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[Muse](#) [Search](#) [Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#)

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News at Eleven in the Big City

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[Figures](#)

We all live in the shadow of television. But for me, the connection is even closer. In the suburb of Detroit where I grew up, the major network affiliates and independent television stations made their homes. As I passed by one station or another on my way to school or to the mall, their towering candy cane colored broadcast antennas with blinking red warning lights would stare down upon me as I wondered about what was happening on the other side of their studio walls. As much as automobiles preoccupied the thoughts of many in Detroit, television would continue to fascinate me for I have chosen a life making documentaries.

Back in the seventies, I was a latchkey kid before the term was even coined. While my parents worked at their store, television watched over me. It was my baby-sitter. And I trusted it. My vision of the world was largely informed by what I saw on the tube. As I grew older and traveled around, I would have to learn to reconcile my television images of different cities with their reality. The geographies and peoples of these places never matched my electronic preconceptions. Even though I have learned to create television, I still find myself fighting its power to transform the way I view the world.

As we move further apart from each other with the growth of suburbia, local television news programs act as a glue that binds the diverse citizens of a metropolitan area. Through its use of helicopters, a sophisticated fleet of news vans and live microwave transmissions, television news compresses the urban landscape, instantly bringing images from the far reaches of the megalopolis. **[End Page 145]** In the local television newsroom, police and emergency scanners often set the tempo for much of what is covered. As one of the tried and true staples of a TV news program, crime reports provide gripping stories with strong visuals that grab the viewer's attention. Crime stories also dominate local news because they are cheap and easy to produce. Much as police cars are dispatched to a crime scene, news vans roll out everyday from their studio lots in pursuit of these same stories.



A few years ago, I had the opportunity to follow a local television news reporter from a station in Los Angeles as she gathered her story. I was producing a short documentary for "Signal to Noise," an innovative public television series that took a critical look at our relationship with television. While I was at the station with my crew, the reporter went out to do a story on a couple of home invasion robberies in Lancaster, a distant bedroom community of Los Angeles. Like any other large metropolitan area, crimes occur everyday in Los Angeles. So what made these home invasion robberies in Lancaster stand out from the many other crimes committed that day?

"News is what's new and different," so goes this popular truism of journalism. Crime in the inner city is not different. South Central Los Angeles, especially after the much televised 1992 riots, has gained a worldwide reputation as the embodiment of our worst urban nightmares. Crime in the inner city, both in its perception and its reality, has become cliché. Thus its news value decreases. However, crime that violates the traditionally safe confines of the suburbs is news, especially in a suburb known as a refuge for people who have fled crime in the big city. For a typical, middle-class suburbanite (an important target audience for television news programmers), a robbery in the central city could just as well have taken place in another country or on another planet. But in Lancaster? As the reporter said during her report broadcast later that night, "You shouldn't feel that comfortable living anywhere, even if you do live in Lancaster."

Local television news creates a landscape of fear. George Gerbner has shown that the more people watch television, the greater their fear of the world outside their doors. In Los Angeles as in any other American city, whole sections of the city, often minority dominated communities like South Central or East **[End Page 146]** L.A., are designated by suburbanites as no-man's lands to be avoided at all costs. Often, people who choose not to enter these areas have no personal, first hand knowledge of conditions in these neighborhoods. Their primary source for information about these communities is television. Even today, Watts is still remembered from its coverage in the 1965 riots. Television does not show us our city. It instead becomes the city, an electronic world unto itself, replacing the need for a true personal experience.

On our television screens, mayhem in our cities is the order of the day. Crime reports capture the essence of a television newscast, offering the unpredictability of the weather along with the action of sports. Crime scenes also feed the medium's insatiable appetite for visuals. Images of cops with guns drawn as they break down doors in a drug bust thrill viewers. Surveillance camera footage of convenience store robberies are also a must. So are live helicopter shots of freeway police chases, which in Los Angeles all too often interrupt regularly scheduled programming. And if nothing exciting is caught locally on tape that day, news programs broadcast images from another state, sometimes another country, and promote it as if it happened next door. Television news offers us front row seats to the daily spectacle outside our doors, across the street and around the world. The television viewer plays their part in this spectacle by not demanding more from their stations and by rewarding them in the ratings game.

In "Prisoners of Paradise," a short documentary that I produced for a local Los Angeles PBS station, I looked at the growing phenomenon of gated communities --entire

suburban subdivisions protected from the rest of a city by walls and a gated entry, often with a guard up front to deter would-be criminals. Many of these gated communities are being built in some of the safest suburbs at a time when crime rates are actually falling. Television news coverage of crime no doubt fuels this development trend as worried home buyers demand more and more safety features. These gated communities serve as landmarks to our collective paranoia, originally manifested on the television screen and brought to fruition in the walls that project a gated community from a barrage of imagined threats.



Yet at the same time, crime is real. It victimizes people everyday. Declining statistics do little to assure the many real victims of crime. In *Another America*, a [End Page 147] documentary that I produced about the relationship between Korean American merchants and African Americans in the inner city, I looked at the murder of one of my uncles, an immigrant from Korea, during a robbery at his store in downtown Detroit. When he was murdered, my father, also a downtown merchant, called the local television news stations to have them cover my uncle's death. He wanted to tell them a larger story about how the city had fallen apart under the weight of its abandonment and how this was connected to my uncle's murder. Instead, the TV news programs told a tragic story of a family victimized by a random crime. The emotions were there in their report, but little context. Their coverage undoubtedly moved many who watched the news that night. But did it inform them?

Everyday, we witness other people's tragedies on television. Sometimes, their stories have an impact. Most other times, they are swallowed by anonymity and apathy and buried amongst the thousands of other tragedies broadcast everyday across the television spectrum. Then, one day I see my own family on television. Their grief shouts out to the viewers to wake up and see what's [End Page 148] happening in their city. But in three minutes, it's over. There was little follow-up to my family's story. Soon other tragedies would displace ours.

As an independent filmmaker, I took on the job of pushing beyond what was covered by the local news. Like my father, I also wanted to tell a story of cities and the people who live in them. Behind my uncle's death, there was another story not told on television news. Behind the much televised conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans, there was another story. In *Another America*, I related how the deterioration of the inner city affects both groups. I looked at some of their history in this country. I explored the common economic and social issues that concern both communities. I examined how crime does not occur in a vacuum. TV news presents fear in the guise of delivering information. I wanted to promote understanding by telling the stories behind the story. I wanted the viewer to get to know a part of their city that they may never visit and to understand its peoples.

Back to when I was a child, whenever I passed one of the local television stations, I always thought of how these gargantuan television broadcast antennas seemed to be so precariously supported by such thin wires stretching out from their sides. My imagination would run wild. What if one day, a tremendous gust of wind brought one of these towering behemoths crashing down upon the city? These antennas of course never came down. But in staying up, they have an even greater impact upon the inhabitants of

the city below.

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