

**THE BLOG****ATTENTION! SICKNESS! and Attention Sickness**

By Marty Kaplan

04/18/2007 11:57 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Have the past few weeks of eyeball-grabbing overload left you feeling as sick as I do? I don't mean meta-sick; I'm talking about the very real nausea that culture (to use a kind word for it) can cause.

First the BIG THING was ANNA NICOLE. Then it was WAR FUNDING. Then it was SANJAYA, and vote-for-the-worst sadism. Then it was CANCER, and our national debate about parental responsibility. Then it was GONZALES, and US ATTORNEY FIRINGS, and MISSING EMAILS. Then it was IMUS, and our national debate about race. Now it's VIRGINIA TECH, and the national debate about — what? Mental illness? Gun control? Security policy? Life-can-change-in-an-instant? Iraq isn't sitting this one out, either, with single-day casualties topping 125. And who knows what it'll be tomorrow. The criminalization of abortion? The new season of "Heroes"?

Confronted by these attempts to get our attention, we are pigeons, B.F. Skinner's pigeons, our nervous and limbic systems automatically responding to the stimuli. Short of retreating to Walden, it's virtually impossible to escape the onslaught. Of course, that's what the senders of all these messages set out to accomplish. Terrorists, mass-murderers, networks, Drudge: they're all in the business of trying to capture our attention. I can't believe that the DSM - the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - doesn't already list a category like "attention sickness," a box on insurance forms that shrinks can check off.

This red-alert hype of continuous intentional distraction - OMG! LOOK AT THIS! NO, THIS! NO, THIS! - makes everything seem the same. It's next to impossible to think proportionately, to give commensurate, differential, appropriate attention to the various info-storms assaulting us. We may know rationally that the carnage at Virginia Tech and the carnage in Iraq require totally different kinds of notice and understanding. We may intellectually grasp the difference between the danger Bush poses to democracy and the danger a spring snowstorm poses to travelers. But in the great Skinner box of modern media culture, our higher minds are no match for the sparklies that stimulate us, and which — not incidentally — raise the profits of business and serve the agendas of politics.

Today Dr. Sanjay Gupta on CNN interviewed a neurologist who — based on her inspection of the MRIs and X-rays of the brains of many mass murderers — theorizes that Cho Seung-Hui might have had a particular kind of brain tumor, one that impedes people's ability to contain rage. That's the kind of tumor, she said, that Charles Whitman had, the tower shooter on the campus in Austin in the '60s. It's also, I learned, the kind of tumor that a number of Texas death-row inmates had, the ones who were executed after Alberto Gonzales told Governor George W. Bush there was no reason they shouldn't die.

I wonder whether President Bush and Vice President Cheney do what they do not because they're blinded by their moral arrogance, but because there's something physiologically screwy in their brain pans. I wonder whether the Sunni and the Shiia hate one another because of something in their history, or something in the water. I wonder whether Cho Seung-Hui's massacre was part of God's plan for us. I wonder whether Cho's murder, on Yom Ha-Shoah - Holocaust Remembrance Day - of Virginia Tech professor Liviu Librescu, a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust who barricaded the classroom door so his students could flee through the window, has profound, inherent meaning, or whether it is just the typical kind of coincidence that a meaningless, random, arbitrary and chaotic universe occasionally taunts us with, a decoy tale to make us think human existence has pattern and purpose. I wonder whether some rogue cell in my body will someday capriciously gift me or someone I love with cancer. I wonder whether a drunk driver, an earthquake, a flu epidemic, or a suitcase bomb will make all my grand passions and quotidian anxieties seem retroactively pointless.

At the same time, I also wonder whether someone will give Heather Mills the smackdown she deserves, what the hell CBS is going to do about Katie Couric, who does Larry Birkhead's highlights, and which one I despise more, Michael Nifong or Nancy Grace.

I just don't know whether there's room in my noggin, or in our collective consciousness, for all this stuff, this indiscriminate mix of crap and content. But I do know that it's really hard to build a progressive political movement, and to keep our eyes on what's truly important, in an attention economy in the midst of hyperinflation — in a bread-and-circuses culture that is (in Neil Postman's prophetic phrase) amusing itself to death.

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