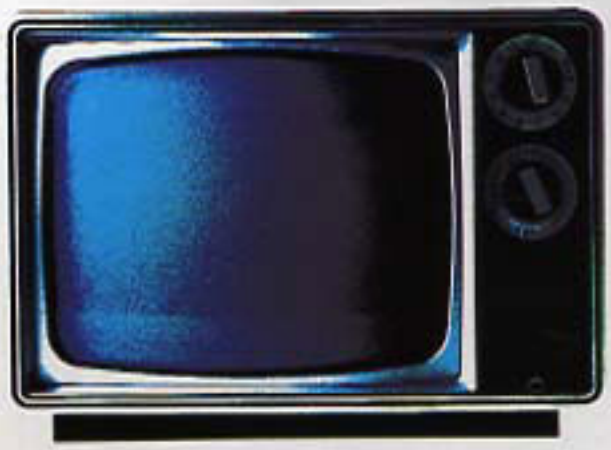
I'm On TV



Therefore, I Exist

By Janet Martin

Network coverage of the Columbia Shuttle tragedy last February offered a quick and dramatic response to the nation's hunger for news. Incredibly, within two days of the event, relatives of the fallen astronauts agreed to interviews on live television, sharing their grief with total strangers. More remarkably, they presented themselves with poise.

Not all such interviews turn out as well. A few months before the shuttle explosion, just two days after four boys had drowned in the Merrimack River in Lawrence, Massachusetts, *Today Show* host Katie Couric interviewed Francis Spraus, 9, and Jaycob Morales, 10. These boys had tried to help their companions, but watched helplessly in horror as their friends drowned. Couric, a parent herself, was sympathetic, but she persisted with questions. The older boy handled them, but the younger boy sobbed openly on the TV set.

"It was just so hard for me," he cried. "It was so cold." As the interview (mercifully) ended, I was left with two questions: first, why do people go on television after tragedy? And second, who, ultimately, are the victims of this type of "tell-all TV?"

I didn't have to ponder long before that prickly feeling of awareness set in. I recalled an episode as a journalist, when I, too, became caught up in the Tell-All-TV syndrome . . . .

As the networks scramble to interview "live" victims of tragedy, do they make victims of us all?

Lucretia* was fifteen, African-American, a mother and a student at Charlottesville High School in Central, Virginia. She had been recommended to me by Teensight, a local program working with teenage mothers. The focus of the program was to raise the career sights of women like Lucretia for whom identity meant creation, or more accurately, re-creation of herself as another human being in the form of a child. Administrators of the Teensight program thought a television story on the difficulties of teen pregnancy – managing school, work, a child and life itself – would be good deterrent material for Lucretia's classmates and other young women the program wished to educate about the realities of young, single parenthood.

Lucretia became pregnant with her baby Josh, because she "wanted somebody to love her." In a backhanded way, without meaning to, I rewarded this self-deception. As a reporter/producer for the Public Broadcasting System in Virginia in 1995, I made Lucretia the star in a regional television show. With a two-person camera crew, I visually captured this small girl, barely out of pigtails herself, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans in the typical teen mode, giggling with friends, sitting attentively in class, raising her hand as if she knew the answers to questions posed. I followed Lucretia down the high school halls, lined with lockers and talkative students who clanged metal doors open and shut, hoisted book bags, adjusted Walkman earphones, and clasped hands in gestures of "High Five."

Everywhere we went, these students clustered around. "Shoot me!" They shouted. "I want to be on TV!" They jumped, waved, crafted monkey faces for the camera and ruined my shots. In desperation, I called out, "Anyone who wants to be on TV, DON'T look at the camera!" Instantly, the halls were quiet. As if cued, the students swaggered past me and the crew, eyes averted; giggling knots of girls affected genuine amusement at one another's jokes. No one looked at the camera.

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to be on TV. In the years since, I've persistently wondered, Why?

In his classic book, *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin discusses the flowering of the "Graphic Revolution" of the 1960s, which

we call the "Age of Technology" today. The author is concerned with the rise of pseudo-events in society; that is, events that are manufactured for the benefit of news coverage. Americans, he says, live in a world "where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than its original." In Lucretia's case, the image of her as a conscientious student was true. But it was incomplete. She was passing her subjects, but she also was being tutored by Teensight, a fact we caught in another part of the show.

As we continued her saga as a teen mom, we showed Lucretia meeting her two-year-old child at the babysitter's home late in the afternoon. There, for convenience, we taped her: the attentive mother, quietly reading a story to the wide-eyed youngster, awed by the presence of Ikegami cameras and umbilical wires stretching to sound recorders and lights. And, as the camera rolled, we fell right into what Boorstin calls the "iridescent experience," the one that takes solace in contrived reality. As he predicts, we became "eager accessories to the great hoaxes of the age. . . the hoaxes we play on ourselves."

Realistically, it is hard to imagine a life much harder than a child, age 15, taking care of her own child, age two. But in showing the difficulty on television, unintentionally, we broadcast the living of this life as an ideal. Seeing her story, Lucretia's friends – some who were pregnant and others who were not – wanted to be on TV, too. Now, Lucretia had a double identity: as a single mom and a TV star.

Contemporary psychologists and sociologists who analyze the modern fascination with television come to varying and sometimes disturbing conclusions. William K. Shrader, author of *Media Blight and the Dehumanizing of America*, charges that media, particularly television, contribute to the pervasive demoralization of the American public. "By stimulating the public with an endless stream of enticing, essentially unattainable illusions, the media produce an 'experiential bind,' a phenomenon rooted in the incongruity between the two juxtaposed realms of vicarious and firsthand experience." He asserts that such "unrealistic and tasteless drivel" undermines our collective bases for interpreting experience in "ways that normally would motivate us to various acts of kindness, cooperation and social cohesion."

Anyone who has young children can agree with Shrader. One summer my husband and I traveled seven hours from Atlanta to Amelia Island, FL, a resort paradise of sea, sky, tennis courts and lagoon-like swimming pools nestled under live oak trees slung with Spanish moss. Upon arrival,

the children tumbled from the car and met their cousins who had driven by a different route. Excitedly, they hopped up and down, demanding to go to the beach, but instead, turned on MTV. Before long, in swimming suits not yet wet, they were flopped on the condo carpet. They had forgotten each other. They had forgotten the beach. They were transfixed by the tube, hypnotized by long-haired musical artists in leather pants who screamed into portable mikes before crashing drums and electric guitars.

Boorstin would say, "Pseudo-events from their very nature tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events." The adults in our beach party would agree. We were forced to escort the kids away from a *pseudo* event they could have watched at home, to a *live*, somewhat expensive event we had purchased for their enjoyment – a swim in the ocean!

In addition to happenings, Boorstin takes issue with people, otherwise known as "human pseudo-events." These creatures are manufactured heroes turned celebrities. The author compellingly suggests that we confuse celebrity-worship and hero-worship every day. The famous are famous, not because they are great, but because they are well known. This, he claims, makes a man or woman a "nationally advertised brand," which becomes a new "category of emptiness."

"You aren't really anybody if you're not on TV," says the anti-heroine Suzanne in the movie, *To Die For*. The character, played by Nicole Kidman, is the vehicle through which writer Buck Henry and producer Gus Van Sant convey the belief that TV validates the world and the self. Suzanne, an ambitious, dim-witted local beauty who is obsessed with going on television, says revealingly, "What's the point of doing anything worthwhile if no one can see it?"

Significantly, her view is widely shared.

On New York's Upper West Side where I lived while enrolled at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism, I fell into conversation with a member of the rising television generation. Javier Valverde, then 16 and a student at New York's Manhattan Center for Science and Math, lived with his family on the floor above mine. Mr. Valverde is a good-looking young man of Hispanic origin. He has swimming brown eyes and dark hair. He is uncommonly helpful and polite. On certain afternoons he walked my two dogs while I attended class. Curious about him and his friends, I asked Javier what being on TV meant to him and his peers. "It means you've accomplished something that a lot of people couldn't do. I mean look at the stars. They're good role models. They do something!" he smiled.

I posed a scenario: "But what if the corner store was robbed and you were in the crowd when the police arrested the suspect. The television camera pans across you. Would you gather your family to watch it on the news that night?"

"Sure. The word would spread. It would make me feel good about myself – Excited. I'd want other people to see me, too. Being on TV is a moment people rarely get to have. You're a part of something. They say, 'Look, look, look!'"

Knowing that Javier is an artist (he pens Japanese animations with pencil), I posed another scenario. "What if a camera crew came to your school class and photographed you over your drawings and then showed close-ups of your work on television? How would that make you feel?" "This is who I am," the boy smiled. "This is what I can do. I like to share, be a role model." "Does television make you famous?" I persisted. "Depends on what you do," he said. "Who is more famous? George Washington or Tom Cruise?" "George Washington," Javier answered. Then he elaborated. "Even though he was not on TV, he accomplished more than Tom Cruise." But here, the boy paused, his brow furrowed. "But what did Washington do?" he asked. "Revolutionary War? Something like that?"

A small exchange, this conversation, yet it reflects the light of recent findings by media psychologists.

First, from television, Javier knew who actor Tom Cruise was. From history, George Washington's identity was a little vague. Collective memory, it appears, is reinforced by recurring electronic images.

Second, the value of appearing on television in Javier's mind was recognition: Word would spread; his friends would know. He would be publicly displayed thereby making Javier feel good about his work and himself.

Some analysts have drawn parallels between the relationship of television and spectator to that of mother and child. In a 1995 article, "Narcissistic Vision and Visibility" in *Percuso*, a Portuguese journal, author Rogerio argues that in the mother-infant relationship, the infant sees its own face in the mother's. Rogerio draws the conclusion that likewise, "the television viewer sees his/her own image in the audiovisual material captured by his/her psyche." Consequently, the spectator's own visibility is guaranteed.

In another journal article entitled, "I and the (M)other," published in *Literature & Psychology*, author Angelika Rauch asserts that the "unconscious mechanism of narcissistic identification with the (m)other might be what underlies the current

(addictive) consumption of media-images." Rauch believes that the ego identifies with the image to gain a sense of pleasurable identity. The fictitious identity, furthermore, is "motivated by an unconscious memory of pleasurable mother-child union." Thus, the television viewer returns and returns.

Viewing the self on television, one escapes his own point of view to see himself as object. Psychologists call this "self-objectification," and when taken to extremes it can be damaging. Raymond Barglow examines the self as media object in *The Crisis of the Self in the Age of Information: Computers, Dolphins and Dreams.* Individuality, the author says, is socially constructed. "One's status as an individual depends on recognition, by others and by oneself, of that status." In Western culture, recognition implies personal relationship among selves, Barglow continues, "on the model of the link between God and His subjects in the Judeo-Christian tradition."

Today, that relationship is often not between God and person, or even person and person. Rather, it becomes person to image, via a television screen. In a world where cameras are so small they can be worn in hatbands, so ubiquitous that they survey department stores and banks and city streets around the clock and so prolific that news is covered every 24 hours and cable programming is nonstop, people are constantly being taped. The omniscient camera in daily life encourages in an untoward way the "culture of narcissism" identified by Christopher Lasch in his book by the same name. The reflection of self promotes "fiddling with the psyche while civilization turns soft and runny all around us."

At its worst, narcissism can be media infatuation gone mad. Consider John W. Hinckley, Jr. As described by author Jay Martin in his book, *Who Am I This Time?*, Hinckley was the third child in a family of three children. Living in the shadows of a successful brother and sister, he was described by classmates as "mousy," or "so normal he appeared to fade into the woodwork." As an adult he was a loner whose mind began to fill with fictions. As a student at Texas Tech, Martin recounts, Hinckley did little work. His landlord remembered, "He just sat there the whole time, staring at the TV." In the fall of 1980, Hinckley stalked President Jimmy Carter. He began to collect guns. He also began to live in a movie, *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese. The main character, Travis Bickle, was played by Robert De Niro. In Hinckley's mind, the character was Hinckley himself. Martin suggests the psychological appeal of the film for Hinckley was the way it was shot.

"In *Taxi Driver*, the camera is used ex-

pressionistically, so that the viewer is trapped inside it, and confined to the emotions it conveys. . . . The opening sequence shows how Bickle's mind works: how the camera functions, confines the viewer. . . . The style of the film is to stress explosive instants rather than narrative flow, since Bickle's fragmentary internal life sees the world in incandescent moments."

As the camera follows Travis Bickle around, it mirrors the character's perceptions; scenes of anger, antagonism, suspicion. His is an off-center, out-of focus world. The character is alone, cut off, unable to relate to anyone. John Hinckley, a "fictive personality," seized Bickle's point of view as his own. His actions mimicked the movie character, who was modeled, incidentally, after Arthur Bremer, the man who shot presidential candidate, George Wallace.

When Hinckley found the opportunity to shoot President Reagan, he later told a psychiatrist that he felt as if he were "just there, living out an experience," in which the participants "were bit players." In a speech prepared for the expected guilty verdict, he wrote: "My life has become a melodrama; I am now a household name."

Declared insane, Hinckley was remanded to St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D. C., where workers approached him for autographs. Hinckley achieved the destiny of his movie hero. He escaped private isolation, and because of media coverage, he came forth publicly to exist.

Hinckley's confusion is the result of illness. Our confusion, Boorstin suggests, is self-willed. His parting advice in *The Image* is to let the outside world in. He urges us to awake, to forego sleepwalking. "The least and most we can hope for," he says, "is that each of us may penetrate the unknown jungle of images in which we live our daily lives. That we may discover anew where dreams end and where illusions begin."

Often the line between dream and illusion can blur. For this reason, we who create images as professionals and we who consume images as spectators must remain vigilant. I sometimes think of Lucretia, now probably in her twenties, and her growing son, Josh. I hope she finished high school and attended community college as she planned. Most of all, I hope that being an unwed, teen-mother celebrity did not blind Lucretia to the fact that TV stardom is a short-lived illusion. But loving a child and pursuing one's dreams can build a satisfying life. *a*

Janet Martin, a former producer for the Public Broadcasting System of Virginia, is a freelance journalist living in Central Virginia.