

Moses Supposes

BY Charles R. Acland

**Everything
you never
wanted
to know
about
television**

"The TTVV Revolution"

CBC, April 9, 1995

Executive producers:

Moses Znaimer and Jay Switzer

Producer and director: Jim Hanley

Writers:

Richard Nielsen

and Moses Znaimer

Narrator: Moses Znaimer

"It's time. It's time to start the body count for one of the great battles of the second half of the twentieth century, the battle between the image and the printed word." With this introductory statement, Moses Znaimer begins his polemic, hyperbolically titled "The TTVV Revolution." According to Znaimer, the image has won and those pundits of print—meaning writers, journalists and academics alike—are creative anachronisms at best and "constant carpers noted mostly for their meanspiritedness" at worst. From the evidence of the programme itself, and the image it presents of commercial television's world domination, it is hard to disagree; the show is an intricate and self-indulgent exercise in image-making. This includes the making of Znaimer's own image, perhaps to such an extreme that it eclipses all other issues.

Znaimer's three-hour opus on the new world of television opens on our vaguely nefarious host, a swirling camera offering uncomfortably intimate close-ups of him in an underlit set. The film noirish effect and his general demeanour, complete with the standard urban-chic uniform, suggest that Znaimer is still in character from his bit part as a hood in Louis Malle's *Atlantic City*. After various changes of persona and costume, ranging from a baseball player to General Patton, Znaimer appears in a trenchcoat against a brick wall backdrop, to hold his "blasphemous" ten commandments of television to the camera—written on scrolled parchment, no less. I doubt that many actually take this character of dealer—prophet as a sign of street credibility; the wardrobe is obviously that of a media huckster, a successful entrepreneur and participant in Canada's

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“Paglia provides a stream of consciousness monologue, without any pretence to consistency, let alone intelligibility...”

media elite who, typical of many so-called “players,” enjoy adopting the identity of the outsider. From the opening moments of “The TVTV Revolution,” we are in the realm of an image whose truth-value is slippery at best, and whose aim is not to reveal but to construct an impression. One of “The TVTV Revolution’s” key assertions is that images can’t lie, which, of course, the show successfully proves is a lie.

Beyond the extravagances of this mega-broadcast, the programme is symptomatic not of the state of the medium, but of the way television is talked about by those who profit from it. While Znaimer plays himself as an eccentric rebel of the media biz, he is far from the vanguard; not once does he present a portrait of himself as the media player that he is. Instead, Znaimer wants us to take him seriously as a disinterested philosopher of television’s future. “The TVTV Revolution” becomes a symposium of sorts, with Znaimer stringing together propositions about our “new” image-based culture and those who work with it.

Unfortunately, his ideas are comprised mostly of misinterpretations of Marshall McLuhan, whose ghost hovers over every word that comes from Znaimer’s mouth. If anything the show demonstrates how stale and familiar these thirty-year old ideas about new technology and the global village have become. Far from revolutionary, McLuhan’s legacy lives on primarily in venues friendly to the myth of the “rebellious” *Wired* organization man. Far from being the manifesto of a revolutionary cell, the ten maxims about television—“I use them in my work,” says Znaimer—are at home with the policy elite of this country. After all, we only have to watch Znaimer’s Bravo!, MusiquePlus, Muchmusic, Toronto’s CityTV and now Alberta’s Access TV to conclude that this is not the trackrecord of someone the CRTC is out to exclude.

What Znaimer’s ten commandments amount to is not a radical vision of the democratic paradise of television; instead, they reveal a fragment of what is an authorized language promoted by policy elites and cultural entrepreneurs alike. In certain circles, most of these claims are received wisdom. If there is a dominant theme running through the list, it is an attack on public culture that reduces the concept of public ownership and service to a simple case of elitism. This is implied in the aesthetic suggestions of maxims 1 and 2, in the technological essentialism of maxims 3, 7 and 8, and in the accusations of governments’ ideological control in maxims 9 and 10. But it is maxim 6 that most completely captures the link between the aesthetics of the medium, the “true nature” of the technology, and the politics of culture: “In the past, television’s chief operating skill was political. In the future, it will have to be mastery of the craft itself.” By implication, Znaimer would have us believe that, in the hands of cultural entrepreneurs, those who have “mastered the craft,” the political dimension of culture and policy disappears. In this view, public culture is always politically and ideologically tainted, and the forces of the market are unbiased and pure.

While studiously avoiding commentary from those contemporary cul-

1

TELEVISION IS THE TRIUMPH OF THE IMAGE OVER THE PRINTED WORD.

2

THE TRUE NATURE OF TELEVISION IS FLOW, NOT SHOW; PROCESS, NOT CONCLUSION.

3

AS GLOBAL TELEVISION EXPANDS THE DEMAND FOR LOCAL PROGRAMMING INCREASES.

4

THE BEST TV TELLS ME WHAT HAPPENED TO ME, TODAY.

5

TV IS AS MUCH ABOUT THE PEOPLE BRINGING YOU THE STORY AS THE STORY ITSELF.

6

IN THE PAST, TV’S CHIEF OPERATING SKILL WAS POLITICAL. IN THE FUTURE IT WILL HAVE TO BE MASTERY OF THE CRAFT ITSELF.

7

PRINT CREATED ILLITERACY. TV IS DEMOCRATIC. EVERYBODY GETS IT.

8

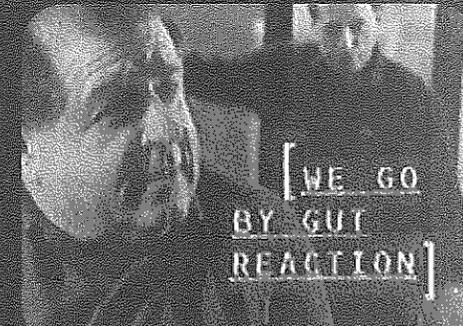
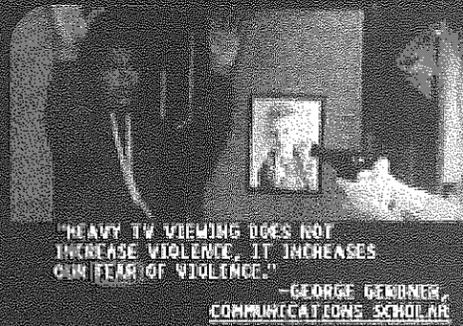
TV CREATES IMMEDIATE CONSENSUS, SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE CHANGE.

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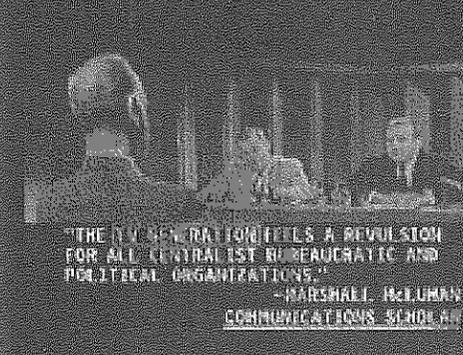
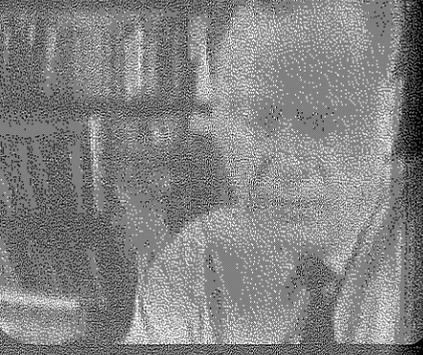
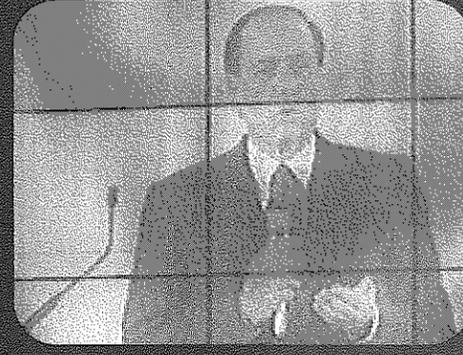
THERE NEVER WAS A MASS AUDIENCE, EXCEPT BY COMPULSION.

10

TELEVISION IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE MANAGED; BUT AN INSTRUMENT TO BE PLAYED.



"The TVTV Revolution" committed one of Znaimer's cardinal sins: it was boring.



One of "The TVTV Revolution's" key assertions is that images can't lie, which... is a lie.

tural and communications theorists who work to develop and challenge ways of understanding media. "The TVTV Revolution" concentrates on the opinions of producers, politicians, and executives of media corporations. Interviewees include such diverse media "experts" as Henry Kissinger, Oliver Stone, Camille Paglia and Ronald G. Keast, formerly of Vision TV and currently a partner with Znaimer in the newly privatized Access TV. David Peterson talks about how environmentalists became media terrorists and led to his government's collapse. Michael Jay Solomon, in charge of international sales at Warner Bros., relates how small markets need cheap U.S. programming because of their insufficient indigenous talent pool. Other clips include McLuhan, talkshow host Jenny Jones, and her producer David E. Salzman, Silvio Berlusconi, U.S. producers Sonny Grosso and Larry Jacobson, and British producer Richard Price.

In his selection of interviewees, Znaimer only finds like-minded company. Camille Paglia provides a stream of consciousness monologue, without any pretence of consistency, let alone intelligibility, about the new "pagan sources of the sensual torrent" (and me without my umbrella!). Oliver Stone contributes a kooky commentary about the "scums and parasites" of the media establishment out to beat him down. Nonsense like "out of the word, into the screenplay"—as though screenplays are not written works—comes from Stone, the inside of the inside insisting that he is "oppressed" by bad reviews. If *JFK* and *The Doors* really are misunderstood examples of what Stone calls "the wash of Dionysian politics," then, as Kevin Costner would say, "We're through the looking glass, folks." Stone's insistence that "you can't lie with a movie like you can lie with a word" is so meaningless that the inverse appears on screen under a close-up of Stone as "you can't lie with a word like you can lie with a movie." Suddenly, an unintentional howler allows a bit of critique to squeak through.

It would have been nice if Znaimer had taken his position as a media guru seriously and presented some well-researched ideas rather than bad armchair philosophy. The astounding level of mis-information represented in "The TVTV Revolution," about political campaigns, about communications theory, about television history, left me longing for an old-style, grumpy leftie like Norm Chomsky to chronicle the mistakes and errors.

Instead, Znaimer begins discussions with awful generalizations worthy of bad high school essay writing, for instance, "entertainment through history can be reduced to one essential element—story." Oh? By whom? To the exclusion of what? Or, "entertainment, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye, does not take us out of ourselves but into ourselves." Well, which is it, McLuhan or Frye? And what did each say on the topic? In fact, many assertions in "The TVTV Revolution" remind me of comedian Mike Myers's classic parody of essay topics, "The Holy Roman Empire was neither holy nor Roman nor an empire. Discuss."

Znaimer's contention that television has taken us from the print-centred world of the ear to the image centred world of the eye is a straightforward inversion of McLuhan. Theories regarding communication and social transformation posit that print is

the visualization of language; television, on the contrary, is an aural medium, one whose role is to introduce what Walter Ong called a "second orality" and to place the ear back at the sensory centre of contemporary human society. The many, many critiques of these claims, in particular their functionalism and essentialism, get no play in Znaimer's argument. Instead, a quick, unthoughtful, and inaccurate claim is all we receive.

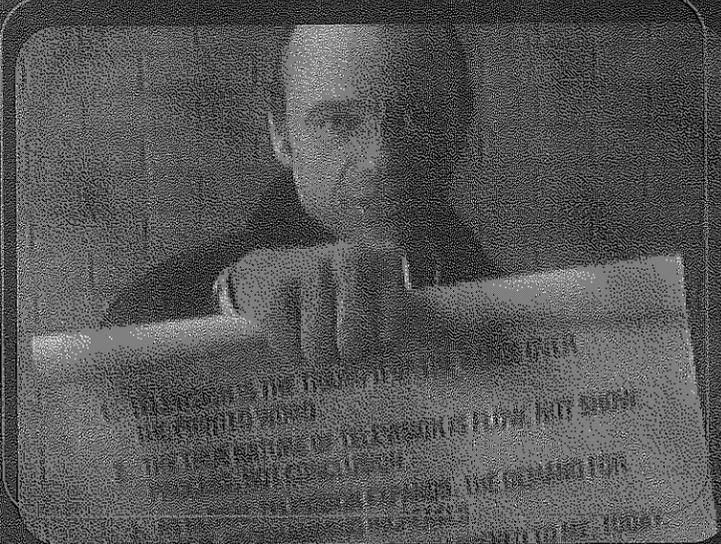
But what is going on here? Why this feigned interest in media theory? Certainly, there is a degree of authority afforded to those who step into the futurist's shoes; indeed, we tend to pay inordinate attention to anyone who claims to have a handle on near or distant tomorrows. But this reveals more about our sense of place in a narrative of progress than about the figures who occupy our attention.

On a different tack, in order to understand fully the show and its context, one has to agree that Znaimer has been able to tap into a popular sensibility about Canadian cultural policy. Historically, cultural policy has engaged in a denigration of popular pleasure and thus created a gulf between a perceived "official" culture and people's everyday cultural consumption. It is acknowledged in this country that there are few realms in which the work supported by Canadian policy and that consumed by Canadians are one and the same. Znaimer, then, is quite right to criticize a history of cultural policy that has been as exclusionary as the economic forces it was developed to combat.

It is in this context that CityTV and the two music video channels have been such exciting developments: they are decidedly about youthfulness, about popular taste, and against the musty airs of "quality" television. It is hard to dislike television that bravely breaks so many of the codes of critical distance, daring to improvise and daring to be sloppy. The jumpy, stammering, wandering hosts teeter between refreshing and irritating; the sweeping hand-held camera makes much of the programming appear like a cross between a cable-access community bulletin board and a mock-war documentary. In its best moments, the quick and dirty methods of these channels produce fascinating television. Further, MuchMusic and MusiquePlus have generated a real connection to their environments, making their Rue Ste. Catherine and Queen St. locations metonymic sites of a national youth culture. They are places which appear solidly in the minds of English Canadian and Quebecois youth, and provide an idea of a televisual community that in many ways the CBC can only dream of achieving.

Problems arise in Znaimer's argument when he assumes that any criticism of him and his "image centeredness" is elite culture's attack on "low" popular taste. In fact, he may have been more shocked than the rest of the Canadian arts community when the CRIC awarded his Bravo! the arts network license over the more "respectable" CBC application. Instead, he should ask himself why his attacks on the tyranny of elite culture in Canada have landed him the high arts channel. The inescapable conclusion: the policy establishment warmly embraces his approaches and ambitions.

For someone so devoted to kinetic, lively programming, "The TVTV Revolution" committed one of Znaimer's cardinal sins:



it was boring, ranking along with other CBC snooze-fests of which Znaimer is so critical. The show was less innovative in style than the average episode of the TVO hit (an oxymoron for Znaimer—horrors, a success in public broadcasting!) *Prisoners of Gravity*. Like so much of Znaimer's "image is all that counts" rhetoric, when "interactive tv" is wheeled out as the future for television production and democracy alike, this becomes nothing more than graphics of computer pull-down menus; in "The TVTV Revolution," choice is only the image of choice.

This programme does hit home with, or at least finds echoes in the discourse of, an important audience: cultural-policy makers and other industry participants and beneficiaries. Versions of this argument, certainly not of Znaimer's making, circulate, are taken as "truth," and form the basis of future directions for mass media in this country. Recently, we have seen a new agreement about the television industry, about convergence, about consumer choice, about the economics of production, and about international culture. In this context, the clothes of the cultural nationalist are put on the cultural entrepreneur, with little regard for Canadian culture, even when participating in a common cry for decreasing regulations and increasing the consolidation of media corporations. Currently, the alibi of technological convergence supports the ambitions of budding oligopolists for vertically integrated cultural empires. Entrepreneurs eye global markets, and are increasingly interested in distribution and less in "software." Consequently, cultural policy becomes a vehicle for the authorization of local technological infrastructural managers, instead of cultural production. In this vein, Znaimer, like other CEOs turned cultural critics, claims to have found the essence of a technology; he knows the true nature of the medium, how, as he puts it, "to play it like an instrument." Far from an innovator, he is an owner and manager of a slice of the media infrastructure for whom production is but an expense to be minimized as much as possible. "The TVTV Revolution" becomes nothing more than an appendix to a licence application, nothing more than Znaimer's filibuster.

In an image so cliched it barely deserves mention, the prophet Moses presents his ten commandments from up high. Through its participation, the faux-public broadcaster, CBC, presents an argument for its own status as a failed enterprise. No contradiction there, it's being increasingly forced into that position. Regardless of the clothes he wears, Znaimer is no media visionary; visionaries don't reproduce, let alone incorrectly, ideas from the 1960s about the future. It may be a sign of cultural exhaustion, of historical repetition, or simply a mirror to our gullibility. But what should be a revolution for popular pleasures and for innovative television is only the same small cadre of investors vying for position in the new technological universe. What might have been a challenge to the structures of Canadian media is part of the process of consolidation and exclusivity.



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