

# HAVE YOU SEEN YOUR WORLD TODAY?

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Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.

Gregory Ulmer, *Teleteory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.

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"as though ... the simulation of real life were not part of real life" (Jacques Derrida)

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During the murder trial of O.J. Simpson, witnesses regularly testified that they were unable to recall the precise times of past events by reference to clocks or watches or even printed records, but only by the hours at which their favorite television programs began and ended everyday.

One witness, according to a New York tabloid: "I Saw O.J.'s Bronco." But who didn't? For so many hours that summer afternoon and evening our world was O.J.'s Bronco, across Los Angeles and across our televisions, images passed from chopper to chopper and screen to screen. All of the narrative drama of the trial, even the promise of a resolution, will never compare with the utter dislocation of that drive, its endless and aimless dispersion, its blinding and riveting monotony. Where was that car that we saw, and how fast was it going? On television, it moved at the speed of light.

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"Today," wrote Ernst Jünger in 1934,

today any event worthy of notice is surrounded by a circle of lenses and microphones and lit up by the flaming explosions of flashbulbs. In many cases, the event itself is completely subordinated to its "transmission"; to a great degree, it has been turned into an object. Thus we have already experienced political trials, parliamentary meetings, and contests whose sole purpose is to be the object of a planetary broadcast. The event is bound neither to its particular space nor its particular time, since it can be mirrored anywhere and repeated any number of times.(1)

Today, this fearful and precise observation rings like a commonplace, a cliché of what we blithely call the 'television age,' and yet it retains considerable shock value. Today, these figures have become constitutive of our everyday experience of television -- the priority of the transmission over the event 'itself,' the ubiquitous light of publicity, unbridled repetition and the disappearance of distance, and even the emergence of global events that seem to belong only to the medium -- while paradoxically remaining grounds for enthusiasm as well as suspicion and resistance. We know, and repeat any number of times, that television has no respect for reality or experience, and that rather than effacing itself in the world-giving transparency that ought to be proper to a medium as such it instead turns opaquely into a space and time (more than one) itself, 'the media.' And today, everyday, we are still surprised by the damage television does to our sense of the way things are and ought to be, and we learn nothing from our astonishment. Whether falling back reactively on everything charred in those flaming explosions, or leaping exuberantly out of them into some unknown fire, we remain blinded by the glare of this electro-optical light to the theoretical difficulties and possibilities of television.

The violent light of publicity and the irreducibility of televisual transmission are, finally, strangely unaccountable events. Without offering the ground for any determinate politics, conservative or radical, they nevertheless disarm from within the entire metaphysical apparatus which props up the television system and which our ongoing amazement seeks, wittingly or unwittingly, to reaffirm. The explosions and the broadcast still seem to befall the event like an accident, and the particular present, in time and space, of its occurrence seems not simply unbound but truly lost, sacrificed, scattered across the wilderness of

so many airwaves. But the dispersal is originary: that is the point Jünger approaches, however hesitantly. Events "whose sole purpose is to be the object of a planetary broadcast" means that things take place, and time, on television -- not just in order to be broadcast, but only insofar as they are transmitted.

Today, things happen, good and bad, on TV -- which is not to say that they don't also happen elsewhere, or that they just don't happen,<sup>(2)</sup> but they do in fact happen ... on air. The time and space of television condition our world -- they do not make it any less real, and certainly not any less true. We do not confirm or verify, like amateur epistemologists, the actual existence of things by checking in with (their representations on) our televisions -- no, we simply take the time to watch them happen. This remains the most difficult thing to think about television: what happens there, and when it comes to pass. Events bound for broadcast, unbound from the present: again, for the first time, they return ... a flashback, a trauma, a ghost.

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Almost a decade ago, Jacques Derrida faced a video camera in Toronto and talked about film and television ... "a ghost dance," he called them:

... contemporary technologies like film, television, telephones. ... live on or off of, in some way, a ghostly structure. Film is an art of the ghost, which is to say, it is neither image nor perception. ... The voice on the telephone also has a ghostly appearance. It is something neither real nor unreal, something which returns, is reproduced -- finally, it's the question of reproduction. From the moment when the first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, we are dealing with the ghostly. <sup>(3)</sup>

A few years later, again on camera, Derrida admonished a group of architects in Japan about the necessity to take what he now called "telefacture" or the *fac simile* seriously, the need to attend to

the new structure of spatio-temporal *différance* constructed by new techniques of telecommunication, by new powers of production as well as reproduction -- information, images, discourse, and even the event in general. The event itself, like the concept of experience and of the testimony that claims to refer to it, finds itself affected, in its inside, beyond the public-private opposition, by the possibility of the shot [*prise de vue*] and of reproduction from practically *anywhere to anywhere*. <sup>(4)</sup>

The event -- for example, in the time of the shot and of its planetary (or even extra-planetary) transmission -- names one of the privileged problems or themes of deconstructive questioning. Whether thought as iterability, dissemination, or the 'originary' simulacrum, the ghost or the *fac simile* has not ceased to provoke Derrida's attention.

For now, though, what is of interest is that these hints -- which repeatedly punctuate the thematic texture of most of Derrida's work from the late 1980's on, and which structure at the deepest level its conceptual labor -- have not been taken up anywhere, or practically anywhere. Why? Nothing would seem a more tempting a target for a deconstructive reading than television -- so utterly metaphysical in its presuppositions and its claims, and yet strictly discontinuous in its operations with the experience of subjectivity and representation that defines this metaphysics -- and yet it has managed to evade rigorous theoretical scrutiny almost entirely. Setting aside the vast bulk of work in cultural and media studies -- which has contributed importantly to our understanding of the psycho-political economic apparatus of TV, but which continues to let the tough theoretical questions go unasked or answers them defensively -- good solid deconstructive texts on television have been practically non-existent in all the years since *Of Grammatology* or "Signature Event Context." <sup>(5)</sup>

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Perhaps things are starting to happen. We could say that they began with the turn of the decade, which witnessed Avital Ronell's tour de force *The Telephone Book*, and perhaps they're starting again now, with Samuel Weber's *Mass Mediauras* on the way and McKenzie Wark's *Virtual Geography* just out. But for our purposes here the sequence -- and the diversity of approaches -- is best bracketed with Gregory Ulmer's *Teletheory* (1989) and Richard Dienst's *Still Life in Real Time* (1994).

Ulmer's programmatic book seeks to extend his perhaps unlikely experiment in the popularization and

application of some deconstructive maneuvers, inaugurated with *Applied Grammatology* (1985), into what the subtitle calls "the age of video." "Teletheory," he begins, "is the application of grammatology to television in the context of schooling." What does Ulmer think about television? In a word, it's unclear. Television and video are not inert objects to which some formal apparatus (if deconstruction or grammatology is one) can simply be applied, and however confident Ulmer is in the word "application" he is properly uncertain about what his book is about, about whether *Teletheory* is, after all, "on television." If, as he writes elsewhere, each of his books "started out trying to be a book about television," (6) then *Teletheory*, at least, turned out otherwise: "my project ... does not take video as its object, but as its cause," and it offers finally not an analysis but "an oblique teletheorization of video" and of its institutionalization in or on television. This obliquity maps the displacement from "about" to "with" -- "not to explain video but to think with it" (xii) is Ulmer's aim. The boldly sideways stroke is characteristic of Ulmer's strategy, which dances around television and video to sketch a broad program, a plan rich in imperatives and targets, and generously productive of examples and insights. What better way to deal with the fact that, today, TV is not just one thing, that "the age of television is emerging in pieces" (44)? The operation is skillful, adjusting authoritatively the difficult relation between talking only obliquely about TV as such and producing a masterplan for all sorts of possible new genres to which this new "age" might give rise. Not to analyze or read the television that exists, but to invent ways of making all that we do implicitly and practically televisual, finally to act our age, piece by piece -- that is Ulmer's aspiration. Ulmer's text, indeed his entire project, is governed by this effort to displace analysis in the name of invention. Whatever sympathies we might have with this resistance to a hermeneutics of understanding and to the immediacy of a thematization, there is of course considerable risk in beginning with the "assum[ption] that video is not something in need of explanation" -- namely, that we will we think we already know what video is, if indeed it is something, in our search for what it "has given us to think" (xii) and that we will take for granted just those operations which, indeed, make it so difficult to think. To think *with* video, as if it's simply ready at hand, to think it as a cause or as the ground of a reality (an "age") rather than merely an object in that world, can amount to renouncing the very deconstructive questioning for which it calls. This difficulty is the direct obverse of the "application" dilemma -- both cause and instrument seem curiously stable here, video and deconstruction equally available and incapable of interfering with the desires of the subjects who manipulate them. (7) Even if the avowed desire of this particular subject is to "think beyond method" (170), or to opt for the relay over the model (211), Ulmer's drive toward the generalizability of "program" (65) or "software" (ix) is strong, and it operates at the text's deepest level in the way it reads and the use to which it puts "the theories of Derrida and the other French poststructuralists" (vii).

These initial reservations (the dream of application, on the one hand, and the assumption of the object, on the other) aside, Ulmer's book produces a powerful model of what it could be to teach and learn at a time when "cognition itself might be changing in a civilization switching to electronics" (2). Operating in a mode he calls variously sampling (13), plundering (18), or confiscating (154), he presents a series of descriptions of theoretical problems that bear, whether thematically or analogically, on the problem of "how to organize academic discourse in the age of television" (184). The breadth and diversity of the material plundered is truly astonishing: teletheory proves itself a very high-capacity processor for an otherwise incommensurable collection of objects, producing compact reports on, summaries of, and quotations from a breathtaking variety of sources. Freud and William Bennett, Mary Kelly and Jean-Louis Comolli, Quintillian and N. Scott Momaday, John Cage's mushrooms and General Sherman's march, artificial intelligence and the atomic bomb -- all find their places, and their relations, in this grand periodic table of the elements of our age.

The descriptions, brought together as components of this general teletheory, threaten of course to become retellings of the same story under different names, and to lose their fragmented specificity precisely to the extent that they succeed in submitting themselves to the generality of the theoretical law. But conceptual generality, formalization in view of popular application, is Ulmer's goal. He identifies it as "one of the most difficult and important issues for teletheory: how to bring the particular or singular into relation with the general or the global" (170), and whether it happens, as he proposes, "in the manner of the relay rather than the model" doesn't affect the procedure overmuch. Teletheory seeks nothing less than to "institutionalize invention," and Ulmer sees in video the technical possibility or "prosthesis" that will allow the dissemination of creativity itself rather than mere analysis (71). Ulmer does not hesitate to propose "solutions" (28, 171), both conceptual and exemplary, for a "problem" that he treats as sheerly practical (how to: this is the pedagogical imperative). The answers, at a strategic level, are familiar and

interesting ones: he emphasizes montage and grafting, jokes and puns, allegory and rhetoric, among others, as the privileged strategies for the production of what he calls a "mystory" (a quasi-autobiographical, quasi-theoretical video/text that we all might invent, for ourselves). Along with their friends love, mourning, rhizomes, tourism, the proper name or the signature, mnemotechnics, and catachresis, for example, these 'poststructuralist' terms become tropes or elements in "a rationale and [set of] guidelines" (vii) for this new, video-age, genre. Ulmer's own mystory closes the book, a complex interweaving of family and personal narrative, Derrida, Custer's Last Stand, and a lot more. The text is marvelous (and the video might be even better), but its easy, open, chaotic, and undisciplined experimentation seems far from the spirit, let alone the rules, of the general teletheory. One wishes that this inventiveness were extended to the analysis of things that happen on television, or how they happen, but Ulmer keeps his distance. His mystory is, he says, on videotape, but the relation to television remains, after all, oblique. (8)

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It was Walter Benjamin who, just as Jünger was worrying about those explosions and the planetary broadcasts in their wake, saw unheard-of possibilities of movement in this new experience of time and speed:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and our furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (9)

Now, history itself, its events and the very manner in which it occurs, are transformed in the strange and everyday time of the camera ... "with its resources of lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions" (237). Today, with freeze frames and live shots, flow and zapping, mixing and switching, television radicalizes this cinematic vocabulary of temporal redistribution, leaving a great deal more debris a lot farther flung. The remarkable empires built in these ruins are the field of operations for Richard Dienst's *Still Life in Real Time*, which handles the dynamite of television time with extraordinary care. In this field, beyond the public-private opposition, the speed of the transmission and the ghost of the tape give rise to a rigorous rethinking of the explosive possibilities of TV as temporality: "Televsual time is already in the air, lofted in the world's atmosphere and running rings around earthly existence. No longer the core of psychic life or the continuum on which everything finds its place, but time as the infinitesimal fissuring of an interminable present" (159). Dienst's is in the best sense a traditional, straightforward book, a series of readings of essential texts on or around television, happily lacking in stylistic innovation or typographical complexity. There are chapters on Raymond Williams' "flow" and some early accounts of television's global reach; the economics of "geotelevision" (64) and its "work for capital" (58); what happens when "television confronts Being" (xii) in Heidegger's technology essays; telecommunication and desterrance, via Derrida; and the image as movement and time in Deleuze. These five chapters are divided, roughly down the middle, with exemplary readings of Madonna videos, *Crime Story*, and *Twin Peaks*. The book is unequivocally about television -- from MTV and VCRs to CNN and commercials -- and soaked in theory. The readings of theory and television are elegantly articulated and completely reliable: I do not know of more faithful and helpful interpretations of Derrida (especially "Signature Event Context" and *The Post Card*) and Heidegger, and a more nuanced account of contemporary capitalism as a cultural force would be hard to find.

Dienst argues quite simply that television takes time, but it gives and makes use of an experience of time utterly at odds with that offered by the Western metaphysical tradition and embalmed in common sense. "Televsual images do not represent things so much as they take up time" (64). Representation is not renounced, of course, in the name of that "interminable present," whether the flow of images or the instantaneous broadcast or the comfortable domestic time of the spectator, but rather of its "infinitesimal fissuring." The time of television is not the time of the subject or some calm succession of presents, nor the apocalyptic temporality of this or that "end" of whatever. TV time is different: Dienst watches satellite-relays and images at the speed of light, but also the discontinuities of channel-surfing and the archiving or time-shifting figured by the VCR. He studies the peculiar "staging of the present tense" signaled by "the little word 'LIVE' electronically pasted over the image" (164), but also neo-capitalism's socialization of all that time spent watching (61). While these are somewhat familiar themes in the literature of television, *Still Life* introduces a fundamental deconstructive rupture: if, as Mary Ann Doane wrote, "the major

category of television is time,"(10) then for Dienst television is "where time is sent and spent without the certainty of sense or the unity of seeing" (99). Letters of all sorts can always not reach their destination, and this risk makes all the difference.

*Still Life in Real Time* seems a bit torn, if in a good way, between (let's say) Jameson and Derrida. There are pledges of fidelity to a number of the precepts of the big *Postmodernism* book, where the path from Sartre to Deleuze has already been beaten, but Dienst complicates the master narrative of "late capitalism" enormously with the removal -- at the theoretical level -- of the certainty of sense or the unity of seeing. And on the other hand, "rather than making deconstruction and television sound alike" (131), Dienst simply intercuts them conceptually and delivers, as it were, on a lot of the suggestions Derrida has made, from the observations about spectral temporalities or global transmission to those, for instance, about "a public space profoundly upset by techno-tele-mediatic apparatuses and by the new rhythms of information and communication,"(11) among other things. Of particular interest is Dienst's subtle and devastating reworking of Althusser's theory of ideological interpellation, which "can only be made rigorous by Derrida's postulate of misdirection" and, once it is, yields a compelling account of ideology as a "mass of sendings ... whose force consists precisely in the fact that they are not perfectly destined" [141]. The elegance of this operation, and the rest of the book, is that it does not depend on Derrida's specific references to television as such in order to produce its "deconstructive questioning," but rather pushes the analysis of telecommunication and "destination" to its inevitable encounter with "television and its world" (xi). The "deconstruction of television" operates at a theoretical level so efficiently and disruptively that it seems to generate that situation, to which Benjamin once aspired, where "all factuality is already theory."(12) This could be the motto:

In spite of its economic and existential immensity, the televisual system is structured on tenuous textual networks held together by an unfounded guarantee that messages always reach their destination. Perhaps, Derrida suggests, a little uncertainty in the right places is all it takes to disturb this network. Or, just as likely, a little uncertainty in the right places keeps the whole thing together. A deconstruction of television maps both sides of the ideal communicative equation: disturbances and bonds, gaps and attachments, displacements and localizations, constant breakdowns and unlimited relays. (xii)

To repeat: "television, where time is sent and spent without the certainty of sense or the unity of seeing." This deconstruction challenges, in the best possible way, most of the existing positions in debates over television, from Postman and Gitlin to the situationism of the Debord-Baudrillard fraction to the hegemonic culturalist studies of TV's consumers and their fantasmatic identifications. All are handed over to the epistemological, which is to say, ethico-political, corrosion of televisual time, and its analysis explodes all uncritical theories of the relations between so-called real things and their representations, on the one hand, or of the so-called subject's manipulation by or creative uses of these representations. The move is simple but explosive: without being able to take meaning or seeing for granted, the analysis of television can finally to start to look at what happens there, and when. "Time moves in two directions on television," Dienst argues, introducing near the end of the book the valuable distinction between "still" and "automatic" time, mixed up and crossed over in the everyday glow of the screen. But "both the still and the automatic can occur at speeds separated from human existential reality -- indeed, that is the whole point of trying to think about them" (160).

This separation from all the presuppositions of humanism, so easily criticized but difficult to dislodge, gives rise in the end -- everyday -- to a new experience of responsibility and of the ethico-political imperative. Television takes, and gives, time. "When television is no longer offered as a single expressive event, ... each act of viewing becomes charged with the responsibility of fabricating its own present tense, affirming the basic transaction while watching for a message, waiting to see what comes next. The televisual bargain will last, moment by moment, as long as we feel we owe something to television, whether it is the solemn duty to find sense in what we see or the sweet burden to pursue our pleasures there" (168-9). The debt is intolerable because it is not just mine, nor is the time simply ours. Dienst is properly uncertain about how to live up to this responsibility, the constraints of this unbearable present. Sense and pleasure cannot just be renounced, and Dienst does not want to, least of all when their certainty and unity are deconstructed. The debt cannot be acquitted, and the responsibility is limitless. But he hesitates to give in, simply to watch and to switch, to do his duty and glue his eyes to the screen. Of course, there could be no question either of giving up, turning away and looking elsewhere, as if TV could be avoided. How to see something besides what television shows? Dienst offers nothing more, and nothing less, than "thought" -- no way out, but a long way in, into the world of TV where we might begin to

take advantage of its 'infinitesimal fissuring of this interminable present,' and to open in those cracks the possibility of another future.

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"Have you seen your world today?," asks the advertising campaign for CBS News. Tonight, two days after the Bosnian Serb Army overran the UN-declared "safe area" of Srebrenica and evicted its population, the anchor of France 2's "Le journal de 20H00," Bruno Masure, asked his reporter how the people of Sarajevo were reacting. (13) Correspondent Giles Rabine, live via satellite from Sarajevo, answered:

The Sarajevans have been under siege for thirty-nine months, thirty-nine months in which they've heard everything, waiting for everything, hoped in vain that things would get better. No one in Europe has undergone such a siege, lived such a nightmare, for more than a century and a half. Tomorrow, or the day after, it will be Zepa that falls into Serb hands, then Gorazde perhaps, and the UN is unlikely to stop them. The Sarajevans have had enough of being interviewed, of being filmed, of being photographed. They have had enough of us watching them die, live and direct, without trying to do anything to save them. And who's to tell them that they're wrong?

## FOOTNOTES

1. Ernst Jünger, "On Pain," partially excerpted in Christopher Phillips, ed., *Photography in the Modern Era*, New York: Aperture, 1989, 209; "Über den Schmerz," in *Sämtliche Werke*, Essays I, Band 7, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1980, 183. Thanks to Eduardo Cadava for alerting me to this passage.
2. Writing about the Gulf War, Jean Baudrillard is infinitely more reactionary than the television he claims to worry about, accepting without protest an entirely metaphysical definition of reality and occurrence (*La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*, Paris: Galilée, 1991).
3. Jacques Derrida, "La danse des fantômes/The Ghost Dance," interview with Andrew Payne and Mark Lewis, *Public 2*, 1989, 61/68.
4. Jacques Derrida, "Faxitexture," trans. Laura Bourland, in Cynthia Davidson, ed., *Anywhere*, New York: Rizzoli, 1992, 29-30 (translation lightly modified).
5. A strong but short list of writers seems to name almost all the candidates -- Mary Ann Doane, Deborah Esch, Avital Ronell, McKenzie Wark, Samuel Weber, David Wills and Peter Brunette -- in addition to Gregory Ulmer and Richard Dienst. A less retentive definition of deconstruction might appeal in addition to some texts by Fredric Jameson, Friedrich Kittler, Jean-François Lyotard, Meaghan Morris, and Paul Virilio.
6. Gregory Ulmer, "The Making of 'Derrida at the Little Bighorn': An Interview," *Strategies 2* (1989), 9.
7. Derrida has repeatedly and emphatically warned that deconstruction cannot be treated as a neutral tool of intervention, and that indeed instrumentality is an eminently deconstructible philosopheme. "Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one, ... deconstruction [can]not be reduced to some methodological instrumentality or to a set of rules and transposable procedures" ("Letter to a Japanese Friend," in Peggy Kamuf, ed., *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, 273).
8. See Derrida's remarks on obliquity in "Passions: An Oblique Offering," in David Wood, ed., *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, 12-13.
9. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 236.
10. Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in Patricia Mellencamp, ed., *Logics of Television*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 222.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx*, Paris: Galilée, 1993, 131.
12. Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, trans. Richard Seiburth, *October 35* (1986), 132.
13. France 2, "Le journal de 20H00," Thursday, 13 July 1995. Two and a half years earlier, CNN's Christiane Amanpour had reported a similar despair with the televisual: "Take any day in the life of this city. The sights are so familiar, perhaps they have lost their impact. ... Around noon another mortar falls. More people are killed and injured. They are rushed to the hospital. The emergency ward is full. Surgeons labor to save lives. The operating theatre is awash in blood. Early on in the war the staff were patient with photographers, hoping perhaps their pictures would shock the world into doing something. The world has done nothing and the doctors have lost hope and patience" (*CNN Week in Review*, 31 January 1993).

## NOTES

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