Information, Crisis, Catastrophe

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The major category of television is time. Time is television’s basis, its principle of structuration, as well as its persistent reference. The insistence of the temporal attribute may indeed be a characteristic of all systems of imaging enabled by mechanical or electronic reproduction. For Roland Barthes, the noeme of photography is the tense it inevitably signifies—the “That-has-been” which ensures both the reality and the “pastness” of the object “photographed.”¹ The principal gesture of photography would be that of embalming (hence Barthes’ reference to Andre Bazin). In fixing or immobilizing its object, transforming the subject of its portraiture into dead matter, photography is always haunted by death and historicity. The temporal dimension of television, on the other hand, would seem to be that of an insistent “present-ness”—a “This-is-going-on” rather than a “That-has-been,” a celebration of the instantaneous. In its own way, however, television maintains an intimate relation with the ideas of death and referentiality Barthes finds so inescapable in his analysis of the photograph. Yet, television deals not with the weight of the dead past but with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present. And the ultimate drama of the instantaneous—catastrophe—constitutes the very limit of its discourse.

According to Ernst Bloch, “Time is only because something happens, and where something happens, there time is.”² Television fills time by ensuring that something happens—it organizes itself around the event. There is often a certain slippage between the notion that television covers important events in order to validate itself as a medium and the idea that because an event is covered by television—because it is, in effect, deemed televisual—it is important. This is the significance of the media event, where the referent becomes indissociable from the medium. The penetration of everyday life by the media is a widely recognized phenomenon. But it is perhaps less widely understood that television’s conceptualization of the event is heavily dependent upon a particular organization (or penetration) of temporality which produces three different modes of apprehending the event—information, crisis, and catastrophe. Information would specify the steady stream of daily “newsworthy” events characterized by their regularity if not predictability. Although news programs would constitute its most common source, it is also dispersed among a number of other types of programs. Its occasion may be politics, science, or “human interest.” Information is noteworthy but is not shocking or gripping—its events are only mildly eventful, although they may be dramatized. The content of information is ever-changing but information, as genre, is always there, a constant and steady presence, keeping you in touch. It is, above all, that
which fills time on television—using it up. Here time is flow: steady and continuous. The crisis, on the other hand, involves a condensation of temporality. It names an event of some duration which is startling and momentous precisely because it demands resolution within a limited period of time. Etymologically, crisis stems from the Greek *krisis*, or decision, and hence always seems to suggest the necessity of human agency. For that reason, crises are most frequently political—a hijacking, an assassination, the take-over of an embassy, a political coup, or the taking of hostages. There is a sense in which information and catastrophe are both subject-less, simply there, they *happen*—while crisis can be attributed to a subject, however generalized (a terrorist group, a class, a political party, etc.). The crisis compresses time and makes its limitations acutely felt. Finally, the catastrophe would from this perspective be the most critical of crises for its timing is that of the instantaneous, the moment, the punctual. It has no extended duration (except, perhaps, that of its televisual coverage) but, instead, happens "all at once."

Ultimately, the categories of information, crisis, and catastrophe are only tenuously separable in practice. There are certainly phenomena which seem to annihilate the distinctions between them—a flood, for instance, which has elements of both the crisis (duration) and the catastrophe (it takes many lives), or an assassination which, although it may be experienced as a catastrophe, is a political action which must be attributed to a subject. But what is more striking in relation to this inevitable taxonomic failure is that television tends to blur the differences between what seem to be absolutely incompatible temporal modes, between the flow and continuity of information and the punctual discontinuity of catastrophe. Urgency, enslavement to the instant and hence forgettability, would then be attributes of both information and catastrophe. Indeed, the obscuring of these temporal distinctions may constitute the specificity of television’s operation. The purpose of this essay is to investigate the implications and effects of this ambivalent structuration of time, particularly in relation to the categories of information and catastrophe.

Television overall seems to resist analysis. This resistance is linked to its sheer extensiveness (the problem of determining the limits or boundaries of the television text has been a pressing one), its continual barrage of information, sensation, event together with its uncanny ability to assimilate, appropriate, or recuperate all criticisms of the media. A story on the March 7, 1988 CBS Evening News detailed how the presidential candidates of both parties produced increasingly provocative or scandalous commercials in order to generate additional television coverage. The commercials would be shown several times in the regular manner and then, depending upon the level of their shock quotient, would be repeated once or more on local or national news, giving the candidates, in effect, free publicity. CBS News, in airing the metastory of this tendency, demonstrates how television news reports on, and hence contains through representation, its own exploitation. Its recuperative power is immense, and television often seems to reduce and deflate, through its pervasiveness and overpresence, all shock value.

Television information would seem to be particularly resistant to analysis given its protean nature. Not only does television news provide a seemingly endless stream of information, each bit (as it were) self-destructing in order to make room for the next, but information is dispersed on television among a number of genres and forms, including talk shows, educational/documentary type programs such as *Nova*, *National Geographic Specials*, and *Wide World of Animals*, "how-to" programs such as *The Frugal Gourmet*, *This Old House*, and *Victory Garden*, news "magazines" such as *60 Minutes* and *Chronicle*, children’s shows (*Sesame Street*), sports, etc. Furthermore, even the two generic forms which are most consistently associated with the concept of information—news and the educational/documentary program—exhibit diametrically opposed formal characteristics. Documentary programs such as *Nova* tend to activate the disembodied male voice-over whose authority has long ago lapsed in the realm of the cinema (it is a voice which, as Pascal Bonitzer points out, has irrevocably "aged"). News programs, on the other hand, involve the persistent, direct, embodied, and personalized address of the newscaster. Information, unlike narrative, is not chained to a particular organization of the signifier or a specific style of address.
Antithetical modes reside side by side. Hence, information would seem to have no formal restrictions—indeed, it is characterized by its very ubiquity. If information is everywhere, then the true scandal of disinformation in the age of television is its quite precise attempt to place or to channel information—to use its effects. Even if it is activated through television, it uses broadcasting in a narrowly conceived way. Disinformation loses credibility, then, not only through its status as a lie but through its very directedness, its limitation, its lack of universal availability. The scandal is that its effects are targeted. Disinformation abuses the system of broadcasting by invoking and exploiting the automatic truth value associated with this mode of dissemination—a truth value not unconnected to the sheer difficulty of verification and the very entropy of information.

Yet, in using this concept of information, I am accepting television's own terms. For the concept carries with it quite specific epistemological and sociological implications associated with the rise of information theory. As Katherine Hayles points out, the decisive move of information theory was to make information quantifiable by removing it from the context which endowed it with meaning, and, instead, defining it through its own internal relations. According to Hayles, this results in what is, in effect, a massive decontextualization: "Never before in human history had the cultural context itself been constituted through a technology that makes it possible to fragment, manipulate, and reconstitute informational texts at will. For postmodern culture, the manipulation of text and its consequently arbitrary relation to context is our context."5

From this point of view, television could be seen as the textual technology of information theory. Insofar as a commercial precedes news coverage of a disaster which in its own turn is interrupted by a preview of tonight's made-for-TV movie, television is the preeminent machine of decontextualization. The only context for television is itself—its own rigorous scheduling. Its strictest limitation that of time, information becomes measurable, quantifiable, through its relation to temporality. While the realism of film is defined largely in terms of space, that of television is conceptualized in terms of time (owing to its characteristics of "liveness," presence, and immediacy). As Margaret Morse notes, television news is distinguished by the very absence of the rationalized Renaissance space we have come to associate with film—a perspectival technique which purports to represent the truth of objects in space.6 Instead, the simultaneous activation of different, incongruous spaces (the studio, graphics, footage from the scene, interviews on monitor) is suggestive of a writing surface and the consequent annihilation of depth. Television does not so much represent as it informs. Theories of representation painstakingly elaborated in relation to film are clearly inadequate.

Conceptualizing information in terms of flow and ubiquity, however, would seem to imply that it lacks any dependence whatsoever upon punctuation or differentiation. Yet even television must have a way of compensating for its own tendency toward the leveling of signification, toward banalization and nondifferentiation—a way of saying, in effect, "Look, this is important," of indexically signaling that its information is worthy of attention. It does so through processes that dramatize information—the high seriousness of music which introduces the news, the rhetoric of the newscaster, the activation of special effects and spectacle in the documentary format. Most effective, perhaps, is the crisis of temporality which signifies urgency and which is attached to the information itself as its single most compelling attribute. Information becomes most visibly information, becomes a televisual commodity, on the brink of its extinction or loss. A recent segment of Nova, "The Hidden Power of Plants," chronicles the attempt to document the expertise of old medicine men who, when they die, take their knowledge with them (it is "worse than when a library burns down," the anonymous voice-over tells us). Similarly, the numerous geographic specials demonstrate that the life of a particular animal or plant becomes most televisual when the species is threatened with extinction. The rhetoric of impending environmental doom is today applicable to almost any species of plant or animal life given the constant expansion and encroachment of civilization on territory designated as still "natural." In this way, television incessantly takes as its subject matter the documentation and revalidation of its own discursive problematic. For information is shown to be punctual; it inhabits a moment of time and is then lost to memory. Television thrives on
its own forgettability. While the concept of information itself implies the possibilities of storage and retrieval (as in computer technology), the notion of such storage is, for television, largely an alien idea. Some television news stories are accompanied by images labeled “file footage,” but the appellation itself reduces the credibility of the story. Reused images, unless carefully orchestrated in the construction of nostalgia, undermine the appeal to the “live” and the instantaneous which buttresses the news.

The short-lived but spectacular aspect of information is revealed in the use of special effects sequences where the drama of information is most closely allied with visual pleasure. In a *National Geographic* special entitled “The Mind,” an artist’s conception of the brain curiously resembles the *mise-en-scène* of information theory. The brain is depicted as an extensive network of neurons, synapses, and neuro-transmitters regulating the flow of information. In one cubic inch of the brain there are 100 million nerve cells connected by 10,000 miles of fibers (laid end to end, the voice-over tells us, they would reach to the moon and back). The amount of information is so enormous that cells must make instantaneous decisions about what is to be transmitted. The sequence is organized so that music announces the significance of these data and an almost constantly moving camera suggests the depths of the representation. The camera treats what is clearly a highly artificial, technologically produced space as the experienced real while the voice-over provides verbal analogues to real space (the fibers which reach to the moon and back, the pinch of salt in a swimming pool which helps one to grasp what it would be like to look for a neuro-transmitter in the brain). Yet, there is no pretense that an optical representation of the brain is adequate—it is simply necessary to the televisual discourse. The voice-over announces, “if it could be seen, brain cell action might look like random flickering of countless stars in an endless universe. Seemingly an infinite amount of information and variety of behaviors in an unlikely looking package,” while the visuals mimic such a sight with multi-colored flickering lights. Television knowledge strains to make visible the invisible. While it acknowledges the limits of empiricism, the limitations of the eye in relation to knowledge, information is nevertheless conveyable only in terms of a simulated visibility—“If it could be seen, this is what it might look like.” Television deals in potentially visible entities. The epistemological endeavor is to bring to the surface, to expose, but only at a second remove—depicting what is not available to sight. Televisability is a construct, even when it makes use of the credibility attached to location shooting—embedding that image within a larger, overriding discourse.

The urgency associated with information together with the refusal to fully align the visible with the dictates of an indexical realism suggests that the alleged value of information, like that of television, is ineluctably linked with time rather than space. And, indeed, both information and television have consistently been defined in relation to the temporal dimension. According to Walter Benjamin, the new form of communication called information brought about a crisis in the novel and in storytelling: “The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.” Information must be immediately understandable, graspable—it is “shot through with explanation.” Meaning in storytelling has time to linger, to be subject to unraveling. It has “an amplitude that information lacks.” This tendency to polarize types of discourses with respect to their relation to temporality is evident also in Jonathan Culler’s activation of Michael Thompson’s categories of transience and durability: “we are accustomed to think—and tradition urges us to think—of two sorts of verbal, visual compositions: those which transmit information in a world of practical affairs—utilitarian and transient—and those which, not tied to the time or use value of information, are part of the world of leisure, our cultural patrimony, and belong in principle to the system of durables.” Benjamin might say that the loss of aura associated with electronic reproduction is a function of its inability to *endure*. In other words, there are things which last and things which don’t. Information does not.
exhausted, in the moment of its utterance. If it were of a material order, it would be necessary to throw it away. As it is, one can simply forget it.

Television, too, has been conceptualized as the annihilation of memory, and consequently of history, in its continual stress upon the “nowness” of its own discourse. As Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow point out, “where film sides towards instantaneous memory (‘everything is absent, everything is recorded—as a memory trace which is so at once, without having been something else before’), television operates much more as an absence of memory, the recorded material it uses—including the material recorded on film—instituted as actual in the production of the television image.” This transformation of record into actuality or immediacy is a function of a generalized fantasy of “live broadcasting.” Jane Feuer pursues this question by demonstrating that a certain ontology of television, defined in terms of a technological base which allows for instantaneous recording, transmission, and reception, becomes the ground for a pervasive ideology of “liveness.” Although, as she is careful to point out, television rarely exploits this technical capability, minimalizing not only “live” transmission but preservation of “real time” as well, the ideology of “liveness” works to overcome the excessive fragmentation within television’s flow. If television is indeed thought to be inherently “live,” the impression of a unity of “real time” is preserved, covering over the extreme discontinuity which is in fact typical of television in the U.S. at this historical moment.

From these descriptions it would appear that information is peculiarly compatible with the television apparatus. Both are fully aligned with the notion of urgency; both thrive on the exhaustion, moment by moment, of their own material; both are hence linked with transience and the undermining of memory. But surely there are moments which can be isolated from the fragmented flow of information, moments with an impact which disrupts the ordinary routine—moments when information bristles, when its greatest value is its shock value (in a medium which might be described as a modulated, and hence restrained, series of shocks). These are moments when one stops simply watching television in order to stare, transfixed—moments of catastrophe. But what constitutes catastrophe on television? And what is the basis of the widespread intuition that television exploits, or perhaps even produces, catastrophe? To what extent and in what ways is the social imagination of catastrophe linked to television?

Etymologically, the word “catastrophe” is traceable to the Greek kata (over) plus strephein (turn)—to overturn. The first definition given by Webster’s is “the final event of the dramatic action esp. of a tragedy” (in this respect it is interesting to note that the etymology of the term “trope” also links it to “turn.”) Hence, although the second and third definitions (“2. a momentous tragic event ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin 3. a violent and sudden change in a feature of the earth”) attempt to bind catastrophe to the real, the initial definition contaminates it with fictionality. Catastrophe is on the cusp of the dramatic and the referential and this is, indeed, part of its fascination. The etymological specification of catastrophe as the overturning of a given situation anticipates its more formal delineation by catastrophe theory. Here, catastrophe is defined as unexpected discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system. The theory is most appropriate, then, for the study of sudden and unexpected effects in a gradually changing situation. The emphasis upon suddenness suggests that catastrophe is of a temporal order.

The formal definition offered by catastrophe theory, however, points to a striking paradox associated with the attempt to conceptualize televisual catastrophe. For while catastrophe is designated as discontinuity within an otherwise continuous system, television is most frequently theorized as a system of discontinuities, emphasizing heterogeneity. Furthermore, the tendency of television to banalize all events through a kind of leveling process would seem to preclude the possibility of specifying any event as catastrophic. As Benjamin pointed out in a statement which seems to capture something of the effect of television, “‘The concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things ‘just go on’ is the catastrophe.” The news, in particular, is vulnerable to the charge that it dwells on the catastrophic, obsessed with the aberrant, the deviant. According to Margaret Morse, “The news in the West is about the anormal. It is almost always the
'bad' news. It is about challenges to the symbolic system and its legitimacy.” Furthermore, in its structural emphasis upon discontinuity and rupture, it often seems that television itself is formed on the model of catastrophe.

Given these difficulties, is it possible to produce a coherent account of events which television designates as catastrophe? What do these moments and events have in common? One distinctive feature of the catastrophe is that of the scale of the disaster in question—a scale often measured through a body count. By this criterion, Bhopal, the Detroit Northwest Airlines crash of August 1987, and the Mexican earthquake could all be labeled catastrophes. However, other events which are clearly presented as catastrophic—Chernobyl, the explosion of the Challenger—do not involve a high number of deaths while wartime body counts (Vietnam, the Iran-Iraq war), often numerically impressive, do not qualify as catastrophic (undoubtedly because war makes death habitual, continual). Evidently, the scale which is crucial to catastrophe is not that of the quantification of death (or at least not that alone).

Catastrophe does, however, always seem to have something to do with technology and its potential collapse. And it is also always tainted by a fascination with death—so that catastrophe might finally be defined as the conjuncture of the failure of technology and the resulting confrontation with death. The fragility of technology's control over the forces it strives to contain is manifested most visibly in the accident—the plane crash today being the most prominent example. Dan Rather introduced the CBS story about the August 1987 Detroit Northwest Airlines crash with the rhetoric of catastrophe—the phrase “aftershocks of a nightmare” accompanying aerial images of wreckage strewn over a large area. The inability of television to capture the precise moment of the crash activates a compensatory discourse of eyewitness accounts and animated re-enactments of the disaster—a simulated vision. Eyewitnesses who comment upon the incredible aspects of the sight or who claim that there were “bodies strewn everywhere” borrow their authority from the sheer fact of being there at the disastrous moment, their reported presence balancing the absence of the camera. What becomes crucial for the act of reportage, the announcement of the catastrophe, is the simple gesture of being on the scene, where it happened, so that presence in space compensates for the inevitable temporal lag. Hence, while the voice-over of the anchor ultimately organizes the event for us, the status of the image as indexical truth is not inconsequential—through it the “story” touches the ground of the real. Nevertheless, the catastrophe must be immediately subjected to analysis, speculation, and explanation. In the case of the airplane crash, speculation about causes is almost inevitably a speculation about the limits and breaking points of technology (with respect to Northwest flight 255, the history of the performance of the engine was immediately a subject of interrogation).

As modes of transportation dependent upon advanced and intricate technologies become familiar, everyday, routine, the potential for catastrophe increases. The breakdown of these technologies radically defamiliarizes them by signaling their distance from a secure and comforting nature. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch points out, this was the case for the railroad in the 19th century, its gradual acceptance and normalization subjected to the intermittent shock of the accident.

One might also say that the more civilized the schedule and the more efficient the technology, the more catastrophic its destruction when it collapses. There is an exact ratio between the level of the technology with which nature is controlled, and the degree of severity of its accidents. The preindustrial era does not know any technological accidents in that sense. In Diderot's Encyclopedie, “Accident” is dealt with as a grammatical and philosophical concept, more or less synonymous with coincidence. The preindustrial catastrophes are natural events, natural accidents. They attack the objects they destroy from the outside, as storms, floods, thunderbolts, hailstones, etc. After the industrial revolution, destruction by technological accident comes from the inside. The technical apparatuses destroy themselves by means of
their own power. The energies tamed by the steam engine and delivered by it as regulated mechanical performance will destroy that engine itself in the case of an accident.\textsuperscript{14}

In the late twentieth century, the potential for technological collapse is more pervasive, characterizing catastrophes as diverse as Bhopal, Chernobyl, the \textit{Challenger} explosion, earthquakes which science and technology fail to predict, as well as railway and plane crashes. But this massive expansion is perhaps not the decisive difference. After the Detroit crash, airport authorities spray-painted the burned-out grass green in order to conceal all traces of the accident and enable other travelers to avoid the traumatic evidence. Yet, this action was then reported on radio news, indicating that what is now at stake in the catastrophe, for us, is coverage. While the vision of catastrophe is blocked at one level, it is multiplied and intensified at another. The media urge us now to obsessively confront catastrophe, over and over again. And while the railway accident of the 19th century was certainly the focus of journalistic inquiry, its effects were primarily local. Television's ubiquity, its extensiveness, allows for a global experience of catastrophe which is always reminiscent of the potential of nuclear disaster, of mass rather than individual annihilation.

Catastrophe is thus, through its association with industrialization and the advance of technology, ineluctably linked with the idea of Progress. The time of technological progress is always felt as linear and fundamentally irreversible—technological change is almost by definition an “advance,” and it is extremely difficult to conceive of any movement backward, any regression. Hence, technological evolution is perceived as unflinching progress toward a total state of control over nature. If some notion of pure Progress is the utopian element in this theory of technological development, catastrophe is its dystopia, the always unexpected interruption of this forward movement. Catastrophic time stands still. Catastrophe signals the failure of the escalating technological desire to conquer nature. From the point of view of Progress, nature can no longer be seen as anything but an affront or challenge to technology. And so, just as the media penetrates events (in the media event), technology penetrates nature. This is why the purview of catastrophe keeps expanding to encompass even phenomena which had previously been situated wholly on the side of nature—earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes. Such catastrophes no longer signify only the sudden eruption of natural forces but the inadequacy or failure of technology and its predictive powers as well.

On the ABC Evening News of September 15, 1988, Peter Jennings stood in front of a map tracking the movements of Hurricane Gilbert for the first fifteen minutes of the broadcast. A supporting report detailed the findings of a highly equipped plane flying into the eye of the hurricane. The fascination here was not only that of the literal penetration of the catastrophic storm by high technology but also that of the sophisticated instruments and tracking equipment visible inside the plane—a fetishism of controls. Our understanding of natural catastrophe is now a fully technological apprehension. Such incidents demonstrate that the distinction made by Schivelbusch between preindustrial accidents (natural accidents where the destructive energy comes from without) and post-industrial accidents (in which the destructive energy comes from within the technological apparatus) is beginning to blur. This is particularly the case with respect to nuclear technology which aspires to harness the most basic energy of nature itself—that of the atom. And in doing so it also confronts us with the potential transformation of that energy into that which is most lethal to human life.

While nuclear disaster signals the limits of the failure of technology, the trauma attached to the explosion of the \textit{Challenger} is associated with the sheer height of the technological aspirations represented by space exploration. The \textit{Challenger} coverage also demonstrates just how nationalistic the apprehension of catastrophe is—our own catastrophes are always more important, more eligible for extended reporting than those of other nations. But perhaps even more crucial here was the fact that television itself was on the scene—witness to the catastrophe. And the played and replayed image of the \textit{Challenger} exploding, of diverging lines of billowing white smoke against a
deep blue Florida sky—constant evidence of television's compulsion to repeat—acts as a reminder not only of the catastrophic nature of the event but also of the capacity of television to record instantaneously, a reminder of the fact that television was there. The temporality of catastrophe is that of the instant—it is momentary, punctual, while its televisal coverage is characterized by its very duration, seemingly compensating for the suddenness, the unexpected nature of the event.

A segment of Tom Brokaw's virtually non-stop coverage on NBC contained a video replay of the explosion itself, a live broadcast of the president's message to the nation, Brokaw's reference to an earlier interview with a child psychiatrist who dealt with the potential trauma of the event for children, Chris Wallace's report of Don Regan's announcement and the press's reception of the news during a press briefing, a mention of Mrs. Reagan's reaction to the explosion as she watched it live on television, Brokaw's speculation about potential attacks on Reagan's support of SDI ("Star Wars"), and Brokaw's 1981 interview with one of the astronauts, Judy Resnick. The glue in this collection of disparate forms is Brokaw's performance, his ability to cover the event with words, with a commentary which exhausts its every aspect and through the orchestration of secondary reports and old footage. Brokaw is the pivot, he mediates our relation to the catastrophe. Furthermore, as with television news, it is a direct address/appeal to the viewer, but with an even greater emphasis upon the presence and immediacy of the act of communication, with constant recourse to shifters which draw attention to the shared space and time of reporter and viewer: terms such as "today," "here," "you," "we," "I." Immediately after a rerun of the images documenting the Challenger explosion, Brokaw says, clearly improvising, "As I say, we have shown that to you repeatedly again and again today. It is not that we have a ghoulish curiosity. We just think that it's important that all members of the audience who are coming to their sets at different times of the day have an opportunity to see it. And of course everyone is led to their own speculation based on what happened here today as well." The "liveness," the "real time" of the catastrophe is that of the television anchor's discourse—its nonstop quality a part of a fascination which is linked to the spectator's knowledge that Brokaw faces him/her without a complete script, underlining the alleged authenticity of his discourse. For the possibility is always open that Brokaw might stumble, that his discourse might lapse—and this would be tantamount to touching the real, simply displacing the lure of referentiality attached to the catastrophe to another level (that of the "personal" relationship between anchor and viewer).

There is a very striking sense in which televisal catastrophe conforms to the definition offered by catastrophe theory whereby catastrophe represents discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system. From this point of view, the measure of catastrophe would be the extent to which it interrupts television's regular daily programming, disrupting normal expectations about what can be seen and heard at a particular time. If Nick Browne is correct in suggesting that, through its alignment of its own schedule with the work day and the work week, television "helps produce and render 'natural' the logic and rhythm of the social order," then catastrophe would represent that which cannot be contained within such an ordering of temporality. It would signal the return of the repressed. The traumatic nature of such a disruption is underlined by the absence of commercials in the reporting of catastrophe—commercials usually constituting not only the normal punctuation of television's flow, but, for some, the very text of television.

That which, above all, cannot be contained within the daily social rhythms of everyday life is death. Catastrophe is at some level always about the body, about the encounter with death. For all its ideology of "liveness," it may be death which forms the point of televisal intrigue. Contemporary society works to conceal death to such an extent that its experience is generally a vicarious one through representation. The removal of death from direct perception, a process which, as Benjamin points out, was initiated in the nineteenth century, continues today:

In the course of the nineteenth century bourgeois society has, by means of hygienic and social, private and public institutions, realized a secondary effect which may have been its
subconscious main purpose: to make it possible for people to avoid the sight of dying. Dying was once a public process in the life of the individual and a most exemplary one. . . . There used to be no house, hardly a room, in which someone had not once died . . . Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death . . . 17

Furthermore, the mechanization of warfare—the use of technologically advanced weapons which kill at a greater and greater distance—further reduces the direct confrontation with death. Consistent with its wartime goal of allaying the effects of death and increasing the efficiency with which it is produced, technology also strives to hold death at bay, to contain it. Hence, death emerges as the absolute limit of technology’s power, that which marks its vulnerability. Catastrophe, conjoining death with the failure of technology, presents us with a scenario of limits—the limits of technology, the limits of signification. In the novel, according to Benjamin, death makes the character’s life meaningful to the reader, allows him/her the “hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.”18 What is at stake in televisual catastrophe is not meaning but reference. The viewer’s consuming desire, unlike that of the novel reader, is no longer a desire for meaning but for a referentiality which seems to have been all but lost in the enormous expanse of a television which always promises a contact forever deferred. Death is no longer the culminating experience of a life rich in continuity and meaning but, instead, pure discontinuity, disruption—pure chance or accident, the result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And it is not by coincidence that catastrophe theory, on an entirely different level, seeks to provide a means of mapping the discontinuous instance, the chance occurrence, without reducing its arbitrariness or indeterminacy. Catastrophe theory is based on a theorem in topology discovered by the French mathematician René Thom in 1968. Its aim is to provide a formal language for the description of sudden discontinuities within a gradually changing system. The points of occurrence of these discontinuities are mapped on a three-dimensional graph. In 1972, E. D. Zeeman developed an educational toy called the “catastrophe machine” to facilitate the understanding of Thom’s theory. (The appeal of this toy is that you can make it yourself with only two rubber bands, a cardboard disk, two drawing pins and a wooden board). The point of the catastrophe machine is the construction of an apparatus which is guaranteed to not work, to predictably produce unpredictable irregularities. For catastrophe theory is, as one of its proponents explains, “a theory about singularities. When applied to scientific problems, therefore, it deals with the properties of discontinuities directly, without reference to any specific underlying mechanism.”19 It is, therefore, no longer a question of explanation. Catastrophe theory confronts the indeterminable without attempting to reduce it to a set of determinations. Thom refers to “islands of determinism separated by zones of instability or indeterminacy.”20 Catastrophe theory is one aspect of a new type of scientific endeavor which Lyotard labels “postmodern”—a science which “by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘fracta,’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge, while expressing how such a change can take place.”21

Television is not, however, the technology of catastrophe theory or, if it is, it is so only in a highly limited sense. The televisural construction of catastrophe seeks both to preserve and to annihilate indeterminacy, discontinuity. On the one hand, by surrounding catastrophe with commentary, with an explanatory apparatus, television works to contain its more disturbing and uncontrollable aspects. On the other hand, catastrophe’s discontinuity is embraced as the mirror of television’s own functioning and that discontinuity and indeterminacy ensure the activation of the lure of referentiality. In this sense, television is a kind of catastrophe machine, continually corroborating its own signifying problematic—a problematic of discontinuity and indeterminacy which strives to mimic the experience of the real, a real which in its turn is guaranteed by the contact with death. Catastrophe thrives on the momentary, the instantaneous, that which seems destined to be
forgotten, and hence seems to confirm Heath’s and Skirrow’s notion that television operates as the “absence of memory.” But because catastrophe is necessary to television, as the corroboration of its own signifying problematic, there is also a clear advantage in the somewhat laborious construction and maintenance of a memory of catastrophe. The spectator must be led to remember, with even a bit of nostalgia, those moments which are preeminently televisual—the explosion of the Challenger, the assassination of John F. Kennedy (the footage of which was replayed again and again during the time of the recent twenty-fifth anniversary of the event). What is remembered in these nostalgic returns is not only the catastrophe or crisis itself but the fact that television was there, allowing us access to moments which always seem more real than all the others.

Catastrophe coverage clearly generates and plays on the generation of anxiety. The indeterminacy and unexpectedness of catastrophe seem to aptly describe the potential trauma of the world we occupy. But such coverage also allows for a persistent disavowal—in viewing the bodies on the screen, one can always breathe a sigh of relief in the realization that “that’s not me.” Indeed, the celebrity status of the anchorperson and of those who usually appear on television can seem to justify the belief that the character on the screen is always—dead or alive—is always definitively other, that the screen is not a mirror. Such persistent anxiety is manageable, although it may require that one periodically check the screen to make sure. But this is perhaps not the only, or even the most important, affect associated with catastrophe coverage.

Something of another type of affective value of catastrophe can be glimpsed in Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of the sinking of the Titanic and its cultural and psychical significance. At the end of the nineteenth century, “civilized” Europe perceived itself as on the brink of extinction, its values threatened by revolutionary workers’ movements, the rise of nationalism and anti-Semitism, and diverse signs indicating the decay of morals. The grand luxury transatlantic voyage incarnated a generalized nostalgia for a disappearing Europe insofar as it signified technological progress, victory over nature, and also a condensed image of a social world based on class divisions elsewhere threatened with dissolution. The shipwreck of the Titanic hence represented for the social imagination the collapse of European civilization, the destruction of an entire social edifice—“Europe at the beginning of the century found itself confronted with its own death.”22 The contradictory readings by the right and the left of the behavior of first-class “gentlemen” with respect to third-class women and children corroborate this reading of a social imagination seized by the shipwreck and treating it as an index to the maintenance or collapse of former class differences.

But Žižek goes on to claim that there must be something in excess of this symbolic reading. For it is difficult to explain satisfactorily the contemporary fascination with images of the wreck at the bottom of the sea: “The mute presence of wrecks—are they not like the congealed residue of an impossible jouissance? … One understands why, notwithstanding technical problems, we hesitate to raise the wreckage of the Titanic to the surface: its sublime beauty, once exposed to daylight, would turn to waste, to the depressing banality of a rusted mass of iron.”23 It would be problematic to bring the Titanic too close—it is there to be watched in its “proper” grave, to be regarded as a monument to catastrophe in general, a catastrophe which, in its distance, makes you feel real. According to Žižek, the two aspects of the Titanic—the “metaphorical one of its symbolic overdetermination and the real one of the inertia of the thing, incarnation of a mute jouissance”—represent the two sides of the Freudian symptom.24 For although the symptom can be interpreted as a knot of significations, it is also more than that. There is a remainder, an excess not reducible to the symbolic network (in the words of Jacques-Alain Miller, one “loves one’s symptom like oneself.”)

It is this remainder, this residue, which televisual catastrophe exploits. The social fascination of catastrophe rests on the desire to confront the remainder, or to be confronted with that which is in excess of significature. Catastrophe seems to testify to the inertia of the real and television’s privileged relation to it. In the production and reproduction of the metonymic chain—the body-catastrophe-death-referentiality—television legitimates its own discourse. This is why it is often
difficult to isolate and define catastrophe, to establish the boundary which marks it off from ordinary television. Information and catastrophe coexist in a curious balance. According to Susan Sontag, "we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror." Television produces both as the two poles structuring the contemporary imagination.

This relation to catastrophe is by no means an inherent or essential characteristic of television technology. Rather, it is a feature which distinguishes television and its operations in the late capitalist society of the United States where crisis is produced and assimilated as a part of the ongoing spectacle—a spectacle financed by commercials and hence linked directly to the circulation of commodities. What underlies/haunts catastrophe but is constantly overshadowed by it is the potential of another type of catastrophe altogether—that of the economic crisis. According to Schivelbush, "If the nineteenth century perceives the cause of technological accidents to be the sudden disturbance of the uncertain equilibrium of a machine (i.e., the relationship between curbed energy and the means of curbing it), Marx defines the economic crisis as the disruption of the uncertain balance between buying and selling in the circulation of goods. As long as buying and selling work as a balanced and unified process, the cycle goes on functioning, but as soon as the two become separated and autonomous, we arrive at a crisis." Of course, economic crisis does not appear to meet any of the criteria of the true catastrophe. It is not punctual but of some duration, it does not kill (at least not immediately), and it can assuredly be linked to a notion of agency or system (that of commodity capitalism) if not to a subject. Yet, for a television dependent upon the healthy circulation of commodities, the economic crisis can be more catastrophic than any natural or technological catastrophe. Ironically, for this very reason, and to deflect any potentially harmful consequences, it must be disguised as catastrophe and hence naturalized, contained, desystematized. The economic crisis as catastrophe is sudden, discontinuous, and unpredictable—an accident which cannot reflect back upon any system.

In comparison with the lure of referentiality associated with catastrophe "proper," the economic crisis confronts us as an abstraction. Yet, the abstraction of catastrophe is difficult since catastrophe seems to lend itself more readily to an account of bodies. Hence, the reporting of the Wall Street crash of October 1987 strives to restore the elements of catastrophe which are lacking—the iconography of panic becomes the high angle shot down at the milling crowd of the stock exchange, bodies in disarray. An interviewee claims, "It's fascinating, like a bloodbath." Furthermore, a catastrophe which seems furthest removed from the concept of a failure of technology is rebound to that concept through the oft-repeated claim that a major cause of the crash was computer trading gone awry. Economic crisis is also tamed by naturalizing it as a cyclical occurrence, like the change of seasons. This is a containment of a catastrophe which, unlike the others, potentially threatens television's own economic base, its own mechanism for the production of commodity-linked spectacle. And perhaps this is why catastrophe has become such a familiar, almost everyday, televisual occurrence. According to Ernst Bloch, "the crises of the accident (of the uncontrolled things) will remain with us longer to the degree that they remain deeper than the crises of economy (of the uncontrolled commodities)." The depth which television accords to the catastrophes of things is linked to the lure of referentiality which they hold out to us. Catastrophe makes concrete and immediate, and therefore deflects attention from, the more abstract horror of potential economic crisis. For the catastrophe, insofar as it is perceived as the accidental failure of technology (and one which can be rectified with a little tinkering—O-rings can be fixed, engines redesigned) is singular, asystematic—it does not touch the system of commodity capitalism.

The concept of crisis is linked to temporal process, to a duration of a (one can hope) limited period. This is why the time of crisis can coincide with that of politics, of political strategy. Crisis, krisis, is a decisive period insofar as it is a time when decisions have to be made, decisions with very real effects. The televisual representation of catastrophe, on the other hand, hopes to hold onto the apolitical and attach it to the momentary, the punctual. Here time is free in its indeterminacy, reducible to no system—precisely the opposite of televisual time which is programmed
and scheduled as precisely as possible, down to the last second. Television's time is a time which is, in effect, wholly determined. And this systematization of time is ultimately based on its commodification (time in television is, above all, not "free"). As both Stephen Heath and Eileen Meehan point out, what networks sell to advertisers is the viewing time of their audiences. Here the commodification of time is most apparent (and perhaps this is why, in the reporting of catastrophes, there are no commercials).

The catastrophe is crucial to television precisely because it functions as a denial of this process and corroborates television's access to the momentary, the discontinuous, the real. Catastrophe produces the illusion that the spectator is in direct contact with the anchorperson, who interrupts regular programming to demonstrate that it can indeed be done when the referent is at stake. Television's greatest technological prowess is its ability to be there—both on the scene and in your living room (hence the most catastrophic of technological catastrophes is the loss of the signal). The death associated with catastrophe ensures that television is felt as an immediate collision with the real in all its intractability—bodies in crisis, technology gone awry. Televisual catastrophe is thus characterized by everything which it is said not to be—it is expected, predictable, its presence crucial to television's operation. In fact, catastrophe could be said to be at one level a condensation of all the attributes and aspirations of "normal" television (immediacy, urgency, presence, discontinuity, the instantaneous, and hence forgettable). If information becomes a commodity on the brink of its extinction or loss, televisual catastrophe magnifies that death many times over. Hence, catastrophe functions as both the exception and the norm of a television practice which continually holds out to its spectator the lure of a referentiality perpetually deferred.

**Postscript (2003)**

Although this essay was written fifteen years ago, I believe that the tendencies it describes have only intensified and deepened. The televisual coverage of September 11, 2001 seemed to obscenely corroborate the idea that "the death associated with catastrophe ensures that television is felt as an immediate collision with the real in all its intractability—bodies in crisis, technology gone awry." It further blurred the already fragile opposition between catastrophe and crisis outlined here, transforming a political act into something with the proportions of a monumental natural disaster (or a grandiose battle between an abstractly defined good and evil), at the expense of any more nuanced attempt at historical explication. The concept of catastrophe has been systematically broadened since 1988 and this steady encroachment is enabled by the fact that catastrophe is defined not so much by any stable or finite content but by the ideological inflection of a technological potential—that of the "liveness" of representation. Hence, events as varied as the O.J. Simpson car chase and later trial, the death of Lady Diana, Princess of Wales, the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the Washington sniper killings, the loss of the space shuttle *Columbia* as well as, most prominently, the collapse of the twin towers on September 11, 2001 and the ensuing Iraq War have all been covered as catastrophic, invoking all the technical skills that have been honed and refined continually since (at least) the 1980s. Those skills above all allow television to be there, on the scene, "live," to stress the urgency, indeed inescapability, of our attending to the event. Catastrophe takes on the logic of innovation associated with the commodity system and especially with fashion—its constant demand for newness, difference, uniqueness and its consequent "forgetting" of yesterday's styles and yesterday's catastrophes (except in the form of the quotable, of "retro"—one might note the existence of "retro catastrophes," replayed somewhat nostalgically on anniversaries and other appropriate moments.)

The role of televisual "liveness" has been made more critical by the emergence and rapid dissemination of digital media that lay claim to an even more desirable temporality—"real time." The use of "real time" in the digital register both appropriates the meanings of this term for film
INFORMATION, CRISIS, CATASTROPHE • 263

(continuity, lack of disruption) and for television (the instantaneity and immediacy of liveness) and adds the additional connotations of interactivity and 24-hour availability. Computer “real time” not only allows you to remain connected, to be in touch with what is happening now, but to allegedly interact with the source of information as well, expanding your choices within a commodity driven economy while leaving intact the restricted, corporate-produced definition of choice. In television's continual effort to assimilate everything—including all other forms of representation, news anchors frequently exhort their viewers to keep up with the news in "real time" by visiting the station's or network's Web site online. A Web site called “freerealtime.com,” whose motto is “Turning knowledge into wealth,” provides its visitors with direct and instantaneous access to action on the stock market. The site promises its visitors the opportunity to “see what's happening right now, not 15 minutes later.” The Web site of Lynuxworks aptly proclaims that “there is no tolerance for delays in a telecom environment.”

No tolerance for delays. What is at stake in this continual technological celebration of instantaneity, in this insistence upon identifying the real with the "now"? In a sense, it signifies the social abjection of representation itself in a highly mediated society. Bazin, in writing about what must strike most people now as a fairly antiquated medium—film—links cinematic specificity to a scandal, that of the repeatability of the unique (“I cannot repeat a single moment of my life, but cinema can repeat any one of these moments indefinitely before my eyes”). While all moments are unique, according to Bazin, the paradox of their cinematic repetition is muted by our acceptance of this status as a form of memory. But there are two moments that are so intensely unique that their repetition in film must be obscene—death and the sexual act: “Each is in its own way the absolute negation of objective time, the qualitative instant in its purest form. Like death, love must be experienced and cannot be represented (it is not called the little death for nothing) without violating its nature. This violation is called obscenity. The representation of a real death is also an obscenity, no longer a moral one, but metaphysical. We do not die twice.”

For Bazin, this scandal was specific to the cinema and did not exist for photography because only cinema could represent the passage from one state to another, from life to death. (The supreme perversion, in his view, would be the projection of an execution in reverse.) Bazin wrote, of course, before television (or at least its widespread dissemination), video, and digital media, other visual time-based media which could share in the scandal of death's representation.

Bazin's formulation of representational obscenity is presented in the course of an analysis of a film about a bullfight. The death at issue is the ever-present potentiality of the death of either the bull or the toreador. Spectatorial cognizance of this risk is heightened by a refusal of editing, by allowing the bull and the man to occupy the same frame. Hence, the obscenity is very much a function of the continuity of cinematic "real time," of the protection of cinéma's indexicality from the violence of editing. Instead, as Serge Daney has pointed out, violence, difference, or heterogeneity are internalized as subject matter in order to preserve the spatio-temporal unity of the representation. It is representation which is truly at risk (“To intern difference means saving representation”). This violence is eroticized, given Bazin's view of the intimacy of sex and death as apogees of the unique.

For Bazin, obscenity is the repetition of the absolutely unique, the fact that death could be made to happen over and over again, made possible by time-based mechanical representation and by filmic "real time," which acts as a kind of proof of the process and its integrity. "Real time" today, in its televisual and digital forms, is less about continuity (the refusal of editing) and more about instantaneity (the adherence of the time of representation to the time of the event). It makes possible a repetition that threatens to annihilate the temporal gap between the event and its representation—in the live telecast, the event is virtually its own repeatability. The scandal would be the disappearance of the very idea of the unique, the loss of death as a measure of singularity. Death happens over and over again on the television screen and there is a general hemorrhaging
of the notion of the catastrophic. The media thrive on this disruption, this discontinuity, because it promises to stave off the boredom of the banal, of television's unrelenting flow. Incorporated within that flow, disruption becomes "reality television."

Yet, each catastrophe is somehow new despite its repetitiveness, for the catastrophic is also the unscripted, the tinge of referentiality which seems to cling to mechanical and electronic reproduction. The dialectic of repeatability and the unique associated with catastrophe works both to affirm representation (to "save" it in Bazin's terms) and to allow for a hope in its effacement, the assurance of an access to the real. This is, perhaps, the supreme paradox of a media-saturated society.

Notes

3. The time proper to catastrophe might be thought of as compatible with that of the digital watch where time is cut off from any sense of analogical continuity, and the connection between moments is severed. One is faced only with the time of the instant—isolated and alone.
15. This performance could also be seen as a masculinist discourse which attempts to reestablish control over a failed masculinized technology. In this sense, catastrophe is feminized insomuch as it designates the re-emergence of the nature technology attempts to repress and control. Brokaw's performance is thus a discursive management of catastrophe. Such a reading is problematic insofar as it equates nature and the feminine, technology and the masculine, but gains a certain amount of historical force from an influential mythology. It was, after all, a woman (Pandora) who unleashed catastrophe upon the world.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
32. Serge Daney, "The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals)," trans. Mark A. Cohen, in Margulies, 34.