

1991 Year-End Bla-Bla

BY MICHAEL VENTURA

CLICHÉ OF THE YEAR: "There wasn't anything or anybody that overshadowed the power of television this year" is the kind of sentence that can be read almost anywhere these days. An odd contemporary tic: television is given the credit for events we see on television. What's forgotten is that events like Columbus' voyage, the French Revolution, Napoleon's wars, the discovery of gold in California, the competitions between the great clipper ships, our own Civil War, the outbreak of World War I, the Russian Revolution, Pearl Harbor — to name a few — provoked the people of their worlds every bit as much as the Gulf War and the collapse of the USSR affect us.

A sense of worldwide impact and participation is nothing new. In 1917 Randolph Bourne wrote of "these days of international economic dependence, of inextricably interlacing communications and financial obligations." You can find similar statements going back at least 200 years. Events on the scale of the dissolution of the Soviet Union are felt *personally* throughout a civilization, and always have been. Our forms for feeling this have changed, but not the fact of the feeling.

When even small cities had several newspapers, this was just as true for events like courtroom trials. When the great film clown Fatty Arbuckle was accused of rape and murder in 1921, the sense of public participation and social impact (his trial became the excuse for the first serious censorship of films) was every bit as traumatic for the country as the Hill-Thomas hearings or the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith. And to claim that the assassination of Abraham Lincoln was felt less as a collective, shared loss than that of John F. Kennedy betrays an ignorance that a day's reading could remedy. I don't mean to minimize the events of our year as events; I only mean to put television in perspective.

Television has, of course, transformed the political process. More profoundly, it has changed the way people spend their time, and no change could be more important than that, for that's not *about* history, that *is* history. But we become ever more lost when we believe our world is drastically different in ways that it is not.

This year has seen one new way to use "the power of television," and it hasn't received much coverage: in downtown Newark, the police have placed hidden TV cameras that give a complete view of the streets, which are monitored all day and night by hidden policemen. Measure the loss of your freedoms by the ease with which this hideous development has been accepted.

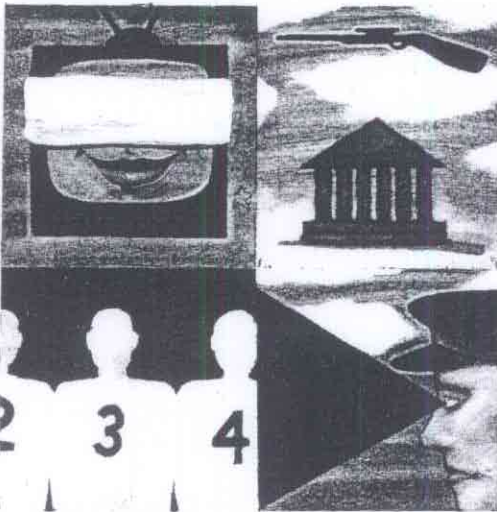
ANOMALY OF THE YEAR: Whether or not you agree with Oliver Stone's *JFK*, it is an incredibly brave piece of work. Given that Stone believes his own theories, he had to know the forces that would air against him and his film, and to have considered the possibility of danger to himself. I suspect the only reason, or the underlying reason, he got it made was that movies have become so trivialized that neither the government nor the studios take them seriously — until (for their purposes) it's too late. The studio doesn't want to alienate a director or a star (Kevin Costner) who's capable of generating Academy Awards, so they give the go-ahead; nobody in Washington's paying attention, so pressure isn't exerted while it could still be relatively unobtrusive. By the time the picture's in production, the studio can't afford the scandal or the financial loss of scuttling the project.

So the most volatile political film in Hollywood's history squeaks through, gets made, gets seen. That's Part 1 of the anomaly.

Part 2 is: when JFK was murdered, *The New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and the TV networks were at least as powerful as, if not more powerful than, they are now. Yet they didn't cover the actual investigation of Kennedy's death with anything like the energy with which they're covering this movie. In fact, they barely covered the investigation at all. They also neglected to scrutinize the Warren Commission's findings and the House subcommittee investigation with anything resembling the time, space or passion they are devoting to a movie *about* these things.

This fact alone indicates that the powers that be have an enormous amount to hide — and gives more credence to Stone's theories than anything actually in the film.

MOST DEPRESSING FACT OF THE YEAR: During the Gulf War, polls showed that Americans overwhelmingly approved of the Pentagon's press censorship — we even thought that our timid, curtailed media had gone too far! The people wanted *not* to know, wanted whatever pacifying pap the government could dish out, wanted *not* to be responsible, wanted *not* to care — wanted, in short, not to be governed, but to be ruled. Unless trends reverse, we are about to learn the difference between the two, and learn it the hard way.



BEST POLITICAL SPEECH OF 1991 OR ANY OTHER YEAR OF MY LIFE: Mario Cuomo's statement and question-and-answer period when he declared, two weeks ago, he would not run for the presidency. I had the odd sensation of *wanting* to vote for Cuomo, and then the echo-sensation of realizing that, in the 25 years I've been of voting age, I've never *wanted* to vote for anyone else, that I've voted instead with disgust or, at best, trepidation. Wanting some particular individual to be president was an unfamiliar sensation.

I have no false nostalgia for the Cuomo presidency that might have been. Presidents are imprisoned by their office and their party, and this would be as true of Cuomo as of anybody. But as Ezra Pound noted long ago, we are governed by means of language. The very way the presidency, as an office, has come to speak is a model of jargon and evasion — you can't tell the truth in the language George Bush uses, and that's why he and the others use it. Whatever President Cuomo might have done, I miss what he would have said.

BUT GIVE THE DEMOCRATS THIS: The Democrats have at least presented an interesting spectrum of one subspecies of humanity, the successful white male. I can't imagine anyone wanting any of them to be president, but I can imagine voting for any of them (that is, if I vote — which, unless Cuomo somehow runs, is unlikely). Bob Kerrey has a hypothetical and perhaps even my actual vote, because maybe we deserve a president who has killed, with his own hands, human beings with whom he had no personal beef, simply because someone told him to. It would be interesting to have the opportunity to watch a man who lives with that in public office.

At the other end of the spectrum is Martin Ansgar. If a candidate like Martin Ansgar didn't exist, someone would have to invent him. He was working as a bus boy at the Ambassador Hotel the night Robert Kennedy was killed. That experience has somehow driven him to want to be president, which makes Ansgar, too, a figure I would like the opportunity to contemplate at length.

Bill Clinton would be fun to watch just to see when (it's not a matter of "if") he'd lose control. And Paul Tsongas, with his undeniable sincerity and his endearing Elmer Fudd delivery, might give the presidency something it's never had: gentleness. (The "gentle" Jimmy Carter in fact began the arms buildup credited to Reagan.) I could watch presidential gentleness for a long time. As for Jerry Brown — at least you never know what he'll say next, and there's something to be said for that. (With Tom Harkin, you *always* know what he'll say next, and there's nothing to be said for that.) And then there's that guy from San Diego whom even the *L.A. Weekly* doesn't cover, whom *somebody* ought to watch.

So much for the white spectrum. The candidate of color, Governor Douglas Wilder, campaigns on the fact that he balanced the budget of Virginia. Didn't Michael Dukakis used to say things like that?

BEST MOVIES: You could pare down a lot of 10 Best lists by asking, "Which films of '91 do I want to see at least twice more before I die?" For me, there were three: *Thelma & Louise* and *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut*, both by Ridley Scott, and *The Commitments*, which I still can't believe was directed by Alan Parker, who's never made another movie I've liked at all.

BEST BOOKS: A variation on the same question, "Which books of '91 will I reread? Which are on my permanent shelf?" Again, there are three. My favorite is *The Best of the West: An Anthology of Classic Writing From the American West*, Edited by Tony Hillerman, it's a brilliant mosaic of all the behaviors and perceptions that made our West what it was — what it *really* was. Then there's *A Red Death: An Early Rawlins Mystery*, by Walter Mosley. Not only is Mosley the best living practitioner of crime fiction, he's one of the half-dozen contemporary American novelists worth your time. And finally, there's *The Gospel According to Jesus: A New Translation and Guide to His Essential Teachings for Believers and Unbelievers*, by Stephen Mitchell. Mitchell's translations of the *Tao Te Ching* and the Book of Job are widely regarded as masterpieces; this book is even more valuable. Because we live in a civilization based on a twisted compromise of Jesus' teachings, this very credible account of what Jesus may have *actually* said is a small but potent antidote.

AS FOR MUSIC . . . American music, as it's practiced over the media, is by and for kids. Nothing wrong with that, except that all ages have their songs, and in this culture no one much over 35 gets sung to by what they call "the music industry." So I was especially grateful for Robbie Robertson's *Storyville*, the music of a tough middle-aged guy — especially the line that anyone who's still a kid will come to experience one day: "We grow up so slowly and grow old so fast." **LV**