



★ MEDIA EVENTS!  
THE LIVE BROADCASTING OF HISTORY  
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## Defining Media Events: High Holidays of Mass Communication

This book is about the festive viewing of television. It is about those historic occasions—mostly occasions of state—that are televised as they take place and transfix a nation or the world. They include epic contests of politics and sports, charismatic missions, and the rites of passage of the great—what we call Contests, Conquests, and Coronations. In spite of the differences among them, events such as the Olympic Games, Anwar el-Sadat's journey to Jerusalem, and the funeral of John F. Kennedy have given shape to a new narrative genre that employs the unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs. These are events that hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience.

We call them collectively "media events," a term we wish to redeem from its pejorative connotations. Alternatively, we might have "television ceremonies," or "festive television," or even "cultural performances" (Singer, 1984). These telecasts share a large number of common attributes which we shall attempt to identify. Audiences recognize them as an invitation—even a command—to stop their daily routines and join in a holiday experience. If festive viewing is to ordinary viewing what holidays are to the everyday, these events are the high holidays of mass communication. Conceptually speaking, this book is an attempt to bring the anthropology of ceremony.

(Durkheim, 1915; Handelman, 1990; Lévi-Strauss, 1963; Turner, 1985) to bear on the process of mass communication.

### ★ Television Genres

Until very recently, television was thought to be saying nothing worthy of humanistic analysis. To propose that television—like the other media—deals in “texts” and “genres” seemed to be conferring too much dignity. Viewers were thought to be watching not programs but television. They were assumed to be passive and unselective, satisfied with stories intended for an undifferentiated audience with a short attention span. Social scientists studied television the way they had studied radio; they searched for mass response to persuasion attempts, or to the images of race, sex, or occupation, or to acts of violence. Some concentrated on long-run effects, taking note of the substitute environment with which TV envelops heavy viewers. Others focused on the effect of television on social institutions, such as politics.

Yet producers and audiences alike routinely assume the existence of television genres. The broadcasters themselves, and the TV listings in newspapers and magazines, regularly classify programs by type: news, documentary, sports, action, adventure, Western, situation comedy, soap opera, variety show, game show, talk show, children’s cartoon, and the like. Researchers in mass communications employ these categories too, almost as uncritically. With the exception of soap opera that dates to radio (Herzog, 1941; Arnheim, 1944; Warner, 1962; Katzman, 1972; Modleski, 1982; Cassata, 1983; Cantor and Pingree, 1983; and Allen, 1985), very little serious work has been done on the characteristics of these forms, how they differ from one another, how they relate to corresponding forms in other media, what their messages are, and how these messages are communicated.

Systematic study of the news as a genre of broadcasting has recently begun to rival interest in the soap opera (Epstein, 1973; Tuchman, 1978; Fiske and Hartley, 1978; Schlesinger, 1978; Gans, 1979; Graber, 1984; Morse, 1985). Certain political forms—national conventions, presidential debates, political advertising—have also gained attention, and the situation comedy is having its day (Marc, 1989; Taylor, 1989). Still, until recently, and with only occasional exceptions, social studies of television have treated the medium as a whole or in terms of discrete stimuli, without paying serious attention to its component forms. The publications of Horace Newcomb (1974) in the United States and Raymond Williams (1975) in England represent major turning points in the mapping of television territory.

It is striking how different is the study of film. Cinema studies approach film with a literary perspective, as texts to be classified and decoded, sociologically, politically, and psychoanalytically.<sup>1</sup> The same kind of classificatory effort has been applied—although not always uncondescendingly—to the other genres of popular culture. In *Adventure, Mystery, Romance* (1976) John Cawelti elaborates on the dominant genres (he prefers to speak of formulas) of popular fiction. In adventure stories—chivalric tales, war novels, mysteries—Cawelti finds the message of triumph over death, injustice, and the dangerous enemy. The classic detective story stands out in his category of mystery and leads the reader to a desirable and rational restoration of order and of pacification of the unknown. Romance teaches the all-sufficiency of love, celebrating monogamy and domesticity.

Following Cawelti, Newcomb (1974) attempted to delve into the formulas of television. This was the first time, to our knowledge, that a scholar classified television programs systematically: he analyzed the programs in each category and generalized about what they had in common. In the process he proposed a

much broader generalization: that television, as a medium, imposes an element of "familism" on each of the genres which it has inherited from the other media of popular culture. In other words, says Newcomb, the Western, the action adventure, and the detective story, not just the soap opera or the situation comedy, is domesticated by television as if to attune the medium as a whole to the nuclear family, television's original viewing group.

### Television with a Halo

Even those like Williams and Newcomb, who pioneered in the classification of television genres, approach the viewing experience not in terms of discrete programs but in terms of the patterned sequences of stimuli (images, issues, messages, stories) that constitute an evening's viewing. They prefer to speak of "strips" (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1983), "flow" (Williams, 1975), compounded interruption (Houston, 1984), relentless messages (Cerbner et al., 1979), moving wallpaper, and mindless chewing gum (Hood, 1967; Csikszentmihalyi and Kubey, 1981).

Even if it is true that most of television melds into some such seamless "supertext" (Browne, 1984), there are certain types of programs that demand and receive focused attention (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Media events are one such genre. Unique to television, they differ markedly from the genres of the everynight.

Readers will have no trouble identifying the kinds of broadcasts we have in mind.<sup>2</sup> Every nation has them. Our sample of a dozen of these events, internationally, includes the funerals of President Kennedy and Lord Louis Mountbatten, the royal wedding of Charles and Diana, the journeys of Pope John Paul II and Anwar el-Sadat, the debates of 1960 between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon, the Watergate hearings, the revolutionary changes of 1989 in Eastern Europe, the Olympics, and others.

We have studied accounts and video recordings of these events, and have ourselves conducted empirical research into five of them.<sup>3</sup>

The most obvious difference between media events and other formulas or genres of broadcasting is that they are, by definition, not routine. In fact, they are *interruptions* of routine; they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives. Like the holidays that halt everyday routines, television events propose exceptional things to think about, to witness, and to do. Regular broadcasting is suspended and preempted as we are guided by a series of special announcements and preludes that transform daily life into something special and, upon the conclusion of the event, are guided back again. In the most characteristic events, the interruption is *monopolistic*, in that all channels switch away from their regularly scheduled programming in order to turn to the great event, perhaps leaving a handful of independent stations outside the consensus. Broadcasting can hardly make a more dramatic announcement of the importance of what is about to happen.

Moreover, the happening is *live*. The events are transmitted as they occur, in real time; the French call this *en direct*. They are therefore unpredictable, at least in the sense that something can go wrong. Even the live broadcast of a symphony orchestra contains this element of tension. Typically, these events are *organized outside the media*, and the media serve them in what Jakobson (1960) would call a phatic role in that, at least theoretically, the media only provide a channel for their transmission. By "outside" we mean both that the events take place outside the studio in what broadcasters call "remote locations" and that the event is not usually initiated by the broadcasting organizations. This kind of connection, in real time, to a remote place—one having major importance to some central value of society, as we shall see—is credited with an exceptional value,

by both broadcasters and their audiences (Vianello, 1983). Indeed, the complexity of mounting these broadcasts is such, or is thought to be such, that they are hailed as "miracles" by the broadcasters, as much for their technological as for their ceremonial triumphs (Sorohan, 1979; Russo, 1983).<sup>4</sup>

The organizers, typically, are public bodies with whom the media cooperate, such as governments, parliaments (congressional committees, for example), political parties (national conventions), international bodies (the Olympics committee), and the like. These organizers are well within the establishment. They are part of what Shils (1975) calls the center. They stand for consensual values and they have the authority to command our attention. It is no surprise that the Woodstock festival—the landmark celebration of protesting youth in the sixties—was distributed as a film rather than as a live television event.

Thus, the League of Women Voters and the two major political parties organized the presidential debates in 1976 and 1980; the palace and the Church of England planned and "produced" the royal wedding; the Olympics are staged by the International Olympics Committee. There may be certain exceptions to this rule: the European Broadcasting Union organizes the annual Eurovision Song Contest, for example, and the Super Bowl—the American football championship—involves a direct organizational input on the part of American broadcasters. But on the whole, these events are not organized by the broadcasters even if they are planned with television "in mind." The media are asked, or ask, to join.

Of course, there may well be collusion between broadcasters and organizers, as was evident in the Gerald Ford–Jimmy Carter debate in Philadelphia, for example, when the TV sound failed and the ostensibly local meeting in a hired hall was suspended until the national broadcast could be resumed. And a state-operated broadcasting system (Poland, for example; *not* England or

Israel) may be indistinguishable from the organizers. But the exceptions only serve to prove the rule.

These events are *preplanned*, announced and advertised in advance. Viewers—and, indeed, broadcasters—had only a few days notice of the exact time of Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem (Cohen, 1978); Irish television advertised the Pope's visit to Ireland a few weeks in advance (Sorohan, 1979); the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics were heralded for more than four years. Important for our purpose is that advance notice gives time for anticipation and preparation on the part of both broadcasters and audiences. There is an active period of looking forward, abetted by the promotional activity of the broadcasters.

The conjunction of *live* and *remote*, on the one hand, and *interrupted* but *preplanned*, on the other, takes us a considerable distance toward our definition of the genre. Note that live-and-remote excludes routine studio broadcasts that may originate live, as well as feature programs such as "Roots" or "Holocaust." The addition of interruption excludes the evening news, while preplanned excludes major news events—such as the attempted assassination of a pope or a president, the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, and, at first glance (but we shall reconsider this), the so-called television revolutions in Romania and Czechoslovakia. In other words, our corpus is limited to ceremonial occasions.

Returning to the elements of definition, we find that these broadcast events are presented with *reverence* and *ceremony*. The journalists who preside over them suspend their normally critical stance and treat their subject with respect, even awe. Garry Wills (1980) called media coverage of the Pope, including that of the written press, "falling in love with love" and "The Greatest Story Ever Told." He was referring to the almost priestly role played by journalists on the occasion, and we find a reverential attitude characteristic of the genre as a whole. We have already

noted that the broadcast transports us to some aspect of the sacred center of the society (Shils, 1975).

Of course, the very flow of ceremonial events is courtly and invites awe. There is the playing of the national anthem, the funeral beat of the drum corps, the diplomatic ceremony of being escorted from the plane, the rules of decorum in church and at Senate hearings. The point is that in media events television rarely intrudes: it interrupts only to identify the music being played or the name of the chief of protocol. It upholds the definition of the event by its organizers, explains the meaning of the symbols of the occasion, only rarely intervenes with analysis and almost never with criticism. Often advertising is suspended. There are variations: the live broadcast of Sadat's arrival in Jerusalem was treated differently by Israeli television than by the American networks, which had more explaining to do (Zelizer, 1981). While we shall have occasion to point out these differences, they are outweighed by the similarities.

Even when these programs address conflict—as they do—they celebrate not conflict but *reconciliation*. This is where they differ from the daily news events, where conflict is the inevitable subject. Often they are ceremonial efforts to redress conflict or to restore order or, more rarely, to institute change. They call for a cessation of hostilities, at least for a moment, as when the royal wedding halted the street fighting in Brixton and the terror in Northern Ireland. A more permanent truce followed the journeys of Sadat to Jerusalem and the Pope to Argentina. These events applaud the *voluntary* actions of great personalities. They celebrate what, on the whole, are establishment initiatives that are therefore unquestionably *hegemonic*. They are proclaimed *historic*.

These ceremonials *electrify very large audiences*—a nation, several nations, or the world. They are gripping, enthralling. They are characterized by a *norm of viewing* in which people

tell each other that it is mandatory to view, that they must put all else aside. The unanimity of the networks in presenting the same event underlines the worth, even the obligation, of viewing. They cause viewers to *celebrate* the event by gathering before the television set in groups, rather than alone. Often the audience is given an active role in the celebration. Figuratively, at least, these events induce people to dress up, rather than dress down, to view television. These broadcasts *integrate* societies in a collective heartbeat and evoke a *renewal of loyalty* to the society and its legitimate authority.

### A More Parsimonious Approach to Definition

Despite its heaviness, we shall argue that the elements in our definition are “necessary,” and that no subset of them is “sufficient” without the others.<sup>5</sup> This hypothesis does not mean that the elements cannot exist without one another, but they are not then what we call media events; they are something else.

Consider, for example, the *live* broadcasting of an event which is not *preplanned*—say, the live reporting of the leaking atomic energy plant at Three Mile Island (Veron, 1981). The leakage is a great *news* event, but not one of the great *ceremonial* events that interest us. Thus, we are interested here in the Kennedy funeral—a great ceremonial event—and not the Kennedy assassination—a great news event. The messages of these two broadcasts are different, their effects are different, they are presented in quite a different tone. Great news events speak of accidents, of disruption; great ceremonial events celebrate order and its restoration. In short, great news events are another genre of broadcasting, neighbor to our own, that will help to set the boundaries of media events.<sup>6</sup>

Consider an event that fails to *excite* the public or one that is not presented with *reverence* by the broadcasters. Such events do

News  
vs.  
ceremonial  
events

not qualify according to the definition, but they are particularly interesting because they suggest a pathology of media events, of which the former is an event "manqué" and the latter an event "denied" by the broadcasters. We elaborate on such pathologies in Chapter 3.

Thus, by converting the elements of the definition into a typology—where elements are variously present or absent, or present in varying degree—we can identify alternative genres of broadcasting that differ from one another by virtue of a particular element. Examination of these alternative forms and the conditions of their occurrence will help define our own events by providing boundary markers.

One additional operation, methodologically speaking, can be performed on the definition. By transforming the elements into variables, one can note which elements correlate with which others. Doing so, one might ask whether, say, the degree of *reverence* invoked by the presenter correlates with the degree of viewer *enthralment*.

Presentation of the genre can be formulated more elegantly, by grouping the elements of the definition into broader categories. The linguistic categories of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics are useful for this purpose.

Syntactically, media events may be characterized, first, by our elements of interruption, monopoly, being broadcast live, and being remote. These are components of the "grammar" of broadcasting. The cancellation of regularly scheduled programs and the convergence of channels are the most dramatic kinds of punctuation available to broadcasters. They put a full stop to everything else on the air; they combine the cacophony of many simultaneous channels into one monophonic line. Of course, these elements also carry semantic meaning: they speak of the greatness of the event. And they have a pragmatic aspect as well:

the interruption of the sequence of television puts a stop to the normal flow of life.

The live and remote broadcast takes us back and forth between the studio and some faraway place. Such broadcasts employ special rhetorical forms and the technology required to connect the event and the studio. The language is the language of transportation—"We take you now to . . ." Both pictures and words are slowed to a ceremonial pace, and aesthetic considerations are unusually important. The pictures of media events, relative to their words, carry much more weight than the balance to which we are accustomed in the nightly news, where words are far more important than pictures (Altman, 1986; Katz, Adoni, and Parness, 1977). The centrality of these various elements of syntax is immediately apparent when one compares the event itself to each subsequent representation of the event—the wrap-up, the news, and the eventual anniversaries: length is drastically cut; pace is speeded up; words reassert their importance; references to the heroic logistics of the broadcast disappear. Syntactic unpredictability (that matches the semantic uncertainty) is smoothed over.

The fact that the event is situated *outside* broadcasting organizations, both physically and organizationally, implies a network of connections that differ from the everyday. The specialists of outside broadcasting deploy their OB units—as the British call them—and the studio now serves as intermediary between its people in the field and the audience, allowing some of the dialogue of stage directions between studio and field to become part of the spectacle. Their cadence is *reverential* and *ceremonial*.

The interruption, when it comes, has been elaborately advertised and *rehearsed*. It entails a major commitment of manpower, technology, and resources on the part of organizers and

broadcasters. It comes not as a complete surprise—as in major newsbreaks—but as something long anticipated and looked forward to, like a holiday. In order to make certain that the point of this ritual framing will not be lost on the audience, the broadcasters spend hours, sometimes days, rehearsing the audience in the event's itinerary, timetable, and symbolics. Even one-time events can be ritualized in this way.

The meaning of the event—its semantic dimension—is typically proposed by its organizers and shared by the broadcasters—although this point requires elaboration (see Chapter 4). Of course, each event is specific in this regard. For example, the royal wedding was proposed as a Cinderella story, the moon landings as the new American frontier, and the papal diplomacy as a pilgrimage. Regardless of the specifics of each event, the genre as a whole contains a set of core meanings, often loudly proclaimed. Thus, all such events are hailed as *historic*; they strive to mark a new record, to change an old way of doing or thinking, or to mark the passing of an era. Whether it is the Olympics or Watergate, Sadat or the Pope, the turning-point character of the event is central.

The event features the performance of symbolic acts that have relevance for one or more of the core values of society (Lukes, 1975). By dint of the cooperation between organizers and broadcasters, the event is presented with *ceremonial reverence*, in tones that express sacrality and awe.

The message is one of *reconciliation*, in which participants and audiences are invited to unite in the overcoming of conflict or at least in its postponement or miniaturization. Almost all of these events have heroic figures around whose *initiatives* the reintegration of society is proposed.

Pragmatically, the event *enthalls very large audiences*. A nation or several nations, sometimes the entire world, may be stirred while watching the superhuman achievement of an

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Olympic star or an astronaut. Sadat electrified the people of Israel, and the Pope revived the spirit of the Polish people. These are thrilling events, reaching the largest audiences in the history of the world. They are shared experiences, uniting viewers with one another and with their societies. A *norm of viewing* accompanies the airing of these events. As the day approaches, people tell one another that viewing is obligatory, that no other activity is acceptable during the broadcast. Viewers actively *celebrate*, preferring to view in the company of others and to make special preparations—unusual food, for example—in order to partake more fully in the event.

The genre is best defined, then, at the intersection of the syntactic, the semantic, and the pragmatic. And, as was argued above, we shall contend that all three elements are “necessary.” If we chose to apply the pragmatic criterion alone, the events so defined would include television programs that enthralled very large audiences, such as the early miniseries or perhaps even key episodes of programs such as “Dallas.” They might also include films that attracted large, sometimes cultish audiences such as the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Woodstock*; these were indeed compulsory viewing for certain segments of the population and invited widespread participation. If syntactics were the sole criterion, major news events would demand to be included. By the same token, if the genre were defined in terms of the semantic alone, we should number among media events all those films and programs that claim to be historic, preach reconciliation, celebrate initiative, and are produced and presented with reverence. Films of the Olympics by Leni Riefenstahl, Kon Ichikawa, or Claude Lelouch, for example, might therefore qualify.

Hence our insistence on defining the corpus of events in terms of all three linguistic categories, an insistence further justified by the fact that we are dealing with ceremonial perfor-

mances and that no such performance can be described in terms of its text alone. A ceremony interrupts the flow of daily life (syntactics); it deals reverently with sacred matters (semantics); and it involves the response (pragmatics) of a committed audience.

### Why Study Media Events?

Implicit in this definition of the genre are answers to the question, Why study media events? The student of modern society—not just of television—will find a dozen or more powerful reasons for doing so. Let us spell them out.

1. The live broadcasting of these television events attracts the *largest audiences in the history of the world*. Lest we be misunderstood, we are talking about audiences as large as 500 million people attending to the same stimulus at the same time, at the moment of its emission. It is conceivable that there were cumulative audiences of this size prior to the electronic age—for the Bible, for example. Perhaps one might have been able to say that there were several hundred million people alive on earth who had read, or heard tell of, the same Book. But it was not until radio broadcasting—and home radio receivers—that simultaneity of exposure became possible. The enormity of this audience, together with the awareness by all of its enormity, is awesome. It is all the more awesome when one realizes that the subject of these broadcasts is ceremony, the sort which anthropologists would find familiar if it were not for the scale. Some of these ceremonies are so all-encompassing that there is nobody left to serve as out-group. "We Are the World" is certainly the appropriate theme song for media events. To enthrall such a multitude is no mean feat; to enlist their assent defies all of the caveats of media-effects research.<sup>7</sup>

overstatement

2. The power of these events lies, first of all, in the rare *realization of the full potential of electronic media technology*. Students of media effects know that at most times and places this potential of radio and television is restricted by society. In principle, radio and television are capable of reaching everybody simultaneously and directly; their message, in other words, can be total, immediate, and unmediated. But this condition hardly ever obtains. Messages are multiple; audiences are selective; social networks intervene; diffusion takes time. On the occasion of media events, however, these intervening mechanisms are suspended. Interpersonal networks and diffusion processes are active before and after the event, mobilizing attention to the event and fostering intense hermeneutic activity over its interpretation. But during the liminal moments, totality and simultaneity are unbound; organizers and broadcasters resonate together; competing channels merge into one; viewers present themselves at the same time and in every place. All eyes are fixed on the ceremonial center, through which each nuclear cell is connected to all the rest. Social integration of the highest order is thus achieved via mass communication. During these rare moments of intermission, society is both as atomized and as integrated as a mass-society theorist might ever imagine (Kornhauser, 1959).

3. Thus, the media have power not only to insert messages into social networks but to create the networks themselves—to atomize, to integrate, or otherwise to design social structure—at least momentarily. We have seen that *media events may create their own constituencies*. Egypt and Israel were united for Sadat's visit not only by images of the arrival of the leader of a theretofore hostile Arab nation, but by means of an ad hoc microwave link between the broadcasting systems of the two countries.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the royal wedding reunited the British Empire, and

creation of a social network

Third World nations joined the first two worlds for the Olympics. That media events can talk over and around conventional political geography reminds us that media technology is too often overlooked by students of media effects in their distrust of hypotheses of technological determinism. Papyrus and ancient empire, print and the Protestant Reformation, the newspaper and European nationalism, the telegraph and the economic integration of American markets, are links between attributes of communication technologies and social structures. They connect portability, reproducibility, linearity, simultaneity, on the one hand, to empire, church, nation, market, on the other.

By extension, it can be seen that the "center" of these media-engendered social structures is not bound by geography either. In the case of media events, the center—on which all eyes are focused—is the place where the organizer of a "historic" ceremony joins with a skilled broadcaster to produce an event. In this sense, Britain is often the center of the world; one has only to compare the broadcast funeral of the assassinated Mountbatten with the broadcast funeral of the assassinated Sadat or India's Indira Gandhi to understand why.

4. Conquering not only space but time, media events have the power to declare a holiday, thus to play a part in the *civil religion*. Like religious holidays, major media events mean an interruption of routine, days off from work, norms of participation in ceremony and ritual, concentration on some central value, the experience of *communitas* and equality in one's immediate environment and of integration with a cultural center. The reverent tones of the ceremony, the dress and demeanor of those gathered in front of the set, the sense of communion with the mass of viewers, are all reminiscent of holy days. The ceremonial roles assumed by viewers—mourner, citizen, juror, sports fan—differentiate holiday viewing from everyday viewing

and transform the nature of involvement with the medium. The secret of the effectiveness of these televised events, we believe, is in the roles which viewers bring with them from other institutions, and by means of which passive spectatorship gives way to ceremonial participation. The depth of this involvement, in turn, has relevance for the formation of public opinion and for institutions such as politics, religion, and leisure. In a further step, they enter the collective memory.

5. *Reality is uprooted* by media events. If an event originates in a particular location, that location is turned into a Hollywood set. The "original" is only a studio. Thus conquering space in an even more fundamental way, television causes events to move off the ground and "into the air." The era of television events, therefore, may be not only one in which the reproduction is as important as the original, as Benjamin (1968) proposed, but also one in which the reproduction is more important than the original.

Sometimes the original is inaccessible to live audiences because it is taking place in London, or because it is taking place on the moon, for example. Even more fundamental are those events that have no original anywhere because the broadcast is a montage originating in several different locations simultaneously. The "reality" of Kennedy's debating Nixon when one was in New York and the other in California is not diminished for its being in the air, and in the living room. Prince Charles, at the church, is waiting for Lady Diana as her carriage is drawn through the streets of London. This is reality. But it is an invisible reality that cannot be apprehended as such because it is happening simultaneously at different places. No one person can see all of it, that is, except the television director and hundreds of millions in their homes.

6. The process of producing these events and telling their story relates to the arts of television, journalism, and narration.

Study of the rhetorical devices for communicating festivity, enlisting participation, and mobilizing consensus demands answers to the questions of how television manages to project ritual and ceremony in the two-dimensional space of spectacle. Essential to an understanding of these events—in addition to the readiness of the audience to assume ceremonial roles—is an analysis of how the story is framed, how interest is sustained, how the event aggregates endorsements, how the broadcasting staff is deployed to give depth to the event, how viewers interact with the screen, what tasks are assigned to the viewers. Media events give insight into the *aesthetics of television production*, together with an awareness of the nature of the contract that obtains between organizers and broadcasters.

The audience is aware of the genre of media events. We (and certain fellow researchers) recognize the constituent features of this rare but recurrent narrative form, and so do producers and viewers. The professional networks of producers buzz with information on the extraordinary mobilization of manpower, technology, aesthetics, and security arrangements required to mount a media event.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the networks of viewers carry word of the attitudes, rehearsals, and roles appropriate to their celebration. The expectation that certain events in the real world will be given media-events treatment is proof of public awareness of the genre. Israelis appealed to the High Court of Justice demanding that the war-crimes trial of John Demjanjuk be broadcast live.<sup>10</sup>

7. Shades of *political spectacle*. Are media events, then, electronic incarnations of the staged events of revolutionary regimes and latter-day versions of the mass rallies of fascism? We think not, even if they might seem to be. It is true that media events find society in a vulnerable state as far as indoctrination is concerned: divided into nuclear cells of family and friends, disconnected from the institutions of work and voluntary association,

eyes and ears focused on the monopolistic message of the center, hearts prepared with room. This is reminiscent, *mutatis mutandis*, of the social structure of a disaster that strikes at night, or of a brainwashing regimen. The threshold of suggestibility is at its lowest the more isolated the individual is from others, the more accessible he or she is to the media, the more dependent the person is, the more the power to reward conformity or punish deviation is in the hands of the communicator.

Nevertheless, media events are not simply political manipulations. Broadcasters—in Western societies—are independent of, or at least legally differentiated from, government. They can, and sometimes do, say no to an establishment proposal to mount an event. Journalists need convincing before suspending professional disbelief, and even commercial interest sometimes acts as a buffer. Second, public approval is required for an event to succeed; official events cannot be imposed on the unwilling or unbelieving. Third, individuals are not alone, not even alone with family, but in the company of others whom they invite to join in the thrill of an event and then to sit in judgment of it. Some societies provide public space for such discussion and interpretation; others provide only living rooms and telephones. Family friends, home, and living-room furniture are not a likely context for translating aroused emotion into collective political action. Fourth, the audience, too, has veto power. Oppositional readings are possible and hegemonic messages may be read upside down by some. These checks and balances filter the manipulative potential of media events and limit the vulnerability of mass audiences.<sup>11</sup>

Still, the question of hegemonic abuse must be asked continually. Almost all of these events are establishment initiated, and only rarely, one suspects, do the broadcasters say no. Instead, journalists—sometimes reluctantly—put critical distance aside in favor of the reverent tones of presenters. Broadcasters thus

share the consensual occasion with the organizers and satisfy the public—so we have hypothesized—that they are patriots after all.

8. When media events are seen as a *response to prior events* or to social crisis, the link to public opinion is evident. Thus, certain media events have a commemorative function, reminding us—as on anniversaries—of what deserves to be remembered. Others have a restorative function following social trauma. The most memorable of them have a transformative function inasmuch as they illustrate or enact possible solutions to social problems, sometimes engendering yet further events which actually “change the world.” In the restorative domain, media events address social conflict—through emphasizing the rules (as in Contests), through praising the deeds of the great in whom charisma is invested (Conquests), and through celebrating consensual values (as do Coronations).

9. At the same time, certain events have an *intrinsically liberating* function, ideologically speaking; they serve a transformative function. However hegemonically sponsored, and however affirmatively read, they invite reexamination of the status quo and are a reminder that reality falls short of society's norm. Taking place in a liminal context, evoking that climate of intense reflexivity which Victor Turner characterized as the “subjunctive mode of culture,” their publics exit the everyday world and experience a shattering of perceptions and certainties. Even if the situations in which they are immersed are short-lived and do not institutionalize new norms, at least they provoke critical awareness of the taken-for-granted and mental appraisal of alternative possibilities. They possess a normative dimension in the sense of displaying desirable alternatives, situations which “ought to” exist but do not. These are previews, foretastes of the perhaps possible, fragments of a future in which

the members of society are invited to spend a few hours or a few days. Activating latent aspirations, they offer a peek into utopia.

10. One wonders whether the media-events genre is not an expression of a *neo-romantic desire for heroic action* by great men followed by the spontaneity of mass action. In this sense, media events go beyond journalism in highlighting charisma and collective action, in defiance of established authority. The dissatisfaction with official inaction and bureaucratic ritualism, the belief in the power of the people to do it themselves, the yearning for leadership of stature—all characterize media events. We can join Sadat or the Pope and change the world; the people can unite to save Africans from starvation by supporting “Live Aid.” The celebration of voluntarism—the willful resolve to take direct, simple, spontaneous, ostensibly nonideological action—underlies media events, and may indeed constitute part of their attraction. The desire for spontaneous action, of course, recalls the erratic rhythm of arousal and repose predicted by the theory of mass society (Kornhauser, 1959). In the telling of media events, establishment heroes are made to appear more defiant than they actually were. But media events and collective action may be more than a dream. The escalation of interaction among public opinion, new or old leadership, and the mass media fanned the revolutions of Eastern Europe in the fall of 1989.<sup>12</sup>

11. The *rhetoric of media events* is instructive, too, for what it reveals not only about the difference between democratic and totalitarian ceremonies, but also about the difference between journalism and social science, and between popular and academic history. The media events of democracies—the kind we consider here—are persuasive occasions, attempting to enlist mass support; they take the form of political contests or of the live broadcasting of heroic missions—those that invite the pub-

lic to embrace heroes who have put their lives and reputations on the line in the cause of a proposed change.<sup>13</sup> The ceremonies of totalitarian societies (Lane, 1981) are more commemorative. They also seek to enlist support, but for present and past; the First of May parade was a more characteristic media event in postwar Eastern Europe (Lendvay, Tolgyesi, and Tomka, 1982) than a space shot.<sup>14</sup> Terrorist events contrast with both of these in their display not of persuasion but of force, not of majesty but of disruption and provocation.

The rhetoric of media events contrasts—as does journalism, generally—with academic rhetoric in its emphasis on great individuals and apocalyptic events. Where social science sees long-run deterministic processes, journalism prefers heroes or villains who get up one morning resolved to change the world. Where academic historians see events as projective of underlying trends, journalists prefer a stroboscopic history which flashes dramatic events on and off the screen.

12. Media events *privilege the home*. This is where the “historic” version of the event is on view, the one that will be entered into collective memory. Normally the home represents a retreat from the space of public deliberation, and television is blamed, perhaps rightly, for celebrating family and keeping people home (Newcomb, 1974). When it is argued that television presents society with the issues it has to face, the retort, “narcotizing dysfunction”—that is, the false consciousness of involvement and participation—is quick to follow (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948). Yet the home may become a public space on the occasion of media events, a place where friends and family meet to share in both the ceremony and the deliberation that follows. Observational research needs to be done on the workings of these political “salons.” Ironically, critical theorists, newly alert to the feminist movement, now see in the soap opera and other

family programs an important “site of gender struggle,” and their derision of the apolitical home is undergoing revision.

But there is more to politics than feminism, and we need empirical answers to the question of whether the home is transformed into a political space during and after a media event. In fact, we need basic research on who is home and when (in light of the growing number of one- and two-person households), who views with whom, who talks with whom, how opinion is formed, and how it is fed back to decision-makers. These everyday occasions of opinion formation should then be compared with media events. It is hard to believe, but nevertheless true, that the study of public opinion has become disconnected from the study of mass communication.

13. Media events preview the *future of television*. When radio became a medium of segmentation—subdividing audiences by age and education—television replaced it as the medium of national integration. As the new media technology multiplies the number of channels, television will also become a medium of segmentation, and television-as-we-know-it will disappear. The function of national integration may devolve upon television ceremonies of the sort we are discussing here. By that time, however, the nation-state itself may be on the way out, its boundaries out of sync with the new media technology. Media events may then create and integrate communities larger than nations. Indeed, the genre of media events may itself be seen as a response to the integrative needs of national and, increasingly, international communities and organizations.

Certain multinational interests have already spotted the potential of international events and may sink the genre in the process. Some combination of the televised Olympics and televised philanthropic marathons inspired the effort to enlist worldwide aid to combat famine in Africa. Satellite broadcasters

already transmit live sports events multinationally (Uplinger, 1990; but see Mytton, 1991). Aroused collective feeling must be a great lure to advertisers, and one wonders whether the entry of the commercial impresario into the arena of these events does not augur ill for their survival as necessarily occasional, and heavily value-laden, "high holidays."

## Scripting Media Events: Contest, Conquest, Coronation

As we have said, the corpus of events can be subdivided into Contests, Conquests, and Coronations. These are story forms, or "scripts," which constitute the main narrative possibilities within the genre. They determine the distribution of roles within each type of event and the ways in which they will be enacted. Venturing beyond the exposition of this typology, we shall propose that the three story forms are dramatic embodiments of Weber's (1946) three types of authority; in other words, that rationality, charisma, and tradition are inscribed respectively in Contest, Conquest, and Coronation.

Certain events do not altogether correspond to any one of the three dominant scenarios, while other events appear to switch in midstream, as if they were conceived in terms of competing scripts. All media events, finally, even those which strongly adhere to a given script, nevertheless contain echoes of other scripts which loom in the background or are given secondary status. The questions of how such scripts are chosen will also occupy us in this chapter and the next.

### Three Basic Scripts

It was television's Sadat who first aroused our interest in media events. Initially, it was the specifics of this rare example of media diplomacy that seemed worthy of analysis. But the similarities