

CNN and the Heat Death of the Universe

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Chunka ...chunka... “Mojo rising” ... *chunka...chunka...* “Rising. Rising.”

Scott beat the Martini shaker against the steering wheel, keeping time as the dead Door wailed away on the stereo.

We were going, as usual, much too fast. The car was a mutant, built by some graveyard-shift assembly line worker with dreams of greater glory and days of thunder. Its only speed verged on the illegal, but fell well within the range of stupidity as we swept along the rain-soaked streets. Fast and ugly, the squat yellow beast suited our purposes.

Scott snapped off the radio, and turned towards me. He wanted to talk. I began to worry.

“Morrison’s dead, you know,” he said. “He died in a Paris bathtub at the age of thirty. Or, at least, that’s what most people think. Personally, I think it was the CIA...but these things are hard to prove...sometimes the facts just don’t fit the theory. Take quantum mechanics, for example. Just how do you prove those things? Me, I prefer Newtonian physics...gravity and stuff like that. Stuff you can actually see. Here, I’ll show you.”

He slammed on the emergency brake.

ZZZZZZIIIIIIINNNGGGGG...GreenWhiteGrayBlack...GreenWhiteGrayBlack...GreenWhiteGrayBlack... the car spun in 360s, headlights highlighting lawn, traffic, concrete and road. The shaker smashed against the door, filling the car with the fine mist of expensive liquor and me with the certain knowledge we were going to die. Light strobed as we spun across lanes, high beams bearing down on us like the eyes of Ahab focusing on that big fishy bastard after all that time. Squishy fear sounds filled the cab.

Then all was normal. The car straight; the spinning gone. The blood roar in my ears began to subside.

Scott giggled. “That,” he said, was centrifugal force.”

Sick with the shock of survival, I flopped against my seatbelt as a car boomed past us, headlights flashing, horn blaring. Suspecting a cop, Scott lurched our vehicle towards the curb, then, realizing it wasn't, swore and snarled into the receding taillights, “Some people just can't handle the unexpected.”

Indeed, some people can't handle the unexpected, and most of us do our damndest to avoid it: an act which makes infinite sense, especially when you consider that the people we pay to encounter the unforeseen—such as cops, soldiers and foreign correspondents—fail and die with depressing regularity.

Take, for example, the time when Desert Shield squalled into a storm; the exact moment the Americans began the first bombing of Baghdad.

On the station that was on—one of the smaller U.S. border stations that broadcast into B.C.—the information had arrived, but the images hadn't: the scoop just had to be shunted through the anchor who had held the front desk for at least a half a dozen years. You knew this was the moment of moment; that this was going to be the big announcement that the Gulf War had begun after weeks of waiting. It couldn't possibly be anything else: deadlines had passed, programmes interrupted, “Special Report” splashed across the screen. All we needed to know now was that it had actually started, and the anchor was our conduit to that confirmation.

So we sat in front of the TV like supplicants before a Cybil, waiting for words that originated from somewhere unseen, for information that would give us a glimpse of our most immediate future. And the anchor put on his best professional face and he opened his mouth and...

...and he blew it. He just died. He sat there yammering and stammering, drowning in flop sweat and information overload, desperately trying to stutter out what was the most important story of his career...and failing. The story was too big, the news too unusual; he just couldn't handle the unexpected—even when he knew it was coming.

Of course, the anchor did finally manage to make the announcement that the Gulf War had begun, but by then it was too late: we were already switching to CNN in the hope we might see what was really going on. And what we saw there—between the bombs and the self-congratulation of exclusive footage—was a quick glimpse of the Second Law of Thermodynamics and entropy in action.

Entropy is the unexpected. Like centrifugal force, it's a primary concept in the field of physics. Like a car spinning out of control, it is completely concerned with chaos.

Entropy is a universal process that eventually makes everything a muddle. An agent of change and chaos, entropy collapses order into disorder, precludes predictability and removes distinction and individuation. Ever present and unstoppable, entropy inexorably drags us towards the ultimate dissolution—the end of everything. And, since everything must end, it's what ties Ted Turner and television to the heat death of the universe. As the Gulf War coverage amply demonstrated, CNN and entropy both do exactly the same thing to understanding: they both make meaning incomprehensible.

“We live in the Age of Information,” proclaims every bush-league Dr Tomorrow with access to a platform, a PC and a satellite dish, but know one seems to know what this actually means. Like McLuhan's “The Medium is the Message”, the term has become a piece of verbal driftwood, so drenched in overuse that it no longer sparks inquiry, let alone understanding. No one even seems to notice that it simply isn't true. We don't live in the Age of Information, we live in the Age of Rumour...