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The Sad Spectacle of the Spectacle

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I do not often find myself in hearty agreement with Bob Herbert of *The New York Times*, but his column released yesterday is too brilliant and haunting to resist. As a matter of fact, Mr. Herbert's argument is so compelling that I am breaking a promise to myself and naming a name I had steadfastly refused to name — Anna Nicole Smith. Stay with me now.

Consider these words from Mr. Herbert:

When we were kids we were taught not to laugh at people who were obviously mentally or emotionally disturbed. With Ms. Smith, who was deeply and unmistakably disturbed, we put her on television and laughed and laughed. Would she say something stupid, or spill out of her dress, or pass out in public from booze or drugs? How hysterically funny!

Then her son died. Then she died, leaving an orphaned infant daughter. Instead of turning away chastened, shamed, we homed in like happy vultures. Whatever entertainment value Ms. Smith had when she was alive increased exponentially when she was kind enough to die for us. Now she's on the tube around the clock.

The story, as they say, has legs.

Yes, it does. The rabid and never-ending news swarm about Anna Nicole Smith is a form of pornography — a lust for the salacious. This sad story combines sex, money, infamy, drugs, celebrity, farce, and sheer tragedy. The story may have started as a story about Anna Nicole Smith, but it is now a story about us, about the American people and a frenzy for the pornography of personal tragedy.

And it's not only about Anna Nicole Smith. As Mr. Herbert notes:

Paris Hilton and Britney Spears were on the cover of Newsweek last week with the headline "The Girls Gone Wild Effect." When you turned to the story, there was a full-page picture of the former best friends, with a glassy-eyed Britney looking for all the world like a younger version of Anna Nicole Smith.

The lead-in to the article said in large type: "Paris, Britney, Lindsay and Nicole — They seem to be everywhere and they may not be wearing underwear."

The nation may be at war; and Al Qaeda may be gearing up for a rematch. But that's no fun, not when Britney is shaving off her hair and Jennifer Aniston is reported to have a new nose and the thrill-a-minute watch over Anna Nicole's remains is still the hottest thing on TV.

I am on a television news fast until the burlesque coverage of the Anna Nicole Smith tragedy ends. If the news coverage is any indication, we are a very sick people.

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