

NYTimes APR 5 1975
Stomach-Bulge Defense

By Russell Baker

BALTIMORE, April 4—The difference between barbarity now and in other times is that now everybody sees it on television.

Massacres, assassinations, bombings and even genocide used to be conducted in comparative privacy. Those who had witnessed or survived them came back and told about them through the soft filters of time, memory, distance and words.

It was hard to believe that such things really happened. It is easy to disbelieve mere witnesses and survivors when they tell things we would rather not believe. They were too close to events, one could object. They were overwrought, inclined to exaggerate, given to lapses into bad taste, apt to overdramatize for effect.

So the world seemed a better place then. It wasn't, of course. It was only more conveniently remote from common experience. Now that television sits in the living room corner

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ready to show us the absolute worst at the touch of a switch, we have to construct other defenses.

In Baltimore, watching the late news the other night, I saw what might be called "the bulging-stomach defense." The man reading the news began by warning that we were about to see some film we might think offensive for the children to witness and advised us to clear them out of the room, a piece of advice that was probably as well-intended as it was calculated to make every child in Baltimore battle for his right to view.

Then we saw scenes of horror from Vietnam. Some people who had been in an open boat for several days fleeing from the enemy had arrived at a besieged port. The boat was filled with dead children, whom we saw briefly, open-eyed. Bodies wrapped in shrouds. An apparently legless woman being carried ashore. Mothers weeping in agony.

Some of the children who died in the flight had been buried at sea, said the reporter. It was harrowing stuff. We could imagine those burials.

Then a handsome young woman appeared on the screen. She had just purchased a superior brand of panty hose. They performed wonders for her figure, she said. They even suppressed her stomach bulge.

The picture shifted. Another handsome young woman. This one had made a study of headache nostrums. She discussed them briefly and recommended a particular brand.

Memory blurs at this point, but I know the news went on as it does every night. Someone may have discussed the hazard of dying battery and told us how to avert it. No doubt a mother of 32 instructed her daughter of 28, and all the rest of us, which brand of tomato paste was most powerful at holding a marriage intact. I don't know, but these are the kind of things commonly used in bulging-stomach defense.

What is happening here is a destruction of value differences. At one instant we are dwelling on two minutes of horror for humanity in Vietnam. Then come two minutes of the nightmares of living-room America—stomach bulge, headache, dead battery, third-rate spaghetti.

The next moment—at least in Baltimore on this night—we went to Cambodia to watch Lon Nol say his farewells to his country before embarking on exile. It threatened for an instant to become touching.

We had a brief glimpse of Lon Nol, who had never been much more than a printed name which spelled the same backwards, looking taller than we had thought, and human. He walked as a man in pain. For the fraction of a second, as the reporter said this was surely the last time he would ever see his country, Lon Nol seemed to be starting to cry, but we could not be sure, for the picture ended abruptly.

Cloudy weather was shown on a blackboard. It was approaching the Tennessee Valley. A number of women at a Baltimore shopping center had been fooled on camera—it was April Fool's Day—by a silver dollar which the television station had glued to a sidewalk. They took it like good sports when they discovered the joke.

And so on. Everything had been reduced to the same value. Despair in Vietnam is grave, but so is bulging stomach. Lon Nol may have cause to weep, but people can still smile on April Fool's Day in Baltimore. And yes, once again tomorrow there will be some weather.

The grossest barbarities, to be sure, stick in the mind. Those dead children with open eyes. Later we will use them as false evidence to persuade ourselves that the world has never been so depraved as now, refusing to believe that the world's depravity is immemorial and different now only by being available for immediate inspection in the living room.

Mostly, however, we remain as sheltered as ever from this timeless unpleasantness, lapped in the horror box's constant assurance that our daily fears, whether failed spaghetti or stomach bulge, are not to be sneezed at either.