

The Contemporary Text: Media and Preaching

The Real and the Mediated

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A new kind of reality is flooding our experience, and it promises to upset our whole epistemology. Daniel Boorstin, student of American history and recent Librarian of Congress, was one of the first to identify it. He called it “pseudo-reality,” coming from the Greek word for false or intending to deceive (*The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-events in America*; Harper, 1961).

Say a hotel in town is beginning to look its age, and the owners need to improve its image and increase its business. In olden times—as my children used to say—they might have re-done the plumbing, imported a new chef, and painted the rooms. But today all is different; they hire a public relations expert. He in turn stages a celebration of the hotel’s fiftieth anniversary.

A committee is formed including a prominent banker, a well-known society matron, an influential preacher. They plan an “event,” for example, a banquet at which the mayor and others call attention to the distinguished service the hotel has rendered to the community. Photos are taken for the morning paper. Local TV crews cover it for the six o’clock news. The occasion is widely reported, and the purpose has been accomplished. This is a pseudo-event—planned with media coverage as the primary objective, with only a tenuous relationship to underlying reality.

That was back in 1961. Since then the new media reality, accelerated and then dominated by television, has been replacing unmediated reality in every arena of life: politics, news, education, warfare, crime, and religion. The real world is being reduced to striking visual images, the simplest possible narration, and a story line that clearly identifies the good and the bad guys. Life has been mediated into show biz.

Neil Postman of New York University points out that television “has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience.” TV not only welcomes artifice, it demands it. It is inherently visual, inherently visceral, and it requires everyone on it—politicians, newscasters, preachers, criminals, academicians—to keep us entertained, or we will tune them out.

The line between real and unreal diminishes, then vanishes. For example, Robert Young, the actor in “Marcus Welby, M.D.,” was *twice* invited by the American Medical Association to speak at their annual meeting—as if he knew anything at all about the practice of medicine. Later he announced on a TV commercial, “I’m not a doctor but I play one on TV.” This might well be the motto of anyone appearing on TV these days—whether stated or assumed. “I’m not a hero, but I play one,” says Oliver North. “I’m not a journalist, but I play one,” says the local TV anchor. “I’m not a president, but I play one,” said Ronald Reagan. “I’m not a hero, but I play one,” says O.J. Simpson.

And we love it. We love it because watching the news or political contests or religion or education becomes more and more *entertaining*. A sordid double murder becomes a Hit of the Year, with more network attention focused on it than any other single event. Why do we follow the O.J. Simpson case so avidly? Because it is just like watching TV: it is “Ironsides,” “Peoples’ Court,” “Perry Mason,” and “L.A. Law”

rolled into a single, serialized, continuous saga of the Downfall of the Hero. Here is Greek tragedy writ small, reality blown out of all proportion.

We love it because the media thus serves up reality—all reality—in a new form that is simple, recognizable, and entertaining. By pressing reality into formula, it becomes much more manageable. We can handle Bosnia-Herzegovina only if someone tells us who are the Good Guys and the Bad Guys. We can live with the Gulf War's annihilation of 50,000 Iraqis only because it is scripted as Heroes to the Rescue. We can deal with the complexities of the health care debate only when Harry and Louise explain it in thirty seconds. By domesticating reality, we can escape it. If TV can convert the sordid, complex reality of twentieth century living into a string of soap operas which we can easily grasp, then we can get hold of it, and can get rid of it.

But there are two problems with converting reality into pseudo-reality. One is that it makes a shambles out of democracy. When every politician from the president on down becomes primarily a performer, and performance art becomes the norm of political action, then the criterion by which we judge our representatives becomes one of media performance. Substance disappears and stagecraft appears. While some citizens become anesthetized to the difference, the rest become profoundly cynical. Involvement in the real world breaks down.

A second problem is that when performance takes precedence over reality, people become things. Whether the communicator is politician, teacher, or preacher, the problem remains the same: when their performance takes precedence over their reality, real-life people become objects to be manipulated instead of individuals to be served. To cite a painful example from the world of religion: television transformed Jim and Tammy Bakker from simple youth evangelists into media celebrities, so that their ministry became a farce, and eventually, fraud.

Life is not a movie, though one would not know it from observing some Americans today. An article in the *New York Times* reports that a young man has asked his divorced parents to step in front of a camcorder and re-enact happier times so that their granddaughter could see how it was before the breakup. In Connecticut, when shot by a friend, a teenager became astonished, and very upset, that it *hurt*.

When we allow entertainment to be the primary purpose of life, pseudo-reality begins to triumph, and life everlasting takes on a much different, darker meaning.