

The Frame that Enslaved Our Gaze¹

At last Bulgaria got into the reality-world by staging Big Brother. When I first had a glimpse at it on a German TV channel, I thought this is the end. But the thing got on and on in ever new countries, languages and TV channels and I started to look for hidden meanings. Was it the expression of our repressed totalitarian desire to watch/being watched, replayed for a second time in the form of comedy? Was it a mass-culture version of Godot?

What you see is a media event being created out of sheer nothingness. The character is just “Being There”, as in Kosinzki’s famous novel, the rest is media. Their vision machine is so powerful that anything put into its grip becomes a star, even if it just lies around panting with boredom. And they get out and become singers, and publish CDs with their famous toothbrushing on day 24. Some centuries ago Caligula also staged his horse Incitatus in purple garments, jewelry, marble stables and invited him at his official dinners, but finally failed to make him a senator. Modern capitalism, having mutated into what Guy Debord called the society of spectacle, could have certainly done that for him in just three months. Some major anthropological change in the human being produced a Pavlovian physiological need for images, that makes us feel excluded from real life if TV is not on. You may sneer, be outraged, and still the TV is on - you drink coffee while the Big Brother stars drink coffee, you lie around while they lie around. The zero degree of broadcasting, Barthes would have said.

Consider the stupefactions in a patriarchal country like Bulgaria by the show, especially among the elderly who desperately tried to find a meaning in what was happening, or rather – not happening. Consider the passionate debates aroused by the fact that two hetero- and one homo-sexual contacts were realized between the TV-guineapigs under the camera-fever, that one went crazy, and several got regularly drunk. As elsewhere the show addressed youngsters looking for models of behavior, so the shadow of Hollywood was heavy: the participants (many of whom were chosen among the prestigious group of comeback emigrants) wore those turned backwards caps, nicknamed each other “Doc” or “Mel”, pointed their fingers around and ejaculated Yes! or Wow! So, in the chat-rooms the major question to discuss was whether our Big Brother was a worthy edition of what the “normal countries” had gone through, or was there some Balkan backwardness we should be ashamed of.

¹ Lettre International – Berlin, 02 2005.

But one is tempted to look for more general symptoms. Let me put it this way: *the frame of our gaze has become autonomous; the frame precedes the thing we are looking at*. Think of the shift that occurred with the invention of ready-mades by Duchamp. The frame “work of art” was gradually established by the institutionalization of galleries and museums throughout the 19th century: the frame is there, before the work, you are conditioned to expect some precious and interesting thing to appear inside it. Enter the Dadaist, who ridicules this monumental attention-machine by putting a urinal into the frame. (John de Mol takes it seriously and makes it sell).

Nationalist and political propaganda constantly instrumentalized the frame-in-search-of-an-object throughout the last two centuries. The Albanian Museum of atheism in Shkoder would present inside it evidence of the non-existence of God; the Bolsheviks would place there Lenin’s embalmed body; Nigeria’s president would display the Nok civilization as a proof of the country’s unity long before the arbitrary post-colonial designation of frontiers. The culture-generating power of the frame was enforced by organized tours of pupils, soldiers or party members; the ritual of bodily presence in front of the frame seemed somehow more important than the actual act of looking into it.

But it is the post-political world that let the frame out of the bottle: there is no need to organize or to enforce. What makes us see a movie, read a book? Well, it is the fact that many others have seen or read it. In fact, criticism tends to be marginalized by various toplists and if you still dare say that Titanic or Harry Potter is rubbish, you sound either like a personal enemy of the distributors, or at best, some strange bad-tempered outsider. The central question of any success in any field has become how much money they’ve spent on the project. If it was so expensive it couldn’t possibly be senseless! Having the biggest budget ever is nowadays the best advertising strategy.

And even well structured national cultures as France or Germany are undermined by World Wide Web, where the major movements are the result of sheer quantity even if each web page may imply positions, values, hierarchies. Who do you think would appear first in the searching machine, a serious critical opinion about a film or hundreds of ads, chats, technicalities? Even if the net does not look like a frame - as it does not exclude by definition - the major part of it remains outside of the center of the searcher’s attention. The limits of virtual attention are statistical, not absolute, nevertheless they orient our gaze in a rather peremptory way. The enormous part of the Web are practically invisible to us! So, one of the major concerns of enterprises is to get higher in the list of the searching machines – the same way stars strive to get to the front pages of magazines.

One could say this is the main characteristics of capitalism: you buy because others have bought. The problem is that watching has entered into the logic of buying, that interest fluctuates freely between what John Urry called strange attractors without plan or logic other than the “immense accumulation of

spectacles”². What could be the reason to stay uninformed of what the others know?

Unlike the word, the value of images is proportional to financial investment. Some sage or revolutionary might give you their word for free, motivated by some noble cause; they might even sacrifice their lives to give more power to it. Good images cannot be produced as easily as words, we do not have in our body some device to manufacture them, so they are mediated from the very beginning and will imply more and more investments throughout history. The Renaissance painter has his secretly produced paints; the architect designs our urban environment by means of tons of bricks and concrete; the photographer struggles to turn up at distant places to catch the best shot; filmmaker needs expensive computer programs to stage our desires.

The most fascinating images are often the most expensive ones, therefore it is the most powerful who tend to produce them. Who is likely to stage a nice, fascinating war – Russia, Pakistan, Serbia? Of course not. If wars should be global spectacles, they will certainly need serious investments. Cheap wars are ugly, the expensive ones catch our imagination (If so much money has been spent, it couldn’t have been for nothing!) Besides the record budget of films, here is the record budget of the American presidential campaign that might explain why the Ohio jobless worker would vote for Mr. Bush. Well, if money can generate interest for ordinary people doing nothing, why shouldn’t much more money sell a president?

Boris Groys wrote once that socialist realism fulfilled the project of modernism by imposing purity, violent ruptures and contempt for the real taste of the masses. In a way the world of reality shows – be it on TV, in publishing, in politics or at the battlefield – fulfills the dream of socialist realism of an almighty frame that would control the gaze of the masses never mind what is depicted inside it. Only, instead of being in the hands of ardent ideologues, the frame nowadays floats freely under the winds of capital.

² Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle*, § 1 (1967)