

1991 YEAR-END BLA-BLA

By Michael Ventura

January 3, 1992

CLICHÉ OF THE YEAR: “There wasn’t anything or anybody that overshadowed the power of television this year” is the kind of sentence that can be read almost anywhere these days. An odd contemporary tic: television is given credits for the events we *see* on television. What’s forgotten is that events like Columbus’ voyage, the French Revolution, Napoleon’s wars, the discovery of gold in California, the competitions between great clipper ships, our own Civil War, the outbreak of World War I, the Russian Revolution, Pearl Harbor – to name a few – provoked the people of their worlds every bit as much as the Gulf War and the collapse of the USSR affect us.

A sense of worldwide impact and participation is nothing new. In 1917 Randolph Bourne wrote of “these days of international economic dependence, inextricably interlacing communications and financial obligations.” You can find similar statements going back at least 200 years. Events on the scale of the dissolution of the Soviet Union are felt *personally* throughout a civilization, and always have been. Our forms for feeling this have changed, but not the fact of the feeling.

When even small cities had several newspapers, this was just as true for events like courtroom trials. When the great film clown Fatty Arbuckle was accused of rape and murder in 1921, the sense of public participation and social impact (his trial became the excuse for the first serious censorship of films) was every bit as traumatic for the century as the Hill-Thomas hearings or the rape trial of William Kennedy Smith.

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