was "something of an illusion"; despite apparently clear visual evidence to the contrary, the officers were only following proper arrest procedures. As one defense lawyer put it: "a picture is worth a thousand words... but a lot of times it takes a thousand words to explain a picture. What you think you see isn't always what you see." The entire case for the defence rested on an attempt to put those eighty-one seconds of videotape in context, a context favorable to the police. And it worked. A juror later explained that throughout the incident King "in my opinion... was in full control." It was an opinion that stupefied the majority of television-watching Americans and provoked an eruption of rage and violence on the streets of Los Angeles and other major cities.

There are many disturbing aspects of this case, moral, legal, political, and racial, that will haunt American society for many years to come. But, for me, perhaps the most disturbing of all is the basic fact that there can be - and is - such a complete lack of agreement within the community as to what that videotape actually means.

Those eighty-one seconds of tape, and the events that followed their transmission, reveal something about the nature of contemporary Western society and the problems that the Christian church faces in seeking to proclaim and embody the gospel within it. We are a society in crisis, and that crisis is, in large measure, a crisis of perception.

We are living through a time of great change in the form and quantity of human communication. In the space of a century the printed word has been joined, and sometimes displaced, by the moving image, by cinema, radio, telephone, television, cable, video, computer graphics, fibre optics, an ever-growing list of new technologies; journalists report to us live via satellite from trouble spots in remote places on the face of the globe, astronauts hold press conferences as they orbit high above the

earth, politicians answer questions from audiences gathered simultaneously in centers across the nation. Every day in modern society ordinary people are deluged with images, viewpoints, perspectives, theories, experiences, stories, and items of information. But what is their significance? Do they have a meaning? The Rodney King case suggests that, as a culture, we haven't got a clue.

In the midst of this remarkable communications revolution the words of Jesus (quoting a prophecy of Isaiah) seem peculiarly appropriate:

You shall indeed hear but never understand,
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.
For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are heavy of hearing,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should perceive with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their heart,
and turn for me to heal them (Matt.13:14,15).

Our generation seems to have called down a terrible judgment upon itself, a judgment which takes the form of darkness and ignorance. It follows a familiar pattern from Babel to the present: at the point of our greatest technical achievements, when knowledge, clarity, and coherence seem to be within our grasp, confusion and fragmentation become rampant. Here, at a moment of astounding communicative potential, meaning, truth, and understanding have all fled. We are left alone with our flickering images, unaware of what, if anything, they might mean.

The Enlightenment, with its emphasis on human reason and achievement, has been blamed for many things, but it would not be fair or accurate to do so in this particular case. Our present state of affairs cannot simply be attributed to the philosophical outlook of those who run television, for example. The problem is more deep-rooted than that.

Many scholars have observed that fragmentation seems almost to be of the very essence of television, part of its technique, its "grammar." The world flashes before our eyes as a constantly changing set of images, angles, perspectives. There are wide shots, mid shots, close-ups, big close-ups, tracking shots, mixes, fades and the ever-present cut. The camera never stays still - there's always another way of looking at a subject, always somewhere else we can get a better view, always something more interesting to hold our attention. Cut, cut, cut.

It's not surprising that television has been called a postmodern medium; it encourages a pluralistic outlook by subverting Enlightenment confidence in a single, rational point of view. Even as it entertains or informs, it also relativizes, educating us to expect and enjoy fragmentation, subtly undermining our confidence that the truth can ever be grasped and known.

But if we can't blame the Enlightenment for our present crisis of perception, neither can we simply blame television as a technique. The problem lies with us. Ours is primarily a spiritual crisis. In the Bible the failure to see and hear and understand is linked firmly to the rejection of God. It has to do with the fact that we have "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator who is blessed forever" (Rom.1:24). In other words, our present crisis of perception is a direct consequence of idolatry.

Like rebellious human beings in every age we too have our idols. We have made gods who cannot speak or hear or discern; "they know nothing, they understand nothing" (Isa.44:18). Predictably, these gods are very much in our own image; their blindness and ignorance reflect our own. Those who make idols, warns the Psalmist, will become like them (Ps.115:8).

Whatever inherent limitations there might be to television as a medium of communication, they are multiplied a hundredfold by the idolatrous position we have accorded it in our society. The prosecution produces a piece of videotape as its trump card in a court of law - the clincher, the knockout blow! - only to find itself trumped by the defense using that very same piece of tape. "They shall indeed see, but never perceive...."

Many Christians who genuinely want to address the culture to which we belong regard television as a heaven-sent gift, timely and unproblematical, a powerful tool in the hands of the right people. They see it as a means by which the whole world may be reached with the message of the gospel. We need to be very careful here that we ourselves do not fall into sin. The massive resources that some churches and independent groups pour into their television ministries to the exclusion of almost all else bears more than a passing resemblance to idolatry. But more than that. A fragmented world will not be healed by fragmented means. A society like ours cries out not for more messages and information, but for the wholeness, the holiness, the peace that the world cannot give.

Perhaps our primary calling as Christians - media consumers, media professionals and artists - in a culture dominated by fantasy, half-truths, confusion and lies, is truly to see and hear and understand and speak. Given the track record of the church, that's a tall order indeed, and maybe smacks of arrogance. But in the midst of our present crisis of perception, there is no worthier calling. And while it may be a hard and a high calling, it is also a promise. For to his followers Jesus Christ gives this remarkable and relevant benediction: "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matt.13:16).