



Slow journalism?

Less Lindsay Lohan, less of the time

By Marc B. Haefele

Last week at USC, a basement full of people questioned the basic news assumption of Fast and First. Primo pomo phrases buzzed: “No narrative choke points,” “narrative of objects,” “feeling of reportorial omnipotence.” It was one of some 30 events in a fellowship seminar hosted by USC’s Annenberg School and Getty Arts Journalism program, which had both turned on the spigots of grant cash to create a luxurious full bath. The parameters came from slow food guru Josh Viertel: “Good, clean and fair.” “It really isn’t about slowing down journalism in the time sense,” director Sasha Anawalt said, but about making it less mass-cultured. Less celebrity-centered. I think the idea is that a slow food potato bakes just as fast as the other kind, but is much better for you.

USC-Getty’s three-week program was itself a slow feast, from its opening Nov. 1 dinner at Campanile to a Nov. 21 farewell supper at Locanda Portofino, by way of daily performances and seminars like this one. Had I known arts journalism could be like this, I’d still be reviewing classical music.

The two most articulate panelists were non-journos (not a rarity, for those who've witnessed journalism panels). The first was the plaidest guy in the room: Mr. Jalopy, a black-rimmed artisan who invented the (stationary bicycle-powered) personal mobile drive-in theater and the World's Largest iPod, turning technology's discards into little masterpieces of personal engineering. Jalopy sees "No user-serviceable components inside" labels as ethical challenges. "If you can't open it, you don't own it," he says, asking for "screws not glues." He thinks that ought to apply to journalism too. The user ought to be able to open up the story and peer inside to see its sources, how it is made, how it connects, how it might be used. "Hand it off to collaborators and it lives forever," Jalopy says. I couldn't agree more. Make the LAPD open the paperwork behind those May Day discipline cases.

The other was Peter Sellars, the international opera magus with the altitudinous forehead and towering crewcut of an old sci-fi movie's 25th century genius. He is one of the world's most articulate people and the only opera director (Adams's Doctor Atomic and Messian's St. Francois d'Assise) to have been on Miami Vice. But as long he's telling me how to do journalism, might I suggest it's time LA Opera tackled modern classics like Busoni's Dr. Faust and Krenek's Johnny Spielt Auf?

Sellars is a godlike, living whirlwind of words: You can see how easy it must be for him to persuade very staid institutions to roll the dice on some very weird projects. He pitched us that L.A.'s central narrative is its racial divisions and strife, that its metanarrative is the foreseeable conflicts and unbroken trends that led to the '92 riot – and persist. "What is important is seeing what is coming, that what is seeded will grow." This, he said, was the function of drama in classic Greek democracy. But classical drama didn't stop Athens from cratering itself. A small shelf of books about the 1965 riot didn't prevent L.A.'s Opus '92. Still, Sellars made me think of the '92 rising's incredible operatic possibilities – martyred Latasha Harlins as soprano, Tom Bradley as the tragic, inept baritone, Rodney King the heroic tenor, Daryl Gates the evil bass. And I realized I was thinking of Anna Deavere Smith's 1993 play Twilight: Los Angeles 1992. This was Wagnerian journo drama (based on Smith's own interviews) whose only music was its words. Twilight is the very embodiment – arty types might say quintessence – of the Slow Journalism everyone was talking about, but no one mentioned it.

Photo-videographer Naka Nathaniel berated industrial-strength journalism's conformism – "38 high-tech cameras covering David Beckham's arrival." But he must know that any assignment editor who sends one of those cameras to a South L.A. shooting instead will soon be shelving cans at Vons. Nathaniel gets to do wonderful you-are-there newspaper pieces partnered with New York Times writer Nicholas D. Kristof complete with Internet video, all with only \$800 in equipment. This is slow journalism indeed, but for now it's also the journalism of privilege. The Internet and the blog were mentioned too, quite often. "They're what allow journalism to go deeper, to have open sources," said Anawalt. I thought of the terrible daily melodrama of the L.A. Times trying to both ride the Internet dragon and make a profit. And that Sam Zell's Spring Street henchmen might have found some useful ideas here.

It's been a slow 150 years since the anarchist Pierre Proudhon called journalism "the cemetery of ideas." Yesterday's great news story has always been today's fishwrap, but the stories that last forever get to be called literature and sometimes art.

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