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## Display as Structure and Revelation: On Seeing the Shiva Exhibition (Review Essay)

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Display as Structure and Revelation: On Seeing the Shiva Exhibition (Review Essay)

## Reviews and Discussion

### Display as Structure and Revelation: On Seeing the Shiva Exhibition

**Review Essay by Michael W. Meister**  
University of Pennsylvania

Present in Philadelphia from March 29-June 7, 1981,<sup>1</sup> the exhibition organized by Stella Kramrisch (curator of Indian art, Philadelphia Museum of Art) to display objects illustrating the diverse manifestations of the Hindu deity Shiva illustrated as well the possibility for manifesting underlying cultural structures in the display of museum objects. Faced with fragments of a civilization bewildering to most Western viewers in its complexity, and rooted in a cultural context of which most Western viewers would be ignorant, Kramrisch chose to weave objects together, using display to provide context, in a way that touched on the deepest structures of that civilization.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, she moved this exhibition steps beyond the pedagogic, historical, display—structures common for such major museum exhibitions.<sup>3</sup> The public who came moved through a world subliminally felt, introduced to them, but not exhausted, by the objects selected and the labels that explained them. Produced as much by display as by the objects themselves, this subliminal world made of the exhibition, as seen in Philadelphia, a revelatory event.<sup>4</sup>

Behind the exhibition lay a scholar's lifetime of experience of India, ten years preparation for the show, a volume of religious interpretation published by Princeton University Press (Kramrisch 1981, affectionately known as the "Stella Purana" by those who worked with Kramrisch toward its production), and a wealth of supporting activities at the Philadelphia Museum of Art that made the exhibit, in the terms of its principal funding agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, a "public event." (These activities included "kits" of objects for school classes; a popular illustrated book by one of Kramrisch's students, *Ways to Shiva* (Dye 1981); a series of films; a specially commissioned film originally entitled simply *Shiva*;<sup>5</sup> a series of scholarly lectures; and vocal, instrumental, and dance performances in the museum, culminating in a Kathakali dance-drama in the main foyer, which sent the cries of demons echoing through all the galleries of the museum.)

The structure imposed by Kramrisch's display took into account existing gallery space—a vast "special exhibition" area with high ceilings, which could be left open or divided up—but revised its normal use in significant ways (Figure 1). This is not to say that the viewer was intended to note the change, but rather that the curator and architect were bound by the perception they wished to create and not by museum convention. This exhibition space normally is entered through smaller galleries in

front; exit is provided by a narrow long hall returning the viewer to the main foyer. Kramrisch chose to use the hallway as access, bringing the viewer into the largest gallery space first, then moving him or her back through smaller galleries to the foyer. By thus reversing the normal flow she could prepare entry to the major sculpture gallery, and could define a ritually appropriate clockwise ambulation.

The long hallway she had widened and broken into alcoves by a series of bays (Figure 1) created by rectangular "gateways," which allowed segments where the miniature paintings displayed could be grouped into meaningful sets without obstructing the central processional path (Figure 2). Low-ceilinged, this hallway provided a backbone for the exhibition, up which the viewers could ascend. Each set of alcoves prepared them differently. First were painted images illustrating Shaivite icons of worship. The second hall-segment opened on the right into the bronze gallery (but was roped off from it), a bronze of dancing Shiva facing the hall, giving to the initiate a glimpse of the ritual objects stored within (and yet to come). (Opposite the dancing Shiva were paintings of Shiva as great ascetic, and one of a king of Mandi as an "apotheosis" of Shiva.) The next alcoves introduced paintings to illustrate Shiva's strange family: a wife who became also a great ascetic, sons who were not natural sons, lovemaking that can never be consummated—presented by colorful Sunday-supplement images of great domestic tranquility. Images of Shiva's more terrifying and elemental aspects were shown (the female river-Ganga descending onto Shiva's head as if to enwrap and engulf him; the great goddess Kali activating Shiva's corpse; Shiva lustfully chasing Vishnu incarnate as Rohini; the wild Bhairava; and the great god Sadashiva). One showed the birth of Shiva's son, Karttikeya, when Shiva's seed spurts into the sacred fire. In the fifth alcove a large wooden headdress, representing dance-dramas performed before a temple, was displayed (Figure 3). Finally, images of earthly and celestial devotees and meditation were collected (three from a series of five ascetics wandering in search of Shiva; paintings of meditative devices; personified melodies preparing the viewer's mood; and near the entrance to the final alcove, a painting showing a priest worshipping four lingams—the abstract phallic emblem of Shiva—over which was traced a map of the "monk's mental pilgrimage"), all suggesting yoga as the "royal road to reintegration."

Up to this point the hallway had been painted light gray, punctuated by the inner surfaces of the rectangular openings that marked segment-divisions, painted a pale flame-color. As one stepped into the next shallow segment, the walls became charcoal-gray, framing two temple-hangings on either side. One moved thus from illustration to devotion as the light darkened. Straight ahead lay the last long segment of hallway, painted jet black. Along the left, straight wall were placed green

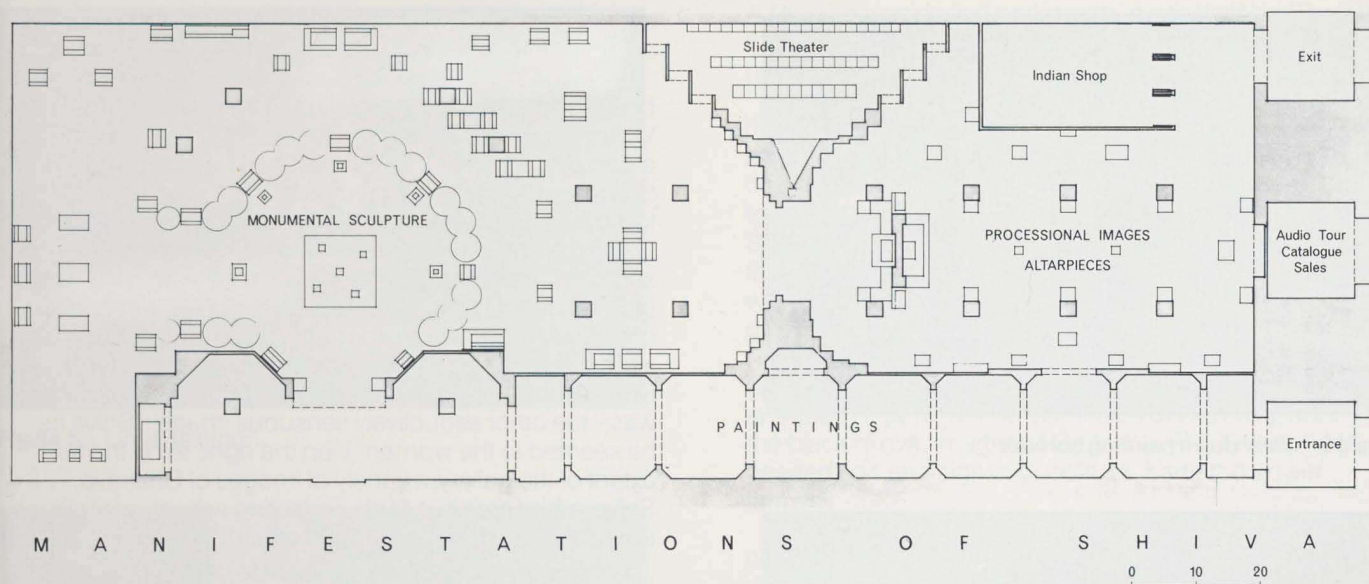


Figure 1 Plan of exhibition.

potted plants, as if the sacred plants in temple courtyards (Figure 4). At the end of this hall section, straight ahead as if presented in the sanctum of an actual temple, was a monumental granite image of Shiva. Kramrisch thus had brought the initiate through stages of illustration, preparation, and challenge into a temple's precincts, the first stone image of Shiva presenting him as if for worship. Thus had Shiva also been made manifest for worship through his images and temples on earth.

Kramrisch, however, used space to move the viewer beyond the temple. To the right in this hall section two empty alcoves had been painted a light tan (Figure 1), making this right wall seem to bulge and dissolve; between was an actual opening, the ceiling of the hallway cut partially back (Figure 4). Through this the viewer could see into a vast nighttime garden, filled with spotlit sculpture and trees, its great space bulging up and over the end of the hall.

To either side of this entry Kramrisch had placed small images of Shiva's impish host, one blowing a conch, the other beating a drum in welcome. Straight ahead, a large, low, square platform dominated (Figure 5). From this emerged the shafts of five lingams, one marking the center, the others the four corners. The deep night of this gallery was punctuated by stone images in harsh light but on stepped black pedestals, so that each image seemed isolated yet alive; this night created was artful and not human night, yet meant to seem eternal, for the linga-platform acted as the ritual presence of a cosmic center, the square altar of men's most ancient rituals, the central lingam the axis separating heaven and earth in early Indian cosmogony. (Lingams marking the corners, unlike a temple platform, marked the four directions

defining the created universe.) By means of this center, and the stone manifestations scattered through the night and grove created in this gallery, Kramrisch had brought the viewer into the actual presence of Shiva.

Around the linga-platform a semicircle of trees was placed, with images reflecting and giving historical reference to the phallic emblems in the center. Directly behind the platform Kramrisch had placed a small relief from the first century A.D. showing a one-faced lingam set up on a square brick platform under a tree, the paradigm for her linga altar. To the left was a small red-stone sculpture from the University Museum showing one of the earliest images known of Shiva manifest in human form in front of the aniconic lingam. To the right of the entry Kramrisch had placed a much later image from the Metropolitan Museum illustrating the myth of Shiva presenting himself as a flaming lingam of infinite extent, with Brahma and Vishnu, the other members of the canonical Hindu triad, attempting to measure its height and depth. On the face of the lingam Shiva emerges in human form, still within a vulva-like opening in the lingam. The aniconic encloses the iconic, and manifestation becomes a didactic device.

Having brought the viewer to confront this abstract ritual center, Kramrisch leads him out, through Shiva's multifaceted, mythic manifestations. Turning further to the left from the linga-altar (the viewer encouraged, one wonders, to circumambulate the platform counterclockwise, as prescribed in some esoteric Shaivite texts?), the now initiated viewer to whom Shiva's cosmic center has been revealed moved through a "gate" marked by two images of Shiva's androgynous form (male and female separate, yet conjoined) (Figure 6) to face three images of Shiva's



Figure 2 View down painting corridor.



Figure 3 Alcove with dance mask.



Figure 4 Stone Shiva at the end of corridor and entrance to monumental sculpture.

attendant mount (symbol of potency and continence, we are told), the bull Nandi (children quickly see these as "Shiva's pets"). These face back through the biunity of bisexual and bivalent images (of Shiva as Harihara—half Vishnu—as well) toward the linga-center (a triad facing a pentad?; Figure 7). The viewer has been brought into Shiva's earthbound but eternal manifestations (Figure 6): to the left a group of three images showing Shiva as teacher (as lord of musical instruments, as "Dakshinamurti" or southern "missionary," and as yogin); in front two images of Shiva as "beggar"—i.e., seducer (of men, but in legend of the holy men's wives, their attraction never fulfilled; one image, the nude human figure standing iconic, tense, Kramrisch describes as "Shiva, the beggar, as he really was," the other seductively sensuous image, "Shiva as he *seemed* to the women"); on the right, filling the far extent of the gallery, a variety of images of Bhairava, Shiva in his fierce but earth-protecting aspect, sometimes emaciated and terrible, sometimes almost regal (Figure 8).

Only here, eccentrically, to the side of Bhairava, and moving along the wall behind the circle of trees surrounding the linga-altar (Figure 8), has Kramrisch introduced what in many exhibitions of Shaivite art would be central, the image of Shiva as lord of the dance. Through images of his dance here, through the eternal rhythm of creation and destruction, time starts again. The viewer moves into groups of images making Shiva's earthly presence specific—as protector of the three worlds and as subduer of demons, sitting also in his Himalayan palace, foot holding down the shaking earth. A series of images then presents Shiva with Parvati, his wife, first ithyphallic, then domesticated; dramatically, as one rounds the perimeter of the sacred grove, one comes upon a great seventh-century Pallava (south Indian) image of Shiva and his family—Shiva domestically manifest as model for all families, yet for no family. As if to remind the viewer that Shiva's domesticity is not one of conjugal but of spiritual harmony, Kramrisch places an image of Kama, the Indian cupid or god of passion, enemy of Shiva's asceticism, as counterpoise.

Still within the glittering black space of Shiva's grove, the vast exhibition space made intimate by trees, Kramrisch again marks the departure from the outer periphery of the sacred circle by a "gate"—here marked by two less impressive images of Shiva and his family. After the "manifest" royal image facing the viewer, these manifestly are *only* images, and mark the end of Shiva's actual presence. Beyond are images of Shiva's secondary level of extensions, as often presented on a temple's outer walls: to the right, images of Skanda, Shiva's warrior son; in front, a bastion of goddesses blocking a view of the bronze gallery ahead; behind, Shiva's elephant-headed son, Ganesha; to the left, a vortex of "secondary" manifestations (river goddesses; door-guardians; a saint, Lakulisha, of the second century

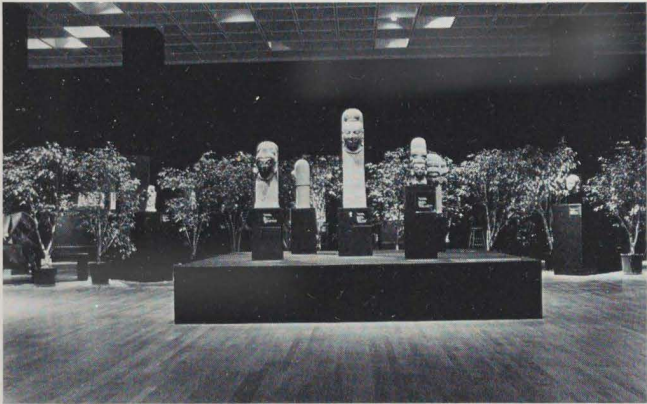


Figure 5 Linga-platform.

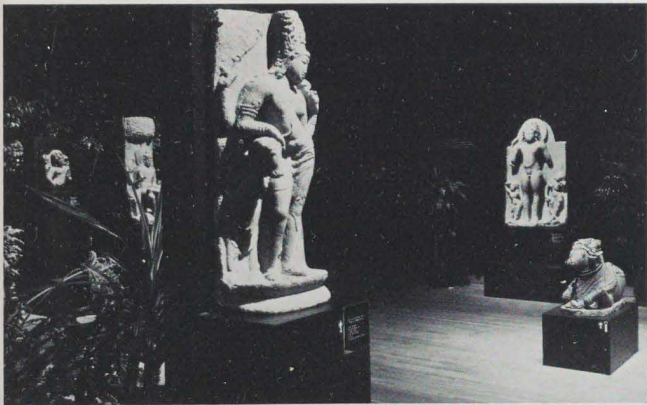


Figure 6 Androgyne gate and images of Shiva as teacher, beggar, and of the bull Nandi.



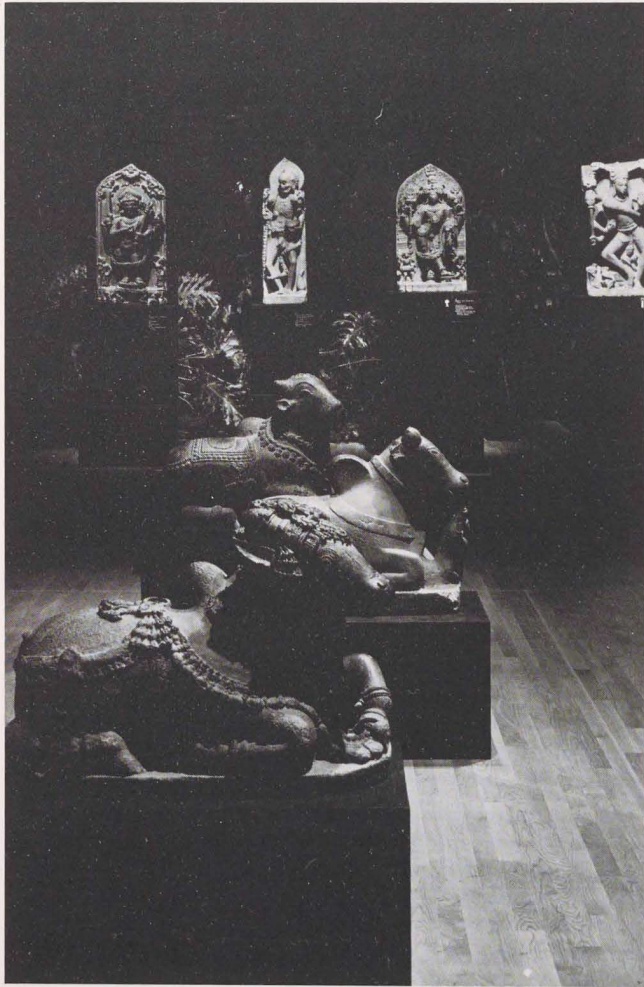
Figure 7 View through the androgyne gate of linga platform.

A.D., who was deified and made "equivalent" to Shiva by the sect he founded; and finally Durga, the great goddess herself).

Two exits were provided from this sculpture grove. To the left (Figure 1), Kramrisch's architect had staged a series of baffles allowing the viewer to slip into a small theater where a slide-show could introduce him to the temples of India in which stone and metal images made Shiva manifest to the worshipper. Through other baffles the viewer could then move on into the smaller gallery in which bronzes had been displayed. Still in the sculpture gallery, the wall had been stepped back, with small cases (Figure 9), to frame a doorway into the display of bronzes, a bronze Shiva as lord of dance again set in the entrance (Figure 10). To either side of this entry, still in the black grove, images of Ganesha, Shiva's elephant-headed son and sign of good luck, bade the viewer farewell.

Shiva's abstract and imaged presence permeates and controls this sculpture "garden." Led from instruction and initiation through paintings and into the "temple" that ends the processional corridor, in this gallery the initiate has Shiva's cosmic and unchanging nature, and faceted and endless valences, made manifest. In leaving this still-swirling manifestation, the viewer could choose to move into the slide theater to be instructed in Shiva's presence on earth, manifest through images in temples, the ritual objects present in the gallery beyond. Alternatively, entering the bronze gallery through the Ganesha gate, the viewer faced a plexiglass-boxed image of Nataraja, master of dance (Figure 10), framed on a wall to block any view of Shiva's "garden" from the gallery itself. Here were implements of ritual and devotion. Walls were again gray, case-backings a pinkish cloth, suggesting both the color of metal and light (Kramrisch now says the color combination to her suggested twilight and dawn), and throughout this gallery, again low-ceilinged, elegant and conventional (Figure 11), Shiva's images as implements of temple worship danced.

On the sides of the gallery a variety of images presented regional diversity and iconographic complexities within the use of bronze. As a central spine, leading to the finest of the three Nataraja bronzes in the exhibit (placed at the gallery's three entrances), were images of Parvati, Shiva's wife, celestial attendant, then various images of Shaivite saints—actual men who had marched through South India composing and singing hymns to Shiva (Figure 11). Bronze had developed in South India, to the heights of accomplishment demonstrated here, as a response to the ritual requirements of the great temple establishments these saints' devotion and the response of royalty produced.



**Figure 8** View across Nandi images of Shiva as horrific Bhairava, and to the right as Natesha, lord of dance.



**Figure 9** Exits from sculpture grove, through theater to left or Ganesha gate to right.

The initiated viewer moved back into this world through this temple storeroom; only then was he led, next, and finally, to the inevitable modern exhibition store, its back to the ritual exhibition and designed so that it could easily be skirted, where T-shirts of Shiva and other objects could be purchased (or, more usefully and more successfully, *Ways to Shiva* and other of the exhibition's publications).

By use of the space in these three galleries for this exhibition—for paintings, stone sculpture, and bronze objects—Kramrisch led the viewer to ascend the heights of an abstract theology, and through the images to return. No compromise was made in writing the explanatory labels, yet they were clear; yet only through perceiving the unity of display could the deeper structure uniting the separate images be perceived. This structure is subliminal; it has not been articulated; yet it leads the viewer as an initiate is led from querulous questions to revelation.

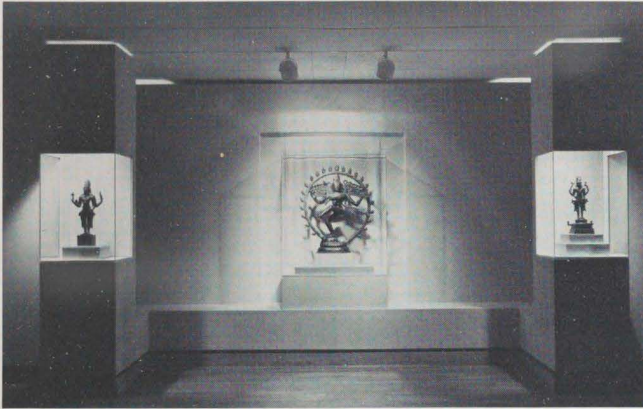
The problems of displaying this material, and the “message” underlying it, are unique; yet the solutions arrived at show the strength possible by which adequate museum display can provide a structure, not simply to reinforce instruction, but to establish a complex, personal, deeply ordered interaction between information and understanding. I am aware that few viewers to the exhibition could have articulated the structure I have suggested here (though many viewers surprised guards with their knowledge and preparation). However, such structures *can* be built into a display, not as “messages” to be decoded, but rather as pathways presented to guide the viewer toward his own perceptions.

### References

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1980 *Ways to Shiva: Life and Ritual in Hindu India*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- Kramrisch, Stella  
1981 *The Presence of Siva*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

### Notes

- 1 The exhibition was also scheduled to go to the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, August 1-September 27, 1981; Seattle Art Museum, November 25, 1981-January 31, 1982; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, March 23-May 30, 1982.
- 2 See Kramrisch (1981) for Kramrisch's personal perceptions of deep structure in Shaivite myth.
- 3 For example, the Chinese Archaeological Exhibition, King Tut, or Before Cortez.
- 4 The architect selected, Richard C. Meyer, worked closely with Kramrisch in formulating the display, and has won an award for “Best Exhibitions of 1981” from *Print Magazine*.
- 5 Later retitled *Manifestations of Shiva*, this film, directed by Malcolm Leigh for the Asia Society, New York, has been broadcast on public television. Through structures built into this film the director also attempted to construct continuities, perceived subliminally, among widely diverse fragments of India's traditions.



**Figure 10** Entry to bronze gallery, Shiva as Nataraja flanked by other "processional images."



**Figure 11** Central axis of bronze gallery: the goddess, Parvati, Shaivite saints, and the Los Angeles Nataraja.

Plan and photographs by Eric E. Mitchell (Figures 3, 4, 6, 8, 10, 11) and Richard C. Meyer (Figures 1, 2, 5, 7, 9). Courtesy of the Phila. Mus. of Art.

**Peter Golding and Philip Elliott.** *Making the News.* London: Longman, 1979.

**Reviewed by Vincent Mosco**  
Temple University

Cecily: What field of endeavor are you engaged in?

Felix: I write the news for CBS.

Cecily: Oh! Fascinating!

Gwendolyn: Where do you get your ideas from?

Felix: (He looks at her as though she's a martian)  
From the news.

Gwendolyn: Oh, yes, of course. Silly me... [p. 5]

Neil Simon wittily captures a prevalent view of news production: news is an independent *thing*, easily recognizable, but which only a few — professional journalists with a "nose for news" — are adept at gathering and reporting. Like the behavioral psychologist who views intelligence as whatever it is IQ tests measure, news is whatever it is a reporter delivers. To accuse a journalist of *making* news, Cronkite and other Personalities excepted, is as inaccurate as accusing the IQ analyst of making intelligence.

This view has of late been subjected to some well-deserved debunking, although, as the authors of this fine cross-cultural report on broadcast news-making point out, journalism is the last among knowledge-producing institutions to submit to demystification. Scrutinizing teachers and psychologists is itself something of an occupation today — witness the growth of professional education and mental health evaluation specialists. The same is not the case for journalism, despite mounting evidence of people's growing dependency on the communications industry for information ranging from the basic (What should I cook for dinner?) to the complex (Who has the power to determine whether I can afford dinner?).

Recent research has begun to remedy this shortcoming. Epstein's *News from Nowhere*, Gans' *Deciding What's News*, and Schudson's *Discovering the News* concretely detail the sociological truism that newsmaking, like any collective human endeavor, is a social process. The news does not exist, but events do. From these events a particular group of people, constrained by various financial, political, social, and organizational forces, select a sample, filter, and report. Halberstam's *The Powers That Be* notwithstanding, the process by which people shape events into news is leaving the realm of romantic mythology, of Great Men who build news dynasties and tough journalists who succeed because they understand the intuitive genius it takes to do a story.