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The Other Lilliput:

Commodity-life and the Discontinuous Space of Television

ABSTRACT

The following essay suggests that the displaced—exilic, nomadic, or diasporatic—viewer, for whom television seems to offer the promise of a glimpse into an otherwise concealed intimate realm, occupies a privileged position from which to understand the role of television in an age of globalization. Rejecting the view that television involves a “spectacular” or “similacric” relation to reality and a merely passive, receptive mode of engagement, I suggest instead that television produces a realm of action-truth: a realm in which certain kinds of action become possible which are at once grounded in, and in turn reveal, a certain manner of truth. This realm of truth-action can be seen as a miniaturization of the reality to which it refers, but it is characterized above all by its heterogeneous constitution and discontinuous topology: it brings into contact private and public, domestic and political, the generically universal and intimately singular. The action-truth that TV opens up onto involves, above all else, the possibility of bringing these incommensurable factors into relation. And in this way it ultimately produces the possibility of a

form of life centered on the commodity, understood not as a simple article of exchange-value and use-value, but as the fusing of a generic type of thing to a complex of associations: character and personality types; emotions; dreams; fantasies; desires; historical moments; melodies; thoughts; religious, ethical, political values; places; and spiritual notions. The way in which television produces a realm of truth-action centered on the commodity is explored from a number of angles, with special focus on the TV shows *24* and *America's Next Top Model*. At the same time, through the invocation of Cho Se-hŭi's *The Dwarf*, I suggest the need to regard television from the perspective of literature, so as to maintain a critical distance from the *truth-action* that it conjures into existence.

“Finally, it’s time to write and think this body across the infinite distance that makes it *ours*, that brings it to come from a site more remote than any of our thoughts: the exposed body of the world’s *population*. (Whence a necessity still completely indecipherable: *this body calls for popular writing, popular thinking.*)”

Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*

“One day, when the cold had slowly started to abate, I sought out the man of science. The Klein bottle was on his windowsill. I considered it. ‘Now I understand,’ I hastened to say. ‘In this bottle, inside becomes outside and outside becomes inside. Because there’s no inside or outside, we can’t talk of containing the inside—the notion of closing it has no meaning here. If you just follow the wall, you can get out. So in this world the notion of enclosure itself is an illusion.’”

Cho Se-hŭi, *The Dwarf*

I.

Television: literally far-vision, vision of what is far away, far off—bringing the distant, most distant things not only close to home, but into the home. Not only the lives of strange families, but a life that has very little to do anymore with the family: wars, natural disasters, the secret lives of animals, exotic locales, political spaces of every kind, meteorological phenomena, even the first steps across the face of the moon. Yet there is also another side of television, easy to forget: the television of the traveler. The traveler, now more than ever, is subject to a double estrangement. Not only the strangeness of a place that is different than home, but of a place that seems to have nothing to do with home. The world that the traveler passes through exists, for the

most part, only as the facades of the world, superficially public (political) and private: public spaces in which he cannot claim the rights of a citizen, palaces that have been preserved as a relic of past powers, hotels, restaurants, museums, bars, cafes, crowds in the street; intimate conversations overheard; the windows of homes offering only an awkward, fugitive peak inside. Yet the moment he turns on the television—one is waiting for him in every hotel room—a different view opens up. Television offers a glimpse, strange and distorted as it may be, beyond the surface. Indeed, it shows a surface that opens itself up, that curves inside, that unfolds into its interior. Soap operas, game shows, local news, educational television, art and music channels expose a system of cultural codes, values, and intimate spaces that would otherwise remain off limit. And at the same time, above all for the traveler from countries that have become dominant cultural exporters, television recalls the world from which he came, which, repackaged as it has been as a global commodity, nevertheless gains a new, unheard-of intimacy when seen from afar.

These interactions, needless to say, become more and more complicated with the dissolution of the normative concept of national, native identity. Yet they still remain in effect. The aim of the following essay is to try to think this effect through to its limit. It is an essay in a strict and even traditional sense: a series of attempts, approaching the phenomena from different sides, seeking to get at something obscure and difficult rather than producing the effect and appearance of a solid argument. It will not shy away from the seemingly subjective or impressionistic, when this is perhaps the only access to the phenomenon at hand. Nor will it rest with this. The method, in other words, is itself *televisionary*: a *television of television*—trying to regard television at once from within and without the dislocated subject (a subject that can never quite keep inside and outside straight) that it produces. Thus there is no need to show the hand of the argument all at once, and also no need to deny the *experience* that initiated these reflections, and that continues to sustain them: my own slightly jarring (there are also light shocks, and these must be addressed) experience as a transplanted American academic, living in Korea, with only a meager command of the language (though assisted by my wife, who grew up in Korea), and yet watching very mainstream American TV broadcasts on nation-wide, international or Korean-owned, cable networks (OCN and FOX). It is not my intention to try to cash out my own ignorance of cultural codes as a positive theoretical resource, but only to suggest an aspect of global culture that becomes evident to an exilic subject capable of experiencing a certain shock of estrangement.

II.

It is necessary first of all to confront an objection which, commonplace as it is, threatens to render all critical analysis of television sterile. It goes like this: of course television shows us a domestic space, just as it shows us hospitals, police stations, and wars in distant lands. But these showings remain “spectacular”: the soap about everyday family life, the reality show or even the documentary, does not “really” present “reality,” and indeed there are many dimensions of experience, and many voices, both subaltern and powerful, that are hidden from view.

We should abandon this Platonic vocabulary with all its metaphysical and ontological assumptions. Television (and in this it is no different than all art) does not present a spectacular or simulacric imitation of the putatively real, but involves a logic of transformations, intensifications, purifications, dissolutions. The world of even the most trite soap opera or trivial reality show is not a falsification of the world, but a certain modification of the world, and first and foremost of the emotional pallet of the world on which it depends. Through this chemical process, it presents a reduction of the world, a miniaturization of the world reducing it to a proportion in which action—human action—becomes possible.¹ It is alone in this way, through a thinking that, abandoning both the Platonic conception of truth as correspondence and the Heideggerian conception of truth as the interplay of concealment and disclosure, understands truth instead in terms of the reduction and simplification that enables praxis, that we can begin to measure the truth of television. As a reduction of a world to which it refers, a world that has already been constituted by a vast, interwoven system of reductions, the world of television, like every artistic world, is not less true than that world. But if every reduction *brings out a certain possibility of truth*, or could even in a certain way be said to produce an intensification of *actionable truth*, nevertheless as this *complex of truth and action, of knowledge and power*, every truth must always remain open to judgment, and indeed to a judgment that is absolute and groundless, since it cannot refer back to any truth, let alone the one Truth, as its criterion.

¹ Ultimately, we could think of this not just in terms of art, or symbolic/semiotic systems, but in terms of sensual perception, motility, and ultimately consciousness itself—the basic attributes of what we call life. The power of perception arises as a reduction of a universal connectedness. What we think of as rationality, the power of language, is not an expansion, but a further reduction.

Criticism is the art of opening up truth to judgment. This criticism is not what we ordinarily think of as *literary criticism*: it is not a question of judging the worth (aesthetic, moral, political...) of a work of literature, but of judging from the perspective of literature: not because literature represents an *absolute perspective*, containing all other truths, but because literature, almost alone, allows a sensitivity to differences in truth. *Literature is the sensorium of truth as truth.*

III.

The TV from the house across the alley sounded louder in the middle room. Shin-ae hadn't been paying attention to the sound of the TV that evening.

"At least *we* can try to be quiet," said Shin-ae. "Father's sleeping."

"Are you kidding? How can he sleep through this?"

"You're not old enough to know what it means to be exhausted." (*Cho* 19)

It is now hard, especially in South Korea, to imagine a world in which the television had not yet become an almost universal fixture of life; in which it was still a sign of influence, arrogantly imposing its noise from afar on those who lived more modestly. Yet though the television makes only a small appearance in the *Dwarf*, Cho Se-Hui's extraordinary treatment of the social costs of South Korea's economic miracle, this work also suggests a perspective from which to begin to *criticize* the truth of television. The daughter of the protagonist, himself the symbol for the everyman dwarfed by the massive scale of industrialized society, dreams of an imaginary town called Lilliput, dislocated from the realm of fiction into a seemingly real place "near Lake Hastro in Germany." (129): "Lilliput is an international town of dwarfs. Dwarfs from various countries have gathered there to live... In places other than Lilliput dwarfs live lives of inconvenience and danger because the scale of everything is too large... The dwarfs who have gathered there from various countries have reduced the world to their scale. They have exercised the vote. They have disregarded anything that smacks of nationality... Through their collective power and their ardent wish for an autonomous community they established a town of dwarfs." If, from Plato's *Republic*, the utopia has been the idea of a perfect world that, given to the vision of philosopher, could be

imposed from on high, this vision is the very opposite of utopian. It is, rather, the strict insistence on a collective action that would produce a world in which action is possible: the refusal to accept the *either-or* of terroristic action or a blind submission to the fateful necessity of historical change and progress. *It is revolution as the constructive reduction of a colossal world back to a human scale.*

Nowadays television is everywhere—especially in South Korea, which has become a world leader in the development of portable media technologies. And at the same time both Yǒng-hǔi's vision of *Lilliput*, and Cho Se-hǔi's apocalyptic vision of industrialization, seem quaint and strange, at least in those societies that have already made it through the first and most disruptive phases of economic development. But perhaps it is precisely this vision of *Lilliput*, and the truth of this vision, that has been realized through television. Perhaps television is nothing else than a reduction and dwarfing of the world: the world rendered with smaller proportions, and in such a way that action would be possible. With television everything is brought into the space of the home, or even the portable space of the individual, cramped into public transportation: everything is cut down to size. Even films, precisely so as to preserve the right proportions, must be subjected to a final cut. And perhaps the transition from an industrial capitalism to post-industrial capitalism involves more than just a passage from the need to mobilize and develop the powers of production to the need to produce consumption. The significant accomplishment of consumer culture is the creation, through constructive reduction, of a small world in which a certain kind of human action is possible. Television has created a *global village* in which everything is small, and where everyone who has been dwarfed by the *massive scale* of things, can congregate, and feel at home, and even act.

Yet this global village is also a factory town, built on a redevelopment zone—on the clearing left over after so many other forms of dwelling, unofficial as they were, have been razed to the ground. And it also serves as a capacitor into which the unbound energies, unleashed by the dislocating shock of rapid historical change, can be safely discharged.

Television is not an untrue spectacle. It is part of a regime of actionable truth. The danger of television is not that it hides the Truth, but that it closes off our vision to other truths and other

possibilities; truths and possibilities that were also becoming. The following words give a hint of what these might have been:

They acted as if they were in a completely different boat from ours. They made more than ten times as much money as we did. In the evening they returned to their happy families in their clean homes far from the industrial area. They lived in warm houses. They didn't know. Management didn't know that the young workers, though they didn't demonstrate when they were anxious to have something, were sprouting into something utterly new. None of the management tried to see, so none of them knew of this change. If pressed to explain, I would call it a kind of power—a power that is completely skeptical of authority. (Cho 147)

IV.

The claim that television is part of a system of actionable truth sounds odd. We are inclined to think of television as involving a purely passive form of existence, an avoidance of *real living*. Such a view, however, gets us nowhere, since this very notion of *real living* (physical, sensual, consuming real things, productive of wealth and money) is a function of the truth that television presents. Even if, for the most part, the flow of information remains one-sided, even if we are not usually able to interact but in a most crude way with the box that we stare at, nevertheless the television, far from just turning us into proverbial couch potatoes, opens up a certain possibility of living and praxis: a certain organization and functional interrelation of sensations, emotions, thoughts, perceptions, movements, actions that stretches far out into what we call *real life*. Television, in this sense, does not stand alone: it operates within a differentiated array of other media that interrelate to it. But even if we might avoid identifying it with a regime of truth-knowledge that defines an entire historical epoch, we could at least explain it as the central node. Almost everything, it seems, passes through television.

This mode of praxis centers around the commodity. The commodity of which we speak, and which has come to play such a vital role in “late capitalism,” is not simply a solid material good that can be produced, used, and exchanged. It is, rather, a fusing of a type of thing, a generic thing, with a complex of associations: with character and personality types; emotions; dreams;

fantasies; desires; historical moments; melodies; thoughts; religious, ethical, political values; places; and spiritual notions. As use-value the commodity stands in a neutral relation to other actionable truths: it is nothing more than a means to other ends. As pure exchange value the *commodity* represents the *foreclosure* of the very possibility of action; or the reduction of all action to mere exchange. Between the apologetics of the one and the apocalypse of the other, the commodity of which we speak—we might, tentatively, call it the *mythopractic commodity*—opens up the possibility of action, and indeed of a meaningful, which is to say, truth-full action. Above all: the commodity is what cuts down to size. It takes even what is most sublime and monstrous and makes it *palpable, graspable, comprehensible*. Thus the profound complicity of television and commodities: the truth of television is to reduce a world that has become ever more colossal, ever more monstrous and obscene in its proportions, into such small proportions that it can be grasped and acted on by those that the world has dwarfed.

The television advertisement, of course, is the principle, though not exclusive, site of this production. In an odd counterpoint to the “real” shows, laced into them as a continual montage, interrupting an otherwise continual narrative, even imposing their order on events presented in real time, the ad offers a triumphant parade of things; testifying to the refinements and innovations made possible by industrial technologies. This is clear enough. What is necessary, though, is to understand how the production of the mythopractic commodity takes place through the very discontinuity that is a seldom recognized, but absolutely pivotal, structural element of television.

Viewed by the diasporatic subject, advertisements reveal an aspect otherwise obscured by the seeming immediacy of the language they utilize. The logic of marketing demands a structure that duplicates and indeed first produces the intrigue of the commodity: the advertisement sutures a more or less global commodity—a commodity, this is to say, addressed to an audience that, under the pressure of globalization, has become ever more uniform in its needs (make-up, automobiles, cell phones, laptop computers, and, finally, loans)—with a register of affects, ideals, values, beliefs, family structures, melodies and even gestures that remain rooted in precisely those aspects of regional and local culture that offer the greatest resistance to universalization and homogenization. Marketing may prey on the fantasies of the individual, but these fantasies

are never just the fantasies of an individualistic self that would fill out the universal subject with particular interests, quirks, talents, and desires. They belong, rather, to the realm of an irreducibly particular, local, or even singular culture that is fundamentally *incommensurable* with the universal. And thus, if television and mass-media seem to be the most powerful forces of cultural homogenization, nevertheless the space within which such media operate and which they constitute—television is only the most exemplary case—is anything but homogenous.

This notion of a *constitutive moment of the incommensurable that operates within the homogenizing power of media* provides a perspective from which to conceptualize the new life—we might call this a *paralife*, not a *Nachleben* but a *Nebenleben*—that mainstream American television assumes when it is translated, subtitled or dubbed, and broadcast into a new cultural milieu. What is important, above all, is not to see it as a mere *replanting*, a merely colonial and imperialistic move operating at the level of culture, but rather to recognize that even if the kernel of the media product remains more or less the same, it becomes part of a very different text, not only due to the translation of the original language, but also because of its inclusion within a different “montage” of advertisements, and its different location within the TV schedule.

V.

TV is very much a rhythmic medium, and if the media is the message, perhaps the most far-reaching message of TV, during the heyday of network television in the United States, was the regular ordering of the common time of life through a technological medium that fills out the uniformity of clock and calendar time with a differentiated pallet of moods. I remember from my childhood in the seventies and early eighties being struck by the powerful alternations that defined the schedule of daytime weekday television. First were the morning shows: bursting in an exuberant excitement manufactured anew each day to shepherd workers off to another day of work and encourage homemakers as they served breakfast to their families and prepared their children for school. Next were the game shows, an endless repetition of hope realized and deferred. Judging from the target-audience of the advertisements, it seemed like most of the viewers were retirees, dreaming not only of a windfall of cash to ease their last days, but of the “showcase” of new things, massive, shiny, expensive, that would rejuvenate their lives. Then,

following a short interlude of local news, came the soap-operas. For three or four hours time seemed to stand still. It had collapsed into the most pure, generic regularity of a bare life dressed up in trappings of wealth, glamour, and beauty that could only barely conceal the ennui so powerfully echoed in the mesmerizingly minimalist opening music. I felt like I had drifted into the doldrums. The titles of these shows were brilliantly evocative of the unimaginable tedium of a life that no longer has any goal beyond itself: “Days of our Lives,” “As the World Turns,” “The Young and the Restless,” “General Hospital.” In the late afternoon, as school-children returned home, the eerie haze of pure and directionless domesticity lifted. Superheroes and supervillians battled over the fate of a world saved anew each half-hour—a fitting preparation for the evening news, which began at 5:30. First local, then national and international news, and finally *prime time*: that feast of entertainment prepared for the tired workers and students. And then came the late and very late shows, lulling workers and housewives to sleep with a benignly comic reflection on the events of the day. By one or two, some of the channels had shut off completely. This happened with the same unusual, anachronistic formality as the emergency broadcast tests that randomly punctuated the smooth flow of content: an oblique reminder of the missiles aimed at us from behind the iron curtain. For the last twenty hours television had gone to such great lengths to prove that it, and thus by extension the celebrated, the powerful and the rich, were nothing more than a slightly better, more witty, heroic, informed, intelligent, capable, and beautiful image of anybody and everybody. But suddenly it was again clear: television was an official medium of mass communication, bound up with the military technologies of total war, and subject to severe, if seldom visible, government regulation. Other channels would keep broadcasting. The shows at this hour were gothic, grotesque, obscene. I remember a throng of female vampires seducing a haplessly submissive male victim. Only misfits—the jobless, the mentally ill, insomniacs, addicts, sexual predators—seemed to be still watching at this hour.

Television’s rhythmic schedule achieved nothing short of the total organization of life demanded by the industrial and corporate organization of society. Yet I believe that something more was at stake than simultaneously naturalizing and celebrating the cycle of the standard 9-5 working day and 5 day work-week. The cyclical organization of time also allowed for a relatively stable opposition to solidify between the public and private, the political and the domestic, or even between *bios* and *zoē*. Pure soap operas, with their evocation of a cyclic life in which all

events—marriages, divorces, births, deaths—dissolved into the flux of time—were for the most part safely confined to a domestic time. On the other hand, shows with a more manifestly public or even political content, including the news and even the broadcast of the State of the Union Address, were reserved for evening prime time. The products advertised seemed, moreover, to follow this division, with the endless array of cleaning fluids, beauty products, and cooking substances like baking powder, baking soda, and shortening—the secret, magical tools of the housewife—confined to daytime hours.

Giorgio Agamben's extraordinary *Homo Sacer* suggests the significance of this stabilized opposition. For Agamben, the Western notion of the political involves a concept of sovereignty that constitutes itself through the abandonment of bare life. This abandonment involves both exclusion and inclusion. Sovereign power, which, through a complicated strategy, is identified with both the *law* and *language* and *bios* as a “qualified, formed” life, excludes bare life, and at the same time includes it through this exclusion. Thus it constitutes itself as a zone of indistinction between sovereign power and bare life. Or in other words, it constitutes itself in a state of exception beyond the normal application of the law. While this structure, which joins classical sovereignty to biopolitics, has constituted the Western experience of politics from the beginning, the tendency of modern political life, coming to a head in the present moment, is to transform the exception into the rule, drawing the entire sphere of the political into this zone of indistinction.

What the rhythmic ordering of the television schedule achieves, in other words, is nothing less than the *appearance* of a *normal situation*, in which sovereign power and bare life, as the two poles of this logic of exclusion and inclusion, have not yet passed into a moment of total indistinction. Yet since the late eighties, with the ascendancy of cable and satellite television, the massive expansion of the number of available channels, and the decline of the great networks, this rhythmic ordering has begun to dissolve. A trace of it remains, of course. Yet now one can watch news, cartoons, soap operas, crime dramas, science fiction, educational television, or public events at practically every hour of the day: a serial order determined by constraints on the bandwidth of the radio frequencies permitted for civilian use and suitable for television broadcast has given way to a parallel order tailored much more closely to individual taste. And with the

emergence of the internet as a broadcast media, already largely achieved in the case of radio, together with view-on-demand, pay-per-view, and TIVO, this will only be all the more the case. This process, moreover, has converged with the development of the content of television in two seemingly contradictory directions. TV has in many cases become more political, more serious. Yet the genre of the reality TV show also emerged: televised domestic surveillance.

At the same time, the merely relative, rhythmic quality of this distinction suggests a possible theoretical modification, slight but nevertheless important, of Agamben's analysis. Perhaps the structural logic of sovereignty, the state of exception, and the inclusion and exclusion of bare life does not operate, or manifest itself, at the level of culture as a logical structure, however paradoxical in its formulations, nor as a syntactic structure of subordination, but paratactically: as a diachronic, rhythmic alternation that never sublimates itself into a final synthesis. The dissolution of television's rhythmic ordering of the "days of our lives" at the macro level leads not to an absolute indistinction, not to the normalization of the state of exception, but rather to the displacement of the rhythmic alternation into the finer texture of the media. One might refer here to a "fractal" structure: an incommensurability that reproduces itself at every level of analysis, and that exposes at once both the political relation between public and private and the magical force of the commodity.

The television show *24*, which started broadcasting barely 2 months after 9/11, is quite characteristic for a new mood of television that became prominent in the somber first decade of the new millennium. This mood must seem, in many ways, profoundly contradictory. There is so much that is fantastic and puerile: a celebration of violence and torture, a rather one-dimensional presentation of diabolical terrorists of various stripes, the death-defying powers of a single, indestructible hero, capable of using both his physical prowess and McGyveresque ingenuity to find his way out of every mess. Yet it is hard to deny, at the same time, a new sort of moral, political, even intellectual seriousness. With a severe, uncompromised intensity, *24* forced us to confront again and again situations in which a decision is necessary between defending the constitution and remaining faithful to its principles. In an America where the corruption of power has become almost absolute, and in which every institution seems to be compromised from within, Jack Bauer has taken upon himself the job of defending the people, the office of the

president, and even the constitution by violating the rights of the first, the authority of the second, and the principles of the third.

With Jack Bauer projected into our living rooms, the state of exception has already become virtually absolute, and yet is also rendered harmless. It has penetrated into the intimate spaces of domestic life: and this domestic penetration of such a radically political content cannot be reduced to a mere effect of the media. Moreover, Jack Bauer is also a figure, indeed a personification of *homo sacer*: the lawlessness that the law at once includes and excludes, whose entire existence seems to consist either in inflicting a violence for the sake of the law that the law could never permit, or suffering a sacrifice for the law that the law could never allow. Indeed, in the 2 hour episode placed between the 6th and 7th seasons, violating the perfect structure of a show that at once promises to present everything in real time and yet contains “real time” within a classically Aristotelian formalism, Jack Bauer appears as a bandit, on the run in the fictional African nation “Sengala” from a country that, in perverse unappreciativeness of the many Nuclear, Chemical, and Biological holocausts that he more or less single-handedly averted, tries to subpoena him to appear before the senate to answer the charge that he engaged in torture.

Yet just at the point where *24* seems to suggest, and indeed virtually realize, total indistinction, the normalization of the state of emergency, it also imposes crucial, and absolutely decisive, barriers to this. Within the consequent logic of *24*, the institutions of government can only act institutionally: they can only serve to carry out a positive, established law; they remain hampered by their own web of bureaucracy. And it is indeed this bureaucratic quality that makes them so susceptible to being infiltrated and compromised. While the president is invested with emergency powers, he or she can rarely take responsibility for the most controversial and difficult decisions. Thus the entire onus of carrying out emergency powers, and executing the state of emergency, rests with a single individual who, at once heroic and tragic, violates the law in the name of the law, and yet can never exempt himself, except through the grace of others, from being punished by the law. Emergency powers, this suggests, can never be normalized, they can never become the law. And at the same time, the sovereign can never pass into a state of complete indistinction with the bare life of *homo sacer* that it includes by exclusion and excludes by inclusion. There can never be an absolute state of emergency orchestrated from a single point of sovereign

decision and normalized as law, since indeed the logic of a state of emergency is always in essence anarchic, multiplying the points of sovereignty ad infinitum.

It is telling that Jack Bauer always remains the son in relation to a series of fathers, including his real father, whom he is forced to kill. Not only does this suggest a moment of rebellion and conflict, at the very heart of the political, that is irreducible, but it also opens onto a theological problematic that I will only touch on, without seeking to develop further: the proximity of the *action hero* to the *passion hero*—Christ, and all the Martyrs that have followed him into death—of Christianity. If the action show seems to revive, in modern guise, a more or less pagan idea of the hero, there remains a Christological kernel that cannot be done away with, and that suggests a constitutive tension between the law and its dissolution.

Of course, Jack Bauer also has a family of his own. This family, consisting only of a wife, soon killed off, and a daughter who becomes estranged from him and remains so until the 7th season, soon recedes from view. But it is all the more significant in this absence. However high the stakes of the political games in which Jack Bauer is involved, however deeply estranged he must become from domestic life, nevertheless the *political* remains referred back to the domestic, since it is alone the latter that can provide the reason for the existence of the former. It is his nostalgic yearning for his family, more than any abstract set of political principles, that provides Jack Bauer both with a sense of moral orientation even in the most extreme situations, and also forces him to violate a merely abstract code of morality. Conversely: the terrorists and extremists are characterized above all either by their willingness to sacrifice their families to an ideal or a cause, or by a devotion to their families that poses an ultimate limit to their idealism.

This all points towards an irreducibly heterogeneous topology of political, or, better, politico-economic, existence. One way that this heterogeneity is experienced is through the emotions that arise at the unstable limit between incommensurables—the private and the public; the universality of the law and the anarchic exception. Unlike simple emotions, which could be reduced to the affect produced through a relation to a past, present, or future state of affairs, these incommensurable emotions involve the transition between mutually exclusive modes of existence. Perhaps the clearest instance of such an emotion is the terror of terrorism, which has become a way of waging war through spectacles --- or rather through the action-truth of the

seemingly spectacular --- and thus converges, in a disturbing way, with its representation in films and television shows. If we are to judge by the endless litany of movies and TV shows, including 24, that simultaneously celebrate and revile terror, the experience of terrorism has everything to do with the paratactic, rhythmic juxtaposition of the sublime grandeur of violence and the cherished values of the home and family life. It is not just the experience of a threat to what we value, but of a consciousness torn between great spectacles of destruction—these could even be seen as the expression, real or parodic, of a “divine” violence—and its own attachment to the little things of everyday life.

Terror, thus, is only the most extreme example of the pallet of emotions that are produced through the alternation of public and private, interior and exterior, political life and bare life, seriousness and playfulness, violence and tenderness, and all the other oppositions that parade their way across the television screen. If these seem to have entered into a sort of rhythmic stability, this is only an effect of distance. From a nearer perspective, the seemingly clean limit between the one and the other dissolves into a meeting of incommensurables. This suggests, in turn, the terrifying origin of the commodity, not as material thing but as a constellation of values, affects, thoughts, and sensations. It is necessary, in this regard, to recognize that these two kinds of commodities—we may provisionally, if problematically, refer to them as the virtual and the real—do not always coincide. Indeed, their coincidence, which even in the best case is fraught with the tension between the thing that can be bought and consumed and the experience that this consumption promises but never realizes, is only a special case of a more general law of difference. When we consider the most significant of those *virtual commodities* that are produced without being sold in the ordinary sense—childhood, nation, the environment, celebrity, the earth, even god as ideological construct—it becomes clear that their production is profoundly intertwined with *terror*, since these all take on their value and qualities only under the threat of their destruction. And perhaps terror itself belongs among them as a commodity.

VI.

To better understand this nexus that binds the commodity with terror, we must approach things from a different angle. The reality show, which has seen such a tremendous surge in global

popularity in the last decade, could not seem more different from the highly-politicized terrorism drama. If in the one the stakes, demands, and contradictions of political existence are posed with an almost Roman austerity, the other seems to glorify the domestic or revel in the publication of a sensuality that, however provocative to a certain bourgeois morality (one reality show involves a competition between men and women for the love of a bisexual celebrity), is merely the hidden secret of domesticity. Yet a closer analysis suggests that the reality show, no less than the terrorist drama, belongs to the incommensurable threshold between the public and the private. It is telling in this regard that one of the first reality shows in America responsible for the recent rise of reality TV was *Cops*.² It is as if the police, among whose official functions it is to trespass upon individual property in the name of the state, violating the private sphere for the sake of public order, provided the first vehicle for the intrusion of the media's gaze into a domestic space. The problem of *domestic violence* is characteristic: precisely because the home is part of the political space of society, and not simply an *oikos* mastered by a *despotes*, it is possible, even without the intrusion of a stranger, for a local emergency situation to arise which, in turn, justifies police intervention. By piggybacking on the emergency responses of the police, the cameras of *Cops* not only expose the private sphere, but they expose its exposure. It shows us that the private, without ceasing to be private, is nevertheless cut through by public space.

In the “classical” reality show—MTV’s “The Real World” was among the first—the doors have always already been broken down.³ Police surveillance has become an integral part of domestic space. A political community, a group of people with no ties between them, least of all bonds of friendship—who rather represents a diverse sampling of abstract demographic categories (an African-American woman, a bisexual male, a latina, an Asian American, a rich person, a high school dropout, an Ivy League graduate—but all young, attractive, *telegenic*) is forced to live together, to become a sort of family. If the history of Western theater has always revolved around the opposition between the familial and the political, one must not underestimate the importance of a gesture which, however “trashy” it might seem, folds the one into the other in such an

² For the role of *Cops*, which started broadcasting in 1989, in the original programming of Fox Network, which, as the first new network introduced in the US since the collapse of DuMont in 1957, initiated a profound restructuring in television programming. see Hilmes 47, 95.

³ For the significance of *The Real World* in establishing the genre, see Edgerton 369.

extraordinarily, uncanny way. But perhaps the most uncanny, and most intriguing, example of such a reality show is the long-running *America's Next Top Model*. Whereas a show like “Big Brother,” a truly global phenomenon, foregrounds the gesture of surveillance, thus exposing itself in the end as a sort of political allegory, the operation of surveillance in *America's Next Top Model* not only operates more covertly, but it also doubles with the camera of the photo shoot. There is, as it were, a double exposure.

The model's beauty banishes depth: everything becomes smooth and flat. The legs seem to stretch out almost to infinity. The arms, bent awkwardly, mechanically, neither give nor receive. They promise nothing. Dramatic colors, pressing forward in the visual plane, suppress the natural play of light and shade on the face. Only the eyes—and, to be sure, they are *very* important, as Tyra Banks reminds her girls over and over again—remain as a mysterious counterpoint to the one-dimensionality that has engulfed the body. If the advertisement demands this almost monstrous flatness, it is not only because the rich depth of the human body would swallow up the thing, rendering it a mere accessory and trifle. The body's flat smoothness allows it to merge seamlessly with ever more refined forms of the commodity. It allows the charisma of the model's beauty to pass over onto the thing. And thus that last remnant of depth, the eyes that smile where the mouth no longer can, is able to cast its aura onto the thing: to become also the depth, mystery, and promise of the thing in its very smoothness and flatness—its industrial refinement.

Everything comes down to these smooth emotions. We might call them commodious: they allow and support and surround the commodity. These commodious emotions, like the commodities themselves, are produced at the site where the interior and the exterior, the domestic and the political, even the human and the inhuman meet. This suggests the extraordinary tendency of *America's Next Top Model*: at the same time that it exalts the aesthetics of the *cover girl*, it also uncovers its depths. Modeling appears as an art that can be learned: an art of self-transformation. What this art involves, above all, is learning to see oneself through the camera lens, to see oneself as one is seen objectively, as one is objectified. To become smooth and flat, one must learn to flatten oneself through the machine in which one is seen and “shot”. Behind the distilled, refined, commodious emotions lurks another realm of affect: and it becomes clear that the former still depends on the latter. Thus the *circuit* of transmission between the body and the thing breaks

down. This much becomes clear: the smoothness that binds the one to the other is itself an effect of discontinuity. The double exposure, as it were, exposes the commodity in its formation.

The reality show demands this of its contestants: they must believe that the prize is worth winning. Like the consumer capitalism that it doubles, it insists, again and again, that only the things it has to offer are worth anything. Thus it reduces the world of actionable truth to the world of commodities. Yet with *America's Next Top Model* this demand is exposed in all its perverse strangeness: to play along, the contestants must believe that, where fame and exposure are everything, being exposed as a "top model" is worth infinitely more than being exposed as a contestant. But to be a model is to have become nothing: to merge with the mere thing. Nothing less is demanded than this: to believe that nothing is worth more than life itself. If it is true, it is because life is only possible in the discontinuous space of this nothing. Yet this nothing, treated as a prize and even given a monetary value (a 100,000\$ modeling contract), loses all its efficacy. Release from this one truth is at once so close, and impossible. The one Lilliput, where people would gather to discover their powers by becoming small, has, once again, given way to the other, where everything, in reduced circumstances, waits, on reserve, to be grasped. By what? By themselves. Perhaps. Or perhaps by an invisible hand.

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