

# Factoring Fear

## Investigations into Media(ted) Fear

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*The little ones sit by their TV screens  
No thoughts to think  
No tears to cry  
All sucked dry  
Down to the very last breath  
Bartender what is wrong with me  
Why I am so out of breath  
The captain said excuse me ma'am  
This species has amused itself to death.*

These lyrics are from the song "Amused to Death" from the album of the same name by Roger Waters, which attempts at critiquing the nexus between mass narratives such as religion and mass media, both of which indeed operate as the 'opiate of the masses'.<sup>1</sup> The album, released in 1992, is based on the book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, by Neil Postman; both speak disparagingly of the supposed wonders of modern society, which seems besotted with the new gods of consumerism. Both works provide a point of departure for certain questions that surround the idea of fear as received primarily through the media:

- (i) Are there linkages between fear, media, democracy and power where citizens of a state are transformed continually into consumers and further into subjects of media?
- (ii) If fear and, by extension, terror are the new 'products' to be consumed through media intervention, who are the complicit actors in this theatre of terror and how?
- (iii) Are there certain images, stereotypes and ideas reified in the media in order to be invested with greater power to evoke fear in the social, cultural and political spheres?

This essay grapples with the problematisation of the tacitly understood relationship between media and productions of fear and terror, which feed into local, socially specific ideas and ideologies of power, governance and citizenship.

Before embarking on this essay on fear, I have to ask, in this post-modern, post-sensation society, what contains enough capacity, intensity and resonance to evoke fear? What can

propel us to act and react based on an emotion such as fear when we are fast approaching a seeming absence of fear? In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in response to the bloodcurdling scream of a woman, Macbeth exclaims:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.  
 The time has been my senses would have cool'd  
 To hear a night shriek, and my fell of hair  
 Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
 As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors;  
 Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
 Cannot once start me.<sup>2</sup>

Lamenting the loss of fear and feeling, Macbeth is in the unenviable situation of being unable to sufficiently feel anything in order to reach the level of fear. This paper attempts to examine whether modern television audiences have become similarly too desensitised and dehumanised to feel emotions manifestly, especially an emotion as strongly reactive as fear, leaving fear, then, to become produced for selective consumption. This paper shall further seek to investigate such social phenomena where the trivialisation of the human has led to the popularity of certain images, types and programmes, especially as evinced in such reality TV shows as *MTV Roadies*, *MTV Splitsville*, *Fear Factor*, *Who Dares Wins*, *I'm a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here*, *Khatron ke Khiladi*, *Bigg Boss*, *Sach ka Saamna*, *Exhausted* and the like, where people are forced to live out hyper-real situations and participate in extreme acts involving fear and terror (such as being immersed in water for inordinate lengths of time) and perform 'stunts' and games with conditions such as not being allowed to sleep for days (the favourite being swallowing non-edible, and often live, insects and other such creatures to universal disgust and horror).

We are in the Age of the Image where every new image is being constantly touched up, repixelated and airbrushed in order for it to 'look good'. In such a world, the visual medium immediately gains power and authority, becoming, in culture guru Marshall McLuhan's terms, both message and metaphor. We are, for now, in a Brave New World where a webpage on the apocalyptic novel of the same name by Aldous Huxley will also show you advertisements for new washing machines and LCD television sets, and a Yahoo! advertisement on television tells you that your own reality is banal as compared to the world of You-Yahoo! It is a sign/cultural signifier of the times, where every moment has been Googled, Facebooked, Twittered and made continually redundant. We are witnessing the advent of a new society where we have been transformed into Huxley's "great abbreviators", confined to tweets of 150 words or less.

In these abbreviated times, one might ask, what most scares us, spooks us, terrifies us? One of the factors of fear leading to an increased state of paranoia and paralysis in the socio-cultural sphere seems to be the state of the world as manufactured by the media – the world of terror, climate change, death, germs, diseases such as AIDS, hypertension, diabetes and swine flu,

and the consequent fear of the mass obliteration of the human race as evinced through movies such as *2012*, based on doomsday predictions again popularised by the media.

Terror as the intensified form of fear has permeated our consciousness to an extent that would have been impossible to achieve without the help, support and indeed the very presence of the mass media. The media creates new monsters for us everyday, and serves them up in a news-mix related to fears of death, global warming, resource limitations, Red Terror, terror across the border, love jihad, the oil crisis, the food crisis, the water crisis, etc. It seems that every day is a battle fought over minor and major crises without end or resolution but within the ambit of the world that the media creates for us and cocoons us in, cut off from actual blood and gore. Neil Postman wrote about the effects of television on the unsuspecting public as far back as 1984 in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, where he says: "Television has become, so to speak, the background radiation of the social and intellectual universe... The all-but-imperceptible residue of the electronic big bang of a century past, so familiar and so thoroughly integrated with American culture that we no longer hear its faint hissing in the background or see the flickering gray light".<sup>3</sup>

The culture of fear thrives on the creation of dichotomous hyper-realities – with reality itself shown as a war between the forces of good and evil, war and peace, terrorists versus the peaceful majority, the Self against the monstrous Other – which continually force us to react and choose sides. The rise of terrorists, villains, monsters, can perhaps be traced to the rise of a global fundamentalism and fascism, where each group imagines itself to be in the right, forced to act out of fear of the other. There are constant encounters, face-offs, battles, conflicts, based on fear, especially in a climate where terms such as 'war on terror', 'collateral damage' and 'shock and awe' have become commonplace. The text of fear is manufactured through the use of images and language in order to coerce people into a certain idea or action where they imagine themselves as members of a certain community against another.

The media, therefore, participates in regulative discourses that attempt to create and locate meanings and identities based on an assumption of the hegemonic power wielded by an authority as distinct from the subject, who then is forced to become a willing/unwilling observer and voyeur. In that sense, the *mediated public* participates in such voyeuristic paradigms that are intended to at once de-subjectivise both the performer and observer, and bind them in an uneasy relationship based on the politics of fear and power. In the movie *Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace*, Yoda tells Anakin on the subject of fear, "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. I sense much fear in you". Although the category of fear is more complex than such direct relations, the hatred and paranoia related to fear are transformed into actuality by a mass media with strong, vested, self-serving interests.

When trust in positive ideology fails, there is an overarching dependence on the language of fear, violence and terror, built in order to maintain order of certain kinds, as also to steer people into forming groups and communities based on the necessary function of survival. This creates what Judith Butler would call "abjected subjects", who are emptied out of their

persona and are instead made to represent particular interests and identities while they are continuously being emptied out – abjected humans, as it were. All media, in McLuhan's view, “are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way”.<sup>4</sup> In the present terrains of media, the electronic has replaced the spoken word in terms of appeal and power but similarly strives towards the construction of new environments and negative impacts based on the patterns of fear.

Fear overrides the concerns of egalitarianism, liberal democratic principles, justice and logic, and can therefore be an extremely potent tool in the hands of those who wield power or seek to. And the most potent medium to spread the message of fear is television, and in the present time, there is nothing more starkly evocative of this than the unending lineup of reality TV shows that have become staple. As audiences, we are either transformed into dumbly captive voyeurs of bedroom politics or are made complicit in fear-mongering and violence in the poisonous combination of news and reality TV, the *simulacra* of reality, as poststructuralist cultural critic Jean Baudrillard puts it.

At one level, one is never shown the consequences of the various stunts, games and competitions performed in reality TV, therefore helping in the ‘cartoonification’ of televised reality. We cannot react when we watch someone falling off a cliff unless it is accompanied by terrifying music or horrified expressions on the faces of other contestants. We wait for affirmation from these sources, which are never revealed as being manufactured reality, and depend on them for our emotional responses.

On the subject of the cult of media fear, Bertolt Brecht has said, “There are many who pretend that cannons are aimed at them when in reality they are the target of opera glasses”. In a recast of Hobbesian fear, the families of those being interviewed and asked seriously personal questions on the programme *Sach ka Saamna* (Face the Truth, a remake of the American reality show *Moment of Truth*) are subjected to the greatest anxiety, where fear of social stigma and loss of honour form the underlying theme, intensified especially in the wake of the values advocated by the bourgeoisie. *Panic Encyclopedia* makes a similar point – “Panic art situates us within its own polar opposition: nostalgic desire for the rock-solid values of respectable modernism vs. hyper-fascination for the valuelessness of postmodern over-production”.<sup>5</sup> The recent controversies surrounding *Sach ka Saamna* also led to state intervention by policy makers, fearful of the corruption of public morals through the programme. The Samajwadi Party MP, Kamal Akhtar, took up the issue in the Rajya Sabha, arguing that the questions asked in the show on 22 July 2009 were against Indian culture – women were questioned about their marital fidelity – and called for a halt to the screening.

In most cases, such as those involving celebrities and actresses such as Urvashi Dholakia, Roopa Ganguly and Bobby Darling, one can detect the construction of questions based on gender roles and identities, where social prestige is opposed to individual choice and where individual anxiety is both the cause and the effect of hegemony and repression. As critic Corey Robin points out, fear as anxiety is not just a political or social tool; it has become the very psychological basis and state of the masses. She goes on to say, “And when the

government acted repressively in response to this anxiety, the purpose was not to inhibit potential acts of opposition by keeping people down (Hobbes) or apart (Montesquieu), but to press people together, giving them a feeling of constancy and structure, relieving them, at least temporarily, of their raging anxiety".<sup>6</sup> Television, as the epitome of the communication between and above the masses, can offer the simulacra and semblance of relief or prohibition by co-opting the masses and speaking for them.

In such cases, one might argue, the traditional roles of gender, community and identity are sought to be validated through the sanction of the public, while newer identities and roles such as those of the openly transsexual Laxmi or Bobby Darling are 'questioned' in order for the watching public to pass their tacit judgement. In each of these cases, even while they are exhorted to overcome their fear of the 'truth' (posited as a singular, monolithic statement of fact as opposed to plural, perspectival notions of truth), they are being coerced to stand trial through the manufacture of social fear in front of the masses through their admissions of 'guilt'.

One can also take, for example, other programmes that advocate the notion of 'going beyond fear' such as *Fear Factor*, *MTV Roadies* and *Khatron ke Khiladi* (The Daredevils), where participants supposedly transcend their fears and phobias, also supported by advertisements such as the Mountain Dew ad that says: "*Darr ke aage jeet hai*" (There's victory beyond fear), the toothpaste ad for Pepsodent that goes "*dishum dishum*" (onomatopoeia for beating someone up) against germs, as well as current ad campaigns targeted at whipping up popular sentiment regarding the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. At the superficial level, while the participants in reality television programmes such as *Roadies* or *Khatron ke Khiladi* are made to confront their individual fears of certain objects, they are at the same time being intensely subjected to the fear of failure within a particular community.

This fear of 'failure', and therefore the subsequent fear of the anonymity that could follow, is the essential ingredient of these programmes, where the actors are never asked to confront the fear of failure itself. Also, the cult of the celebrity, followed in almost all these programmes, lends the added hierarchy of the sanction of Big Brother, variously incarnated in the persons of such celebrities as Amitabh Bachchan or Akshay Kumar.

Failure in the social community, loss of face and the loss of social honour and prestige have become, through media intervention, one of the most prevalent fears sold on Indian television and, by extension, in society at large. Even while fears at the macro level, such as fear of war or disease, fluctuate and intensify/lessen with time, the more locally situated fears of local authorities or locally available others, such as the imagined communities of the class-based/religious minorities, are intensified in order to become prevalent notions of their beliefs and powers through electronically convergent media. An instance may be seen in the current advertisement featuring actor Abhishek Bachchan for Idea Cellular Ltd. on what is popularly known as the "Mumbai 26/11 terror attack of 2008" (of which, tellingly, the Taj Mahal Palace hotel has become emblematic, despite the attacks having taken place at around ten different locations), which builds on the hysteria around the event whipped up by news channels that led many upper-class Mumbaikars to join mass protests, the same

people conspicuous in their absence during the more damaging July 2006 attacks on the Mumbai intra-city trains. Very evidently, then, the media demonstrated its power to collect the critical mass of people necessary to effect physical change in the public sphere, and demonstrated also its capacity to whip up public passions for or against certain sections of the population.

Coming back to the questions posited at the beginning of this essay, it would be worthwhile to additionally look at the convergence of the media – and media-related perspectives – with discourses that construct and sell the grand narrative of fear, psychosis, anxiety and panic for the willing public. The manufacture of the culture of fear requires further investigations, where fear has been commoditised and converted into a saleable product for consumption in the market through electronic convergence/interdependence, in order to create more markets and goods based on the main factor of fear. Most of the current market trends, entertainment channels, TRP ratings and news reports depend on the industry of fear in order to attract more audiences, consumers and buyers. Fear is peddled by all kinds of sources, news media, cinema, television, Internet, thereby elevating it to a level beyond the ordinary or the human, where those that are feared are the new purveyors of the newly mediated environments. In the movie, *Iron Man* (2008), the main protagonist, Tony Stark, who is a weapons manufacturer, sums up his ideology thus, while showing off his new Jericho missile: “Is it better to be feared or respected? I say, is it too much to ask for both?”<sup>7</sup> The mass media, controlled by big corporations, are the new king-makers, powerbrokers and evangelists, attempting to cash in on both these opportunities – fear and respect; through the creation of circular dialogues, they initiate self-fulfilling prophecies of new crises, dire consequences, doomsday scenarios and new Armageddons, which can be averted only if one takes recourse to the solutions they offer. Fear is the new saleable ‘hot’ item being peddled; in the waiting markets, it is bought all too quickly.

I conclude this essay with pertinent dialogue from the American film, *V for Vendetta*, adapted from the DC comic book by Alan Moore, wherein is an instance of media critiquing media itself. Here, the character V delineates the twisted plot of the power-hungry High Chancellor, and reveals the ways in which the state and big industry collude in order to retain power.

V: However, the true goal of this project is power. Complete and total hegemonic domination... Fuelled by the media, fear and panic spread quickly, fracturing and dividing the country until at last the true goal comes into view. Before the Saint Mary's crisis, no one would have predicted the results of the election that year, no one. And then not long after the election, lo and behold, a miracle... it was a pharmaceutical company controlled by certain party members that made them all obscenely rich. A year later, several extremists are tried, found guilty and executed while a memorial is built to canonise their victims. But *the end result, the true genius of the plan, was the fear*. Fear became the ultimate tool of this government, and through it our politician was ultimately appointed to the newly created position of High Chancellor. The rest, as they say, is history.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

1. Roger Waters. **Amused to Death** (Sony, 1992).
2. William Shakespeare. (Ed.) John Wilders, **Macbeth**. V.v (Cambridge University Press, 2004, Cambridge), p. 205.
3. Neil Postman. "A Peek-A-Boo World". In **Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business** (Penguin USA, 1985, New York), p. 59.
4. Marshall McLuhan and Terence Gordon. **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man** (Ginkgo Press, 2003, California), p. 57.
5. (Eds.) Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, David Cook et al., **Panic Encyclopedia** (Macmillan, 1989, Montreal), p 19.
6. Corey Robin. **Fear: The History of a Political Idea** (Oxford University Press, 2004, Oxford), p 76.
7. Trevor F. Bartlett. "Iron Man". In **Saturday**, 10 May 2008. Available at: [http://www.wirenh.com/Film/Film\\_reviews/Iron\\_Man\\_200805102905.html](http://www.wirenh.com/Film/Film_reviews/Iron_Man_200805102905.html) (accessed 20 November 2009).
8. Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski et al. **V for Vendetta: From Script to Film** (Universe Publishers, 2006, New York), p. 124.