

# News, Television, and Performance: the Case of the Los Angeles Riots

When the 'action' at major news events is observed over days or weeks by television cameras, how far does the medium become, whether knowingly or not, a participant and shaper in the action it observes? How far does the action itself become, to some degree, a performance before the cameras? While not ignoring either the moral or practical implications of such questions, Ian Watson sets out primarily to analyze the 'frame' of television news broadcasting, and to consider the events within that frame as elements of performance. He considers the six days of rioting in Los Angeles in 1992, sparked by the acquittal of police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King – itself caught on camera – as a case study, in which the often ignored role of the observer, whether the news anchor-man in the studio or the audience watching at home, comes in for corrective scrutiny. He concludes that in the 'mediated present' of the news event on television, the medium is indeed as much a producer as a reporter of an action which is pervasively shaped by its presence. An Advisory Editor and regular contributor to *New Theatre Quarterly*, Ian Watson teaches in the Department of Visual and Performing Arts at Rutgers, where he is Co-ordinator of the Theatre and Television Programs.

THE MEDIUM may well be television's message, but this message is rooted in what scholars such as Milton Singer, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner term cultural performance (Singer, 1959, p. xii; Geertz, 1973, p. 448; Turner, 1982, p. 13). Television, especially in the United States, plays an important role in how we conceive, narrate, and contextualize ourselves as a people. As an examination of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots will reveal, the significance of this type of cultural performance is nowhere more evident than in the way television reports on moments of social crisis.

## The Los Angeles Riots

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 lasted six days, from 29 April to May 4.<sup>1</sup> Their immediate catalyst was the acquittal of the four police officers (Sergeant Stacey Koon and officers Laurence Powell, Theodore Briseno, and Timothy Wind) charged in the Rodney King beating case. Within hours of the acquittal, the first reported incident took place in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Hyde Park in East Central Los Angeles,

when a young black store clerk hurled a rock at a white motorist. Some thirty minutes later, a few blocks away at the corner of Florence and Normandie, blacks hurled stones and pieces of broken concrete at passing vehicles, dragged several white and Asian-American motorists from their cars, then robbed and beat them. Within the hour, television news teams began roving the streets sending images of the 'disturbances' into Los Angeles homes.

Then, at approximately 6.30 p.m., the incident that is generally credited with igniting the Riots began. A large truck hauling a load of sand was stopped at the corner of Florence and Normandie by a group of black men. The white driver, Reginald Denny, was dragged from his cabin, beaten with a hammer, hit on the head with a brick, kicked, and robbed while the entire event was televised live by a television news cameraman in a helicopter above the mayhem.<sup>2</sup>

As night fell, most of the major streets in South Los Angeles became engulfed in violence, looting increased, and the first acts of arson were reported. In response to the increasing maelstrom, Mayor Tom Bradley

declared a local state of emergency and imposed a dusk to dawn curfew as Governor Pete Wilson ordered the National Guard to activate 2,000 reserves.

The following day saw an upsurge of incidents in the inner city as the violence spread to other parts of Los Angeles County. And, while television bounced its searing images of the carnage across the nation, riots broke out elsewhere in the country. Not to be outdone by the small screen's apparently catalytic bent for anti-social behaviour, local, state, and national leaders also demanded their share of air-time to address rioters and to reassure a tense nation that, despite what they were seeing in their lounge rooms, the 'American dream' was secure.

The apparent influence of television on criminal behaviour on the one hand and the tacit acknowledgment by elected leaders of its potential to ameliorate crisis on the other is instructive. As ugly and destructive as the Riots were for those at ground zero in South Central Los Angeles, for the vast majority of people in the United States they were an electronic event – a mediated experience in which, ironically, the visceral imagery and voices of reason were part of a conceptual frame that, as Neil Postman argues, primarily connotes amusement and entertainment (1986). Whether one accepts this thesis or not, the televising of the Riots and the responses the images of violence evoked raise questions about the relationship between what might be termed instrumental behaviour (i.e., everyday-life activity) and how an observer frames that behaviour.

### **Instrumental and Performed Behaviour**

Riots would appear to be instrumental behaviour in a moment of social crisis. But placing that behaviour within the television frame blurs the already tenuous borders between the instrumental and the performed in human action.

In his introduction to the collection of essays on cultural performance, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performances*, John MacAloon takes up the issue of distinguishing between

behaviour and performance. In rejecting Dell Hymes's notion of performance as a 'particular class or subset of behaviour in which one or more persons assume responsibility to an audience and to a tradition as they understand it' (1984, p. 8), he opts for a continuum of human activity which was first suggested by Hannah Arendt as the best means of appreciating the difference.

This continuum has 'behaviour', which he characterizes as 'relatively routine, habitual, unself-conscious, even "natural" activity in which agency predominates over agent', at one end, and 'action', which he describes as 'relatively spontaneous, atypical, self-conscious, creative activity in which agent predominates over agency', at the other (1984, p. 8).

In keeping with most attempts to differentiate performance from behaviour, each of these explanations places the onus on the agent of the action. For MacAloon, the distinction is centered on the relationship between function (what he terms agency) and the person involved in the action (what he terms the agent). Hymes, meanwhile, defines performance as the product of an assumed responsibility on the part of the protagonist. Both ignore the role of the observer.

With all due respect to MacAloon, Arendt, and Hymes, performance is a matter of what Gregory Bateson and Goffman refer to as framing (Bateson, 1972; Goffman, 1986). The central question in understanding performative behaviour is: 'Performative for whom?' In the final analysis, performance – especially social performance in which the more clearly demarcated aesthetics of theatrical performance are absent – is decided by the spectator, not by the agent. There is no performance without an audience to acknowledge it as such.<sup>3</sup>

As with much else to do with understanding the performative nature of daily life, the theatre is a judicious point of departure from which to examine the performative nature of behaviour. In conventional, psychological-based theatre, much is made of the rationale behind a character's actions. Providing this rationale, couched in technical

theatrical terms such as justification, motivation, and/or psychological action, takes up a large part of a western actor's work on character, and provides the framework for what in theatre-speak is sometimes referred to as believability – that is, the character's behaviour being consistent with his ostensible psycho-emotional make-up. In order to project this believability, the actor has to manifest a physicality, vocal quality, and visual appearance that are consistent with an understanding of his/her character. The audience, in turn, 'reads' these cues as insights into the nature of the character and his/her intentions from moment to moment.

### Reading Behaviour as Performance

Just as we look for meaning in the theatre, we seek for it in the street. The reception and reading of daily-life behaviour is not unlike the way in which audiences read the action of characters in the theatre. In assigning meaning to an action in life, we read that action as indicative of intentions. In other words, even though we are aware that certain actions are instrumental, we often also implicitly regard them as performed. We assign a simultaneous double order to behaviour, the first as instrumental action, the second as expression.

Behaviour in this instance is not only an action, it is an action that expresses its motivation; it is the performance of an inner psycho-emotional state. In the Denny beating, for example, the videotape recording made from the helicopter above the violent scene became one of the major sources of evidence in the trial against the two men charged with the beating, Damien Munroe Williams and Henry Keith Watson. At one point, the tape shows Williams dancing beside the prone figure of Denny after having hit him on the head with a piece of concrete.

In his opening arguments to the jury, Assistant Prosecutor, Larry Morrison, described this as 'Williams celebrating', and in discussing the same action Bill Kurtis, the narrator of the television documentary series *American Justice*, which devoted an episode to the Denny trial, talks of how Williams,

'with glee, strutted for the TV audience' (Kurtis and Towers, 1995). The dance was viewed as performative, not because as in a theatre piece Williams was an actor playing a role, but because his instrumental action was framed as a performed intention.<sup>4</sup>

The way in which television highlighted the performative component of instrumental behaviour in the Riots was not limited to individual incidents. The medium lends itself to a performative reading of virtually all broadcast events because of its authorial voice, its commercialism, its protagonist/audience paradigm, and its roots in the entertainment industry. Through the medium of television, the myriad of individual incidents that constituted the Riots became a socio-cultural text on a grand scale.

Whatever their consequences in material terms, the Riots were also the playing out of a community's rage. Long prior to the Riots, the inner-city underclass in Los Angeles was angry. This anger transformed from muted fury to social action with the King verdict. Modern technology provided the means for that anger then to be displayed to the entire country. Deprivation, welfare statistics, and angry rhetoric moved from debate onto the national stage as America watched the consequences of a significant minority of society being left out of the American dream. To paraphrase Geertz, the Riots were a story that Americans told themselves about themselves (1973, p. 448).

In socio-cultural terms, the Riots were a performed inversion. The norm ensures the underclass is spectator to democratic capitalism. They are audience to the success of others. In the Riots, the underclass took centre stage. They became the protagonists of an event in which power lay in their hands while the rest of America became audience to the consequences of their rage. Given the cost in human and economic terms, it is little wonder that many sociologists and urban researchers have read this temporary transformation much as directors and theatre scholars read warnings into plays of social conscience – or that one of the major studies of the Riots is sub-titled, 'Lessons for the Urban Future' (Baldassare, 1994).

## 'Packaging' the News

Stuart Hall makes a distinction between what he terms channel and medium functions in television. Channel function refers to the relaying of primary material 'via television with little by way of substantial changes to its nature as an event or performance'. Medium function, on the other hand, is 'television's aesthetic practice' – that is, the various recognizable aesthetic components evident in television ranging from the performative to the way in which material is shot, edited, and presented to the public (in Corner, 1995, p. 17).

The channel and medium functions are far from mutually exclusive. In a conventional news programme, for instance, the anchor's reading of the news is intercut with reporters' stories which usually include a combination of location footage with voice-over explanation and a direct report to the camera. American news anchors like ABC's Peter Jennings or NBC's Tom Brokaw are personalities who not only read the news but present it to the viewer with a delicate touch of the performed self.

When reporting a dire tragedy, they thus assume an appropriate air of solemnity in vocal tone and facial expression; if a story is light-hearted, Jennings, especially, combines a hint of a smile with an upbeat vocality. Newsreaders may be limited to a medium shot within which they can move or gesticulate little, but they are not too-distant cousins from orators like Martin Luther King or the 'great communicator', Ronald Reagan, both of whom had the ability to convince people of their sincerity as much by the way in which they presented their ideas as by their ideas themselves.

News programming, like all material on television, is packaged. Since most network news programmes have more or less the same 'raw material' available to them on any given day, the way in which the material is organized and presented is a crucial factor for executives attempting to attract a high share of viewers. Until the summer of 1996, for example, *World News Tonight with Peter*

*Jennings* (which says much for the cult of personality even in news programming since, despite the title, Jennings was occasionally absent and another anchor took his place) had catchy introductory music which implied gravity without appearing too solemn. This music accompanied a graphic spinning blue-toned globe of the world which, as the music faded, became background to brief footage of the several leading news items for the day.

Jennings's off-screen voice explained each of the stories as they appeared in a masked frame that was smaller than the full TV screen, the left side of which displayed the words *ABC News*. Then the final lead story dissolved into a medium-wide shot of Jennings at the news desk. As the camera slowly zoomed into the mid-shot that Jennings remained in for the rest of the programme, an off-screen voice spoke: *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* (if Jennings were not appearing, the same words were followed by a brief introduction to whoever was sitting in). The day's date appeared in a caption box at the bottom of the screen, then faded out as Jennings began the first story.

The packaged nature of news programming does not end with the opening credits. The entire news format is organized around a model in which stories are presented. Each story usually runs no more than two to three minutes, is introduced by the anchor, and illustrated with edited footage by a reporter in the field who combines voice-over descriptions of the story's major elements with an on-screen appearance. Immediately before an advertising break, Jennings summarizes the stories yet to come in much the same way as the leading stories were introduced at the top of the programme.

In addition, there are often running segments that appear two or three times per week, such as ABC's investigatory reports on how the government spends taxpayers' money and health reports from a medical correspondent. For those major news events known well in advance, like summit meetings between the President and his Russian counterpart or the New Hampshire primary that signals the official beginning of the

presidential electoral process, Jennings will often anchor the news from where these events are taking place rather than from his base in New York.

Since modern technology makes such a move functionally unnecessary, one can but assume that its purpose is to signify 'news'. Being where important events are happening implies a concern for up-to-the-minute reporting, giving the viewer a sense that Jennings and his team are at the centre of a current event rather than on the periphery of history. It is a performance of sorts in which the reporting of the news becomes a metaphor for the nature of news itself – that is, 'reporting live', being 'at the centre of major events', 'witnessing history in the making'.

### The Function of the Footage

This 'performance' is complicated by the role of the moving visual image which is at the heart of television. It is hardly original to point out that television is a visual medium, but it is worth noting that this visual bias is nowhere more obvious than in its news reporting. It is rare to find a news story on television that is not accompanied by footage of what is being discussed, and with all due respect to Postman's concerns that television undercuts considered argument and articulate dialogue (1985, p. 3-29), its language is visual and calls for a visual sensibility. That which can be rendered visually is the news for television.

Take the initial Israeli and Palestinian peace accord negotiated over several years of dialogue between representatives of the Israeli government and the Palestine Liberation Organization in Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. Despite the many hours of reasoned argument, heated debate, diplomacy, and number of people involved in achieving a major breakthrough with implications for the entire Middle East, the United States, and other western oil-driven economies, the entire process for the vast majority of us was encapsulated in the televised formal signing of the accord by the late Yitzhak Rabin and Yasar Arafat on the White House lawn, with the now immor-

talized handshake between the two former enemies.

Equally, the Los Angeles Riots garnered far more television time than did the ongoing peace discussions leading up to the ceremony on the White House lawn, even though the latter arguably had far greater historical (if not local) implications. This is because riots are much more visually interesting than closed door meetings, no matter how important the topics of discussion.

Television's visual (and aural) acuity is a product of a technology that is a major component of its medium function. Camera angles, lighting, and editing – though most important in drama programming where there is a conscious attempt by directors, designers, camera people, and editors to create an aesthetic that serves the story being told – play a significant role in many documentaries and, to a lesser extent, even in programmes with less time for aesthetic considerations, such as the nightly news.

The video footage from cameras on missiles targeting strategic locations in Baghdad during the Gulf War, for instance, was more effective in getting across the impression of military prowess, technological superiority, and the allies' destructive power than a simple report on the progress of the war by a newsreader. Similarly, the scope of the devastating February 1996 floods in north-western Oregon was brought home dramatically by footage shot from a helicopter flying over the inundated areas, with the dull bass whirling sound of the rotor blades as a backdrop to the voice-over explanation of the damage by a reporter.

Just as the Oregon floods were a continuing (or in journalist-speak, a developing) story, because the swollen rivers took time to reach flood stage in many areas and the extent of their damage remained an open question over days of reporting, the Los Angeles Riots were a developing television story for almost an entire week. Many of the local Los Angeles channels cancelled all other programming, sent roving film crews and reporters into the streets to seek out looting and violence, then broadcast incidents live as often as they could. News anchors were

on air permanently or for extended periods of time, introducing the material being reported from the streets and attempting to analyze the development of events.

Even the network channels, though they devoted less time to the Riots than their local counterparts, altered programming to allow for greater coverage of the violence. As one moved further from Los Angeles to the major television markets of Chicago and the north-east United States, reporting of the Riots was less consuming. In keeping with the television news format, much of the reporting of the mayhem was limited to leading stories on national and local news programmes, with edited footage of the crisis airing to commentary by reporters and news anchors.

### **Improvising a Frame for the Riots**

The way in which the Riots were reported in Los Angeles provides an understanding of the roles of the channel and medium functions in television journalism. Thus the channel function component of the Riots consisted of reports on the violence from the streets and studio commentary from news anchors. News crews, shooting from helicopters and in the streets, captured a broad array of riot activity that included motorists being stopped, dragged from their cars, attacked, and robbed; buildings being broken into, damaged, and in many instances set on fire; lootings; beatings; and the fire department's attempts to bring the many urban fires under control.

Much of this footage was accompanied by journalists talking over what it showed, explaining what was happening, and also on-camera reporting. Many of these journalists worked long hours without time off, especially during the early days of the Riots, and appeared unkempt and tired on camera. Much of the commentary was hurried, alarmist and improvised, since reporters had little time to prepare material.

Anchors mirrored their colleagues in the streets. Many were on camera for extended periods of time with little or no rest. Stories were breaking so fast in the first few days of

the Riots that they had little time to prepare on-camera material. They served as links between various roving news crew reports, improvised responses to much of what was happening, and attempted to provide an overview and analysis of events as best they could. The usual polished impeccable dress of newsreaders was gradually replaced with loosened ties and slightly crumpled jackets, faded make-up, and hair that was no longer so neatly combed. There was a sense of exhaustion and indeterminacy in the studios that reflected the frenetic chaos of the streets.

Similarly, much of the news footage of the Riots echoed the confusion in the streets. During the worst of the rioting, material being shot by film crews lacked the polish of most news stories because it went to air without being edited. Much of the hand-held camera work was unstable and wobbly as the camera people tried to film the mayhem around them. Sections of material were poorly framed, parts were out of focus, and shots zoomed in and out without apparent justification, while the accompanying sound track was full of the extraneous noises of the confused streets rather than a scripted voice-over explaining events clearly.

The sanitized, prepared nature of news, in which well-dressed reporters and anchors move from tales of unspeakable tragedies to light-hearted human interest stories with an equanimity that, as Postman maintains, lulls viewers into perceiving television news as yet another form of entertainment that is not to be taken seriously (Postman, 1985, p. 87), was challenged by what happened in Los Angeles during the Riots. This is because there was a sense of unpredictability in the news coverage of the Riots. Not only were events in the street volatile, but the way in which they were presented on television mirrored that volatility. The footage from the Riots and the way it was presented by news anchors as well as journalists on the street had an improvised, chaotic quality that contrasted with the way in which we are used to receiving our news.

The material was packaged (either consciously by news executives or accidentally due to circumstances) as a presentational

metaphor of the Riots themselves. The 'managed' chaos of the studios, which gave the impression that at any minute events could reel out of hand, reflected the apparent unpredictability of the streets.<sup>5</sup> The Los Angeles Riots may well have been a story America told itself, but the way in which the story was presented to the vast majority of us was also a metaphor for the story being told.

### Informing – or Transforming?

It would be an understatement to say that television was a major factor in the Los Angeles Riots. But its role was complex, because in addition to providing commentary through its reporting of the looting, violence, and arson, it was also a factor that helped shape events. This dual function was primarily the product of a technology that can both record an event and transmit it live.

Television news is dominated by the immediate past. It reports a selection of what the particular station or network regards as the newsworthy stories of the day. These stories are usually prepared before the news broadcast and are presented as incidents that took place before the report went on air. Regardless of any bias on the part of the reporter or discernible editorial stance of the television station, these episodes are already cast in the objective distance of history. They have happened in the past and their outcome is decided.<sup>6</sup>

But, decided or not, television is able to make past events into significant factors in the present in an unparalleled way since, regardless of their vintage, the images that television transmits are in the present tense. Re-broadcasting some emotionally charged episode from the past can make it a factor in current events. The repeated screenings of the King beating, for instance, played no small role in the outbreak of violence in Los Angeles. This was because, apart from its becoming an iconic touchstone for all those who felt that police violence was directed against minorities, the brutal nature of the beating made it difficult for most people, especially blacks, to accept the innocent verdicts. The guilt of those involved seemed

incontrovertible from the footage shown countless times on national television.<sup>7</sup>

Live broadcasting, on the other hand, transforms 'history' into a personalized event in the present tense. It is a commonplace to note that the outcome of an event that is taking place is undecided, but if the event in question is also broadcast on network television – whether the National Basketball Association (NBA) finals or the police pursuing O. J. Simpson along a Los Angeles freeway – its process and eventual conclusion assumes a collective and possibly even national significance. Yet this piece of 'history' is personalized by 'taking place' in one's living-room: the public event becomes a private affair on a grand scale. Television informs, but it also has the potential to transform.

As important as television's role was to become during the Riots, it played no small part in events leading up to the violence. Apart from the continued screening of the King beating, the imminent verdict in the King trial was difficult to escape. It was carried live on television and many people gathered around their sets to watch. These 'electronic communities', as John Corner refers to them (1995, p. 13), supplemented the pre-existing social groups that according to scholars are so important in the early stages of collective behaviour, like riots. The electronic and social communities were often one and the same, as friends and neighbours gathered to watch the verdict together.

In some instances, the relationship became even more complex, as when one television station intercut the verdict with a group of customers in a barbershop in a black neighbourhood watching it on television and registered what a critic characterized as their 'unforgettable disbelief' at the acquittal (Du Brow, 1992, p. 20). Here television managed to incorporate viewers into the broadcast equation.

Just as it is difficult to establish precisely when a group of people moves from a gathering phase into collective action during a riot, deciding at which point television moved into reporting on the Los Angeles violence, as opposed to being a factor lead-

ing up to it, is far from easy to pinpoint. In the grey area between the verdict and the anti-social explosion that followed it, for example, came what one reporter characterized as a series of 'tense TV moments'. Such 'moments' included an angry, unruly crowd berating officer Koon as he left the Simi Valley courthouse with epithets of 'Guilty' and 'Racist'; a reporter confronting one of the jurors saying, 'Why are you covering your eyes? Why are you hiding your eyes in shame?'; and various officials who went on television and condemned the verdict (Du Brow, 1992, p. 20). Critics, scholars, and the police agree that these, and other similar pre- and early-Riot reports on television were a factor in what followed.

### Stimulating the Need for a Catharsis

Unfortunately, most studies have focused on the role of television during the Riots. But, studies or not, there are some pertinent factors with regard to the grey area between reporting on the Riots and being a factor that contributed to them which are difficult to ignore. The initial and most obvious of these is that television gathered people and also provided instant information. But this information was predicated by the King beating which had been seared into the national psyche by its brutality and continued screenings. Adding insult to injury, Channel 2 in Los Angeles ran the tape of the beating as the Simi Valley verdicts were being read.

The emotionally charged opinion invested in the repetitions of the King beating footage, merely underlined by the irresponsibility of Channel 2's editing, became a confrontation with those who viewed themselves as victims of racism, economically exploited, and abandoned by the system when the verdict was announced. This confrontation was the product of transforming 'history' into a personal and emotionally charged experience. The catalysts to the Riots were not distant, impersonal happenings that affected others, they were events in each and every home, bar, or club that affected those with a stake in the outcome. Television might well have informed

(or one might argue, misinformed), but it also contributed to the escalating emotional tension of the relatively deprived to a point beyond which catharsis was an understandable resolution.

Unquestionably, then, television was an important source of information during the Riots because of the extensive coverage it provided and because of the ready accessibility of that coverage. But the diffusion and nature of the coverage has led to the accusation that it was a major contributor to the rapid spread of the Riots. Even putting aside the pre-Riot screenings of the King beating and the live broadcast of the verdict, the Denny beating alone seems to confirm that there is more than an element of truth in this charge.

Before the live screening of the beating, looting and violence were confined to three areas in South Los Angeles. Shortly after the Denny beating went to air around 6.30 p.m., the number of areas which reported riot behaviour exploded; as night fell, near 9.00 p.m., most of the major streets in South Los Angeles were reporting incidents; by 10.00 rioting had intensified in other parts of the city, and over the next few days had spread throughout the county, as well as to other cities around the country (Dunn and Hubler, 1992, p. 18; Treadwell and Stanley, 1992; Berger, 1992).

In his excellent analysis of the role of television in the Los Angeles Riots, Patrick O'Heffernan, the Director of the Media Research Programme of the Georgia Tech Centre for International Strategy, Technology, and Policy, identifies four ways in which television exacerbated the Riots. Based on interviews with looters and rioters following the violence, O'Heffernan maintains that the continued screening of looting and arson coupled with reports of lack of police action against those involved encouraged rioting. He further argues that the broadcast of rioting combined with public officials calling for restraint only underscored the inability of the civil authorities to control the situation. He also alleges that television fuelled people's anger with its repeated screenings of the King beating during the Riots.



Such direct provocation aside, O’Heffernan implies that television was guilty of indirect incitement through exploiting the Riots. He offers several examples of what he terms ‘exploitative programming’ which, he argues, attempted to capitalize on events: the TNT channel’s screening of *Heatwave*, a movie centered on the 1965 Watts’ Riots; an episode of the Oprah Winfrey show in which a mixed-race studio audience degenerated into an out-of-control mob shouting at each other; and Geraldo Rivera taking over the Channel 2 news only to berate a Korean guest because he did not appear angry enough about his community being targeted by rioters (O’Heffernan, 1992, p. 8).<sup>8</sup>

### Fusing Public and Private Spheres

Exploitation aside, television’s influence on the Riots was based on immediacy. The emotional valence of the coverage combined with the fact that much of what was broadcast was either live or recently taped (that is, it was taking place in the public, chaotic territory ‘out there’ at the same time as it was being viewed in the private, personal world ‘in here’) had the effect of psycho-electronically fusing the public and private spheres into a single time-frame. The result was a mediated present, like the cartoon that depicts a man watching a sunrise on television while out of the window behind him the real sun is rising.

There is, of course, an important difference between the cartoon and the televised Riots. The former satirizes the way television has replaced contact with nature and reality, but in the case of the Riots the mediated present was both a report on the Riots and a component in them, through its inducement to many to take part in the violence.

There has been a great deal of criticism of the way the Pentagon controlled reporting of the United States invasions of Panama and Granada, as well as its role in the Gulf War. The military’s actions were based on the Vietnam experience, in which the television reporting was an important factor in shaping public opinion and, eventually, military options. Putting aside questions of moral

responsibility and democratic process for the moment, the Pentagon’s actions are understandable: it is necessary, as the Joint Chiefs of Staff see it, to control the media during times of military crisis because, even though national security may not be threatened, the media, through its potential dual function as a reporter of events and a factor in helping to shape them, can transform a passive public into an active social agent.

Television is such a potent factor in society because of the web of inter-related tensions it generates. This web of socio-cultural/socio-aesthetic tensions marks the blurred line between instrumental and performed behaviour, between the broadcast event and the way in which it is packaged, between the public event and private experience, and between history and the present moment. Crises like the 1992 Riots – which not only emphasize television’s ability to negotiate (dare one say manipulate?) these socio-psychological vectors, but also highlight the performative in both the individual actions and the socio-cultural texts they generate – bring this potency into question.

Should there be voluntary restraints on television during such periods of social or national upheaval? Should there be laws that limit television in some way during such times? Is restraint of any kind in conflict with the democratic principles this society is based on? These are difficult questions, but ones that need to be faced in an age in which media such as television and its cousin the on-line computer, now dominating the technological and social horizons, have helped make some kinds of cultural performance media events of national significance.

### Notes

1. For the sake of clarity throughout the paper, riot is capitalized when referring specifically to the Los Angeles Riots. When riot is written with a lower case initial, it refers to riot in general.

2. The Riots began in predominantly black neighborhoods of Los Angeles, but it would be inaccurate to characterize rioters as exclusively black. In fact, if arrest statistics are any indicator, more Hispanics took part in the Riots than blacks. Fifty-one per cent of those arrested were Hispanic while thirty-eight per cent were black. Another statistic to consider in relation to the balance of black and Hispanic rioters is that, despite the number of

Hispanics arrested, twenty-one blacks were killed during the disturbances against 'only' twelve Hispanics (Board of Police Commissioners, 1992, Appendix).

3. A discussion of what constitutes a spectator is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice to say that the spectator/observer is not the only one who can frame behaviour as performative. The agent of an action can also acknowledge her action as performative, as in the young teenager 'playing the role' of the dutiful daughter for parents and the serious student for her teachers because she knows that is what they want her to be, while her genuine interests are in the boy-friend that she is not allowed to date and socializing with her friends. She relies on what Goffman refers to as a 'social front' (1976, p. 91). And this front is hardly limited to deceiving parents and teachers, but is employed wilfully by politicians, diplomats, and others in the public eye every hour of the television day, and even more frequently by anyone required to make an impression on someone else, be it their employer, lover, or drinking buddies. The recognition of front on the part of the agent of an action calls for reflexivity. The protagonist is aware that she is 'playing at,' or more formally, engaging the performative in her behaviour. She is employing the front intentionally. This reflexivity is, as MacAloon paraphrasing G. H. Mead puts it, 'the act of becoming an audience to oneself' (1984, p. 11).

4. One of the reasons that so much was made of intention at the Denny trial is that the two most serious charges against Williams and Watson, attempted murder and aggravated mayhem, are felony charges which require the prosecution to demonstrate intention on the part of the defendant. The legal definition of intent applicable in the trial is different from the way in which I am using it. This legal form of intention demands proof of premeditation: in other words, the prosecution had to demonstrate that Williams and Watson had given prior thought to killing Denny in order to prove intent. One of the arguments used by Edi Faal, Williams's defence attorney, was that both of the defendants had been caught up in spontaneous acts of violence which precluded premeditation (in Kurtis and Towers, 1995).

5. I use the word 'apparent' carefully. Despite the impression of chaos in the streets, there is evidence that rioters targeted particular sectors of society at times (Korean store-owners, for example). This implies that a calculated socio-political agenda shaped at least part of the Riots.

6. There are exceptions to television's focus on the recent past. The 'breaking story', for example, is one taking place as the news is being read. The news can either be 'interrupted' – that is, the scripted text put aside while the item is mentioned to viewers – or, if a story such as a large fire or severe storm has been in progress long enough for a film crew to travel to it, a journalist can report live from the scene during the news. These latter broadcasts usually follow much the same format as news from the recent past, with, wherever possible, footage of the event preceding cut-aways to a reporter talking to the camera explaining what is happening. The past and present also become blurred in long-term news stories, such as the Vietnam War or the Bosnian crisis. Daily events are reported as happening in the past, but in the context of a continuing situation.

7. According to a *Time* magazine poll conducted on 30 April, the day after the King verdict was announced, 79 per cent of whites and 78 per cent of blacks thought

that the officers who beat King would be found guilty before the verdict was announced; while 92 per cent of blacks and 62 per cent of whites indicated that they would have found the officers guilty if they were on the jury (Church, 1992, p. 23).

8. To be fair to O'Heffernan, he also discusses what he regards as the positive role television played during the Riots: it is television's job to cover stories like riots live and in depth; law-abiding viewers needed the extensive coverage for their own safety; television served as an emergency communication system; and television was an instrument of democracy through showing where the police and other agencies failed in their duty (O'Heffernan, 1992, p. 8-9).

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