



**Cosmos Latinos**

An Anthology

of Science Fiction

from Latin America

and Spain

Translated, edited, &

with an introduction & notes

by Andrea L. Bell & Yolanda Molina-Gavilán

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# Pepe Rojo

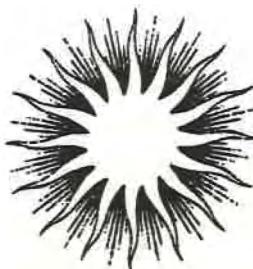
MEXICO

Juan José "Pepe" Rojo (1968-) was born in Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero. He lived there and in Acapulco before settling in Mexico City, where he currently resides with his wife and editorial collaborator, Deyanira Torres. He has a degree in communication sciences and now teaches part time, co edits fan-zines, and freelances as a communication services specialist.

Rojo specializes in horror-, fantasy-, and cyberpunk-influenced SF, frequently intermingling elements of all three genres, and his fiction has appeared in numerous Spanish-language genre magazines.

We proudly present "Gray Noise" ("Ruido gris"), which won Mexico's *Kalpa* prize for best SF story of 1996. It is an atmospheric piece juxtaposing taut, graphically shocking drama with passages of lyrical introspection. The near-future story is set in an unspecified urban center that may or may not be Mexico City; Rojo, unlike many of his contemporaries, tends not to portray an explicitly Mexican reality, preferring instead to emphasize the universality of his characters' circumstances and attitudes.

"Gray Noise" incorporates many of the postmodernist themes and images that characterize Rojo's fiction: the corrosive effects of corporate values and practices (the news media in particular); the paradoxical inability to communicate in a world overrun with communications technology; a fascination with the power of cybernetics, tempered by an awareness of its destructive potential; and personal alienation, often conveyed through motifs of self-mutilation and corporal fragmentation. In "Gray Noise" Rojo gives us a story that is both chilling in its pervasive sense of powerlessness and disquieting in its irresolution.



## Gray Noise

*Ruido gris*, 1996

by Pepe Rojo

translated by Andrea Bell

In my room in the early morning, when everything is still, I can hear a buzzing sound. It starts between my eyes and extends down my neck. It's like a whisper, and I concentrate, trying to make out the words that sound inside my head, knowing in advance they won't make any sense. They don't say a thing. The murmur is like that vibration you can feel but can't place when you're in a mall right when all the stores start turning on their lights and getting ready for the day. Even when people arrive that vibration is still there, but you can't feel it anymore. My head is like a vacant mall. The sound of empty space. The vibration that expectations produce. The whisper of a desire you can't name.

Believe me, I'm used to the buzz. I'm also used to my heart beating, to my brain stringing together ideas that have no direction, to my lungs taking in air in order to expel it later. The body is an absurd machine.

Sometimes the noise lulls me to sleep at night. Sometimes it doesn't let me sleep, it keeps me awake, staring at a yellow indicator light on the ceiling that tells me I'm on standby.

I transmitted for the first time when I was eighteen years old and desperate to find some news item, anything. So I took to walking the streets, following people whose faces seemed like TV fodder. I felt like a bum with a mission. I'd had a little money left over after the operation and could enjoy the luxury of eating wherever I wanted, so I went to one of those fancy restaurants on the top floor of a building tall enough to give you vertigo. After having a drink I walked toward the john, trying to find an exit out onto the terrace. I wanted a few shots of the city for my personal file. I opened several doors without finding anything. Just like my life, I thought with a cynicism I sometimes miss. The rooftop terraces of all buildings are alike. A space filled with geometric forms, in shades of gray. Someone should make a living painting horizontal murals on terrace roofs with messages for the planes that fly over this city every five

minutes. Though I don't know what the messages would be. What can you say to someone about to arrive except "welcome"? It's been a long time since anyone felt welcome in this city.

Someone was scrambling over an aluminum fence on the opposite side of the terrace. Maybe it was my lucky day and he was gonna commit suicide. I activated the "urgent" button inside my thigh, hoping I wasn't wrong. A little later a green indicator lit up my retina, telling me that I was on some station's monitors, though not yet on the air. The guy was standing on a cornice, looking down. He was dark and stubby; his back was to me so I couldn't see his face. I jumped over the fence and looked down, establishing the scene for the viewers; it could be edited later. The dark man turned and saw me, got nervous, and jumped. Right then a red light went on in my eye and I heard a voice tainted with static say in my ear, "You're on the air, pall!"

That night I found out that the man was named Veremundo, a fifty-four-year-old gym teacher. The suicide note they found on his body said he was tired of being useless, of feeling insignificant from dawn to dusk, and that the worst thing about his suicide was knowing it wouldn't affect a soul.

Suicides always say the same thing.

WHEN IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SET UP AN EXTERNAL CAMERA TO SITUATE THE ACTION, THE REPORTER SHOULD OBTAIN A FEW ESTABLISHING SHOTS—"LONG SHOTS"—TO ENSURE THAT THE SPACE IN WHICH THE ACTION TAKES PLACE IS LOGICAL TO THE VIEWERS. REPORTERS SHOULD PREPARE FIXED SHOTS FIRST, AND ONLY LATER, WHEN THERE IS ACTION, CAN THEY USE MOTION SHOTS.

Suicides don't pay very well. There are so many every day, and people are so unimaginative, that if you spend a day watching television you can see at least ten suicides, none of them very spectacular. Seems the last thing suicides think of is originality.

Only once did I try to talk a suicide out of it. It was a woman, about forty years old, skinny and worn-out. I told her that the only thing her suicide was going to accomplish was to feed me for about two days, that there was no point being just another one, that I totally understood life was a load of shit but there was no sense killing yourself just to entertain a thousand assholes who do nothing but switch channels looking for something that would raise, even just a little, the adrenaline level in their bodies.

She jumped anyway.

I returned home, and that night I watched the personal copy I'd made over and over again. Every action happened thousands of times on my monitor. I ended up playing it in slo-mo, trying to find some moment when her expression changed, the moment when one of my words might've had an effect I didn't know how to take advantage of.

I went to bed with swollen eyes, a terrible taste in my mouth, and thinking that what I'd said to that lady I might just as well have been saying to myself.

I've had enough, and I leave my house to go buy something to eat. I jump on my bike (which I use to get around near home) and just before reaching a pizza place I hear a bunch of patrol cars a few blocks away. I press my thigh to activate the controls, and the green signal goes on in my eye. I pedal as fast as I can, following the sound of the sirens. I turn a corner and see five cop cars parked at the entrance to a building. I leave my bike leaning against one of them, hoping no one'll steal it, and run toward a cop who's keeping gawkers back. I show her my press badge and she grudgingly lets me in. Tells me to go up to the third floor. When I arrive, a couple of paramedics are examining a body that's convulsing in the doorway of the apartment. I stop to establish the shots. One full shot of the paramedics, one long shot of the corridor, and I try to walk slowly and keep my vision fixed so that the movement isn't too abrupt. I stop at the doorway and slowly pan my head in order to establish the setting on thousands of monitors throughout the world. My indicator light's been red for several seconds. I approach an officer who's covering up a corpse near a TV monitor, and on the monitor they're transmitting my shot. I feel the shiver that always accompanies a hook, I begin to get dizzy, and a shooting pain crisscrosses my brain. I lose all sense of space until I turn around and spot a cop trying to be the star of the day. The cop sees the red light in my right eye and looks into it. "We got a report from some neighbors in the building, they'd heard a baby crying, and they knew that three single men lived here. You know how people are, they thought they were some kind of faggot perverts who'd adopted a baby so they could feel like they were more normal."

I interrupt the laughter of the cop who's posing for my right eye, and ask him when they were notified.

"Twenty minutes ago. We ran a check on kidnapped babies. When we got here, they'd already killed the neighbors. Seems they were monitoring all phone calls, and they began shooting at us . . ."

The officer kept on talking, and I was concentrating on getting the shot when I sensed a movement behind him. Apparently a closet door was opening. The next thing I register—and I suppose it's gonna be pretty spectacular since my shot was a close-up of his face—is a flash of light and his face exploding into pieces of blood and flesh.

I hurl myself against his body, grabbing hold of it and using my momentum to carry us toward whoever did this. Before reaching the closet I let go of the body and step back, to get a clear shot. The headless corpse of the policeman strikes another body and knocks it down. I run up quickly and stomp on the hand holding a gun. I can hear the bones as they break. Too bad I don't have secondary audio capacity so I could record the sound. I hope someone in the transmission room patches it in. The shot is a bird's-eye view of some guy's face, soaked with the blood of the cop. I can't make out his features. More cops arrive. I take a few steps back.

"It seems," I comment on the air, "that there was still one person hiding in the closet, and this carelessness by the police has cost yet another officer his life." It's always good to criticize institutions. It raises the ratings. Just then I hear a commotion at the door and quickly turn around to find a young woman crying, followed by a private security guard. She goes into one of the rooms I haven't managed to shoot yet. When I try to go in, a cop stops me and his look says I can't enter. I know he's dying to insult me, but he knows I'm on the air and it could harm the police department's image in this city, so all he says is I can't go in. I manage to get shots of the woman picking up a bundle and holding it to her breast while endlessly repeating, "My love, my baby."

"What is that, officer? Is it a baby?"

"This is a private moment, reporter, you have no right to be filming it."

"I have information rights." I lie by reflex, but I don't succeed in budging him. I try my luck with the girl who'd gone inside crying. "Can I help you in any way, miss?" Just then I realize the bundle she'd picked up is all bloody. Various police officers and two paramedics try to take away the baby, at least I suppose that's what it is, but she doesn't want to let go of it. She pats her hair and comes over to me. Hurry up, I think, the clock's running on your fifteen minutes. "You're a reporter, aren't you?" My first instinct is to nod my head but I remember that it's an unpleasant motion for TV viewers, I'm not supposed to be anything but a verbal personality, and so I answer by saying yes.

"Someone stole my baby, and now I've found him but it looks like the cops hurt him, he's been shot in the leg." The girl cries harder and harder while a paramedic tells her that all she's doing is hurting the baby more. I get confused because someone's started to shout in my ear receiver. They want me to ask the girl her name. The paramedic grabs the baby. In my head, the program directors keep talking. "We couldn't have planned this better, this is drama, just wait till you get your check, the ratings are gonna add a lot of zeros to it."

The rest is routine. Interviews, facts, versions. The fate of the baby will be a different type of reporter's job and it'll keep the whole city enthralled all this afternoon and maybe into tomorrow morning, when some other reporter tapes fresher news.

When I leave the building my bike's no longer waiting for me, and I have to walk home. I live in a world without darkness. All day long there's an indicator light in my retina telling me my transmission status. I can turn the indicator level down, but even when I'm sleeping it keeps me company. A yellow light and a buzz, a murmur. They're who I sleep with. They're my immediate family. But my eyes belong to the world. My extended family spans an entire city, though no one would recognize me if they met me on the street.

I haven't gone out for a few weeks now. My last check frees me up from having to wander around looking for news. Privacy is a luxury for a man in my condition. Several times a day a yellow indicator goes on in my right eye and I hear a voice asking if I have anything, they have some dead time and it's been days since I transmitted anything. I simply don't answer. I close my eyes and remain quiet, hoping they'll understand that I'm not in the mood.

What do I do on my days off? Well, I try not to see anything interesting. I read magazines. I look at the window of my room. I count the squares on the living room floor. And I remember things that aren't recorded on tape, while my eyes stare at the ceiling, which is white—perhaps the least attractive color on a TV screen.

THE MOST COMMON ERRORS MADE BY OCULAR REPORTERS ARE DUE TO THE REFLEXES OF THEIR OWN BODIES. A REPORTER MUST LIVE UNDER CONSTANT DISCIPLINE SO AS TO AVOID SEEMINGLY INVOLUNTARY REFLEXES. THERE IS NO GREATER SIGN OF INEXPERIENCE AND LACK OF PROFESSIONAL CONTROL THAN A REPORTER WHO CLOSES HIS EYES IN AN EXPLOSION OR A REPORTER WHO COVERS HER FACE WITH HER ARMS WHEN STARTLED BY A NOISE.

Today is not a good day. I go walking the streets, and in every store I hear the same news. Constant Electrical Exposure Syndrome, CEES for fans of acronyms, seems to be wreaking havoc. Continuous stimulation of the nerve endings, caused by electricity and an environment which is constantly charged with electricity—radiation from monitors, microwaves, cell phones—seems to have a fatal effect on some people. I stop in front of a shop window and start recording a reporter with his back to a wall of TV screens: “It seems the central nervous system is so used to receiving external electronic stimulation that when it doesn’t get it, it begins to produce it, constantly sending electric signals through the body that have no meaning or function, speeding up your heartbeat and making your lungs hyperventilate. Your eyes begin to blink and sometimes your tongue starts to jerk inside your mouth. Some witnesses even say that the victims of this syndrome can ‘speak in tongues,’ or that this syndrome ‘is what causes this type of experience in various subjects.’” They insert shots of several people speaking in tongues here.

The reporter, looking serious and trying to get people’s attention, keeps walking, while images of people who suffer from these symptoms appear on the video wall. The screens fill with shots of serious men with concerned faces. Interviews with experts, no doubt.

“No one knows for certain the exact nature of the syndrome. The global scientific community is in a state of crisis. There are those who say this is just a rumor started by the media, simply another disease transformed into a media event. Some say the syndrome isn’t as bad as it seems. But there are also those who believe that civilization has created a monster from which it will be difficult to escape.”

The images on the monitors change. Various long shots of rustic houses, surrounded by trees. The music changes. Acoustic instruments, a flute and a guitar.

“However, there are already several electric detox centers out in the country. Rest homes devoid of electricity. This is perhaps the only possibility or hope for those who exhibit symptoms of the syndrome. As always, hope is the last thing to die in what is perhaps the most important ‘artificial’ disease of this century. There are those who say that what cancer was to the previous century, CEES will be to ours.”

They show a few shots of these places. The patients look out the windows or at the walls, as if waiting for something they know will never arrive. As if waiting for civilization to keep a promise, yet aware that it never will, since the promise has long been forgotten.

The equipment for corporal transmission is very expensive. My father gave it to me. Well, he doesn't know what he gave me. I just received an e-mail on my eighteenth birthday saying that he'd deposited who knows how much money into an account in my name, that I had to decide what to do with it and that after spending it I was on my own. That I shouldn't seek him out anymore.

I still keep that e-mail on my hard drive. It's one of the advantages of the digital age. Memory becomes eternal and you can relive those moments as many times as you want. They remain frozen outside of you, and when you don't know who you are or where you come from, a few commands typed into your computer bring your past to the present. The problem is that when the past remains physically alive in the present, when does the future get here? And why would you want it to?

The future is a constant repetition of what you've already lived; maybe some details can change, maybe the actors are different, but it's the same. And when you haven't actually lived it, surely you saw something similar in some movie, on some TV show, or you heard something like it in a song. I keep hoping my mom will return one day and tell me it was all a joke, that she never died. I keep hoping my father will keep his promise and come see me in the orphanage. I keep hoping my life will stop being this endless repetition of days that follow each other with nothing new to hope for.

I paid for part of my operation with the money. Legally, half the operation is paid for by the company that owns the rights to my transmissions. The doctors tried to talk me out of the implant, but I was already over sixteen, so I told them to just concentrate on doing their job. I needed to earn money and I knew perfectly well that luck and necessity are strange bedfellows. Three days later the nerve endings of my eyes and vocal cords were connected to a transmitter that could send the signal to the video channels.

That was the last time I heard from my father.

THE MOST IMPORTANT DETAIL THAT AN OCULAR REPORTER MUST REMEMBER IS TO AVOID MONITORS WHEN TRANSMITTING LIVE. IF A REPORTER FOCUSES ON A MONITOR THAT IS BROADCASTING WHAT HE IS TRANSMITTING, HIS SENSE OF BALANCE WILL BE HARSHLY AFFECTED AND HE WILL BEGIN TO SUFFER FROM SEVERE HEADACHE. EXPOSURE TO THIS TYPE OF SITUATION IS EASILY CONTROLLED BY AVOIDING SHOTS OF MONITORS WHEN TRANSMITTING LIVE. IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT THE REFLECTED TRANSMISSIONS "HOOK" THE REPORTER, AND THERE IS A CHANGE IN THE STIMULI THAT TRAVEL

FROM THE BRAIN TOWARD THE DIFFERENT MUSCLES OF THE BODY. FOR THAT REASON IT IS SOMETIMES ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO BREAK OFF VISUAL CONTACT WITH THE MONITOR. THE ONLY WAY TO PREVENT THESE "HOOKS" IS THROUGH ABRUPT MOVEMENT OF THE BODY OR NECK AS SOON AS VISUAL CONTACT IS MADE WITH THE IMAGES ONE IS TRANSMITTING. LATEST RESEARCH REVEALS THAT LONG PERIODS OF EXPOSURE TO THESE VIRTUAL LOOPS CAUSE SYMPTOMS SIMILAR TO THOSE OF CEE'S. THIS INFORMATION WAS OBTAINED FROM RECENT EXPERIMENTS AND FROM THE RECORDS OF THE TOYNBEE CASE.

The Toynbee case is a legend no one in my profession can ever forget. Some anti-media extremists kidnapped a reporter and blindfolded him so that he couldn't transmit anything. Every two hours they broadcast their opinions to a nation that watched, entertained: "The media are the cause of the moral decay of our society; the media are causing the extinction of individuality; thousands of mental conditions stem from the fact that human beings can only learn about reality through the media; the information is manipulated." The whole ideological spiel, just like on one of those flyers they hand out in the streets. It's ironic to think that those extremists may be the only ones who'll survive if an epidemic like CEE's wipes out humanity. They always try to avoid electricity. I don't know what I prefer, to keep hoping that this reality miraculously gets better or that some stupid extremists take over the world and impose the rules of "their" reality. The only thing you can learn from human history is that there's nothing more dangerous than a utopia.

So, as an example and metaphor of their complaints, they tied up the reporter, who worked under the name Toynbee, and put him in front of a monitor. They immobilized his head and connected his retina to the monitor. I've seen those images a thousand times. The only thing the reporter's eyes see is a monitor within a monitor within a monitor, until infinity seems to be a video camera filming a monitor that's broadcasting what it's recording, and there's no beginning, no end, there's nothing, until you remember that a human being is watching this, it's the only thing he can see and it's giving him an unbearable headache, as if someone were crisscrossing his skull with cables and wires. The images weren't enough. For those who know what it feels like to get hooked, the images were painful, but for those who'd never felt that kind of feedback they were frankly boring. The extremists—conscious that they were putting on a show and that before they'd be able to broadcast ideas they had to entertain the world—set up a video camera to tape Toynbee's face, and sent the signal to the same transmission station the reporter was con-

nected to. At the station they knew there was nothing they could do to help Toynbee, since he was connected directly to the monitor, and they began to transmit both things: the monitors reproducing themselves until infinity, and Toynbee's face. The station executives say they would've cut the broadcast if they'd had doubts about the source of the hook, but everyone knows that's not true. Ratings are ratings.

Watching that reporter's face is quite a show. First, a few facial muscles start to move, as if he had a tic. At first he tried to move his eyes, to look to either side, but right next to the monitor was the tripod with the camera taping his face. And so on one half of the screen you could see how the loop was broken: all you saw was the partial view of a TV set, showing the image of a video camera on the right side of the screen and the real video camera on the other side, as if reality didn't have depth, only breadth. As if reality repeated itself endlessly off to the right and left. But the hook was stronger than his willpower, and gradually the reporter stopped trying to look off to the side. Sometimes the monitor showed how he tried. A very slow pan to the right or left that slowly came back again, as if the muscles of his eyes had no strength left. Toynbee began to sweat. His face began to convulse more violently, each time sweating bigger drops that struggled against gravity until, just like the reporter's eyes, they gave up and slid rapidly down his convulsing face. Each drop followed a different path. His face, lit up by the monitor, seemed to be full of thousands of monitors, since his damp skin also reflected, in distortion, the monitor he was looking at. The muscle spasms were getting stronger, and just as the sweat deformed the monitor, each convulsion moved the reporter's face one step further away from what we know as human. There were no longer moments when you could see normalcy in his face. Everything was movement and water and eyes that looked out feverishly, desperately. Sometimes, when I recall the images, the eyes even seem to be concentrating, as if they were discovering a secret that not only makes you lose your mind but causes your body to react violently, because it's something that human beings shouldn't be allowed to see.

A few minutes later his eyes seemed to lose all focus, even though they kept on receiving and transmitting light. His eyes were vacant, just like the monitors. I've always liked to think that at that moment the only thing the reporter could see was a kitschy image of his past—I dunno, the birthday party his mom threw him, or some day when he was in a play, or his first kiss, or some other idiocy of the kind that always makes

us happy. There was no more willpower left in his eyes, but his eyelids were being forced open, so his body and the ghosts that occupied his body were still functioning. Several of his facial muscles atrophied and stopped working, which made the movements of his face even less natural. The shot continued until his face had no expression left, just spasms and movement, expressions that went beyond the range of human emotions, possibilities that ceased to have meaning the moment they disappeared.

Until his heart exploded.

Sometimes, when I'm bored and on the bus returning to my apartment, I begin to record everything I see. But then I stop seeing and just let the machines do their work. I go into a sort of trance in which my eyes, though open, observe nothing; and yet when I get home I have a record of everything they saw. As if it wasn't me who saw it all.

When I watch what I taped I don't recognize myself. I relive everything I saw without remembering anything. At those times it's my feelings that are on standby.

Some truths become evident when reality is observed this way.

The poor are the only ones who are ugly. The poor, and teenagers. Everyone with a little money has already changed his or her face and now has a better looking one, has already made his face or her identity more fashionable. Teenagers aren't allowed this type of operation because their bone structure is still changing. That's how you can tell economic status or age, by checking out the quality of the surgical work on people's faces. We live in an age when everyone, everyone who's well off in this world, is perfect. Perfect body, perfect face, and looks that speak of success, of optimism, as if the mind were perfect, too, and could think only correct thoughts. Today, ugliness is a problem humanity seems to have left behind. Today, as always, humanity's problems are solved with good credit.

Sometimes I like to think about the scene of my suicide. One of my options is to connect the electric camera terminals I have in my eyes to an electric generator in order to raise the voltage little by little, until my brain or my eyes or the camera explodes. It thrills me to think of the images I'd get.

Or I could prepare something cruder. Take a knife and cut out my eye. Cut it out by the roots. Sometimes I think I'd prefer not to see anything, I'd prefer a world in shades of black. Get rid of my eyes. Even if they sued me, even if I had to spend the rest of my life rotting away in jail.

And while I decide, I sit alone at home, waiting. Waiting for a promise to be kept . . .

Today I woke up with the urge to go out into the street and find something interesting. I've been walking around for a couple of hours without any destination. It's a nice day. I hear shouts at the end of the street and take off running in that direction. A drugstore. I press the button and my indicator light changes from yellow to green. I stop a few meters from the entrance and file a report. "Shouts in a drug store, I don't know what's going on, I'm going to find out." I take the time needed to establish the scene and slowly start to approach. A lot of people are leaving the drugstore, running. The story of my life. Wherever no one wants to be, there go I.

It's hard to get inside. I try to shoot several of the faces of the people stampeding each other to get out. Desperate faces. Scared faces. The red light goes on. "I'm at a drugstore, the people are trying frantically to get out. I haven't heard any shots." I have to shove several people aside until I can get through the door, and I head toward the place everyone's leaving. "Looks like someone's lying on the ground." A bunch of people wearing uniforms surround him. Probably the store employees. I stop a moment to establish the shot. I stop an employee who wants to get outside and look him in the eyes. He's so scared he doesn't even realize I'm transmitting. "What's going on?" "The guy was standing there, taking something off the shelves, when suddenly he collapses and starts to shake. He's infected . . ." The guy pushes me and jars my shot. Shit. I approach the body; there's an ever widening circle around him. I pass these people and get a full-body shot of the guy, on the floor having convulsions. He's swallowing his tongue. I approach and get down close to him. He looks at me desperately when his head's not jerking around. Toynbee. He has the same facial features. "This man was shopping in the drug store when he suffered a seizure." The guy turns to look at me, realizes there's a red light burning in my retina, and begins to laugh. His laughter starts to mix with his convulsions and before long you can't distinguish his laughter from his pain. I try to hold him in my arms, I try to touch him to calm him down, but it has no effect. I see a red light in his left eye. He's transmitting. I let go of him and his head hits the floor hard. Out of nowhere, he seems to be drowning. He shudders twice and remains quiet, looking at me. In my head I hear, "Say something, say something about CEES, talk, dammit, it's your job."

The reporter is motionless. The camera in my eyes records a tiny red

dot that remains alive in his. Today my face will probably appear on the monitors.

Two days later my news is no longer news. It seems like every day more attacks of the syndrome are reported. Forty percent of the victims are reporters. I remember AIDS and the homophobia it awoke. Seems like it's us reporters' turn to live in fear, not just of dying, but of the fear of others. Mediaphobia? What will they name this effect?

The common citizen (and believe me, they're all common) still doesn't understand that the syndrome isn't transmitted by bodily contact. Everyone runs away when they see someone falling apart in a fit of convulsions. They still don't get it that the body is no longer the important factor. They live under the misconception that if they touch a victim they'll get infected. It's like a phantom virus that can't be located, it's in the air, in the street, it's wherever you go but in reality it doesn't exist. It's a virtual virus. And it's a sickness we're exposed to by living in this world. It's the sickness of the media, of cheap entertainment, it's the sickness of civilization. It's our penance for the sin of bad taste.

FOR ALL REPORTERS WHO TRANSMIT LIVE, CONTROL IS THE PRINCIPAL WEAPON AGAINST THE REFLEX STIMULATION CAUSED BY THE INDICATOR LIGHT. THE VIEWER CAN SEE THROUGH THE REPORTER'S EYES ONLY ONCE THE RED LIGHT IN THE RETINA GOES ON. ALL MOVEMENT, ALL ACTION ON THE REPORTER'S PART, SHOULD BE PERFECTLY PLANNED. THERE MUST BE NO MISTAKES. FRONTAL SHOTS ARE BEST. IT IS ALWAYS NECESSARY TO TAKE FACE SHOTS OF THE SUBJECT, BY MEANS OF THE CAMERAS CONNECTED TO THE NERVE ENDINGS OF THE EYE, IN ORDER TO ESTABLISH IDENTIFICATION BETWEEN THE SUBJECT AND THE VIEWER. THE REPORTER FUNCTIONS AS A MEDIUM. HE/SHE IS MERELY THE POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN THE ACTION AND THE REACTION THAT THOUSANDS OF VIEWERS WILL HAVE IN THEIR HOMES. THE REPORTER MUST BE THERE WITHOUT BEING THERE. EXIST WITHOUT BEING NOTICED. THIS IS THE ART OF COMMUNICATION.

The opening sequence of the program I usually transmit on goes like this: all the shots are washed out as if they were done in some familiar, old-fashioned style, as if done without the necessary transmission quality, that being the excuse for washing them in gray tones that'll later change to reds. First there's a subjective shot of a stomach operation; then the doctors turn and talk to the camera, and the whole world learns that the camera is the face of the person being operated on. Then there's an action sequence of a shootout downtown, till one of the people firing turns and sees the camera and presses the trigger; the camera shot jolts

and seems to fall to the ground. Everything starts to flood, a red liquid's filling up the lens. The pace starts to pick up. A shot from the point of view of a driver who crashes into a school bus. A worm's-eye view of a guy throwing himself off a building (I've always thought he looks like a high-diver). The sacrifice of a cow in a slaughterhouse. The assassination of a politician. An industrial accident where some guy loses an arm. Shots of explosions where even the reporter gets blown up. A skyjacking where the terrorist shoots a passenger in the head. And so on. The images go by faster and faster until you can hardly make out what's going on, all you see is motion and blood and more motion, shapes that don't seem to have any human reference anymore, until it all begins to acquire a bit of order and you start to see red, yellow, and gray lines that dance about rapidly and leave the retinal impression of a circle in the middle of the screen where the lines meet. An explosion stops the sequence, and inside the circle the program's logo is formed: Digital Red.

Welcome to pop entertainment in the early twenty-first century.

What will I be doing in twenty years? Will I keep roaming the streets looking for news to transmit? Not a very pleasant future. Belonging to the entertainment industry gives off an existential stink. Some still call it journalism, though everyone knows the news is there not to inform, but to entertain. My eyes make me commune with the masses. Thousands of people see through my eyes so they can feel that their lives are more real, that their lives aren't as putrid and worm-eaten as the lives of the people I see. I'm the social glove they put on in order to confront reality. I'm the one who gets dirty, and I prevent their lives from smelling rotten. I'm a vulture who uses the misfortunes of others to survive.

When you get up close to a mirror you can't see both your eyes at the same time. You can see either the right or the left. The closer you get to your image the more distorted it gets and you can only see yourself partially. The same thing happens with a monitor. You're not there. You're the unknown one who moves in a way you don't recognize as your own. Who speaks with a voice that doesn't sound like yours. Who has a body that doesn't correspond to your idea of it. You're a stranger. To see yourself on a monitor is to realize how much you don't know about yourself and how much that upsets you.

If I wanted a more dramatic effect I could get myself hooked, like Toynebee. Connect myself directly to a monitor and start to transmit. See how reality is made up of ever-smaller monitors (and no matter how hard you try, you can't find anything inside those screens, just another

monitor with nothing inside) and go crazy when I realize that's the meaning of life. Totally forget about control over my body.

Allow my eyes to bleed.

THE TRANSMISSION TIME OF AN OCULAR REPORTER IS THE PROPERTY OF THE COMPANY THAT FINANCES HIS/HER OPERATION. CLAUSE 28 OF THE STANDARD CONTRACT ESTABLISHES THAT SIX HOURS OF EVERY REPORTER'S DAY ARE PROPERTY OF SAID COMPANY.

A terrorist attack in a department store. I hate department stores. Almost all of them are festooned with monitors that randomly change channels. It's easy to get hooked. You have to be careful. The police are just arriving on the scene. I'm about to transmit but decide not to tell central programming. As always, I look for an emergency exit. A manager is trying to take merchandise away from customers who are capitalizing on the situation to save a few pesos. The manager is so busy that he doesn't even realize when I push him. He falls and a bunch of people quickly run out with the stuff they're stealing. A little old lady of around sixty carries a red dress in her hands and smiles pleasantly when she leaves. I enter the store and hide behind the clothes racks. I get up to the third floor via the emergency stairs, which are empty. I don't know if the terrorists are here inside or if they simply left everything in the hands of a bomb. I avoid several of the private security guards hired to guard the store, not wanting them to see me yet. One of them comes upon a shoplifter, and he and his partner kick the hell out of him. The guy's bleeding and crying. Everyone tries to take advantage of an emergency situation. The two security guards go away, leaving the customer lying there on the floor. Blessed be capitalism.

I move on to the candy department, and the smell makes me dizzy. I've never understood how they keep the flies away from the exposed candied fruit. I hear some voices and hide. I begin to hear a buzzing sound and I gently tap my head. But the sound's not coming from there. The hum is coming from my right. I crawl until I get to a box, which I open cautiously. Inside is a sophisticated device with a clock in countdown mode, rapidly approaching zero. I have a little more than a minute, so I take off running. I forget about transmitting or anything else. When I feel I'm far enough away I turn around and press a button; it's green. I see the two security guards approaching the candy section. I quickly turn my head. I'm about to shout at them to get away when I hear a voice in

my ear. "Where the fuck are you? Straighten out the shot, show us something we can broadcast. Are you in the store?" I slowly correct the shot, steadyng my head in a slow pan while I notice the red indicator light switch on in my eyes. I manage to spot the two security guards in the candy section. I force myself not to blink, and the bomb explodes. The fire is so hot and the colors so spectacular that for the first time in a long while I forget about the red light that lives in my head. I miscalculated. The force of the explosion lifts me up and I fly several meters through the air. I'm not a body, I'm a machine soaring through the air, whose only purpose is to record and record and record so that the whole world can see what they wouldn't want to live. The clothes burn, the display shelves fall apart, thousands of objects go flying. Some hit me but I try to keep the shot as steady as I can. All in the name of entertainment.

I slam against a wall and try to keep my head up so I can tape the fire.

For the first time I feel at home in a department store. Everything is flames, everything is ashes. The stylish dresses feed the fire, the perfumes make it grow. The spectacle is unparalleled. Civilization destroying itself. I'm in a department store, one of civilization's most glorious achievements. I see a sign that's beginning to burn; it says, "Happy Father's Day." Promises, promises . . .

I get up and my whole body hurts. I walk toward the exit. A voice in my head is shouting, "Where the fuck do you think you're going? I need fixed shots, I need you to talk; tell the world about your experience. Don't be an asshole, you don't tape an explosion every day! Where do you think you're going?"

And it doesn't stop until I'm three blocks from the attack.

Today I crossed a line. I don't know and I don't care if I killed the security guards. It's one thing to report on stuff that happens and another thing to make what happens more spectacular.

What were the security guards? They were graphic elements to liven up my shots. They were mimetic elements that the audience would be able to identify with. They were dramatic elements to make the story I had to tell more interesting. They were scenery.

Today I crossed a line and I don't want to think about anything. My whole body aches.

Situations like these make me think about the urgency of my suicide. At least that way I could decide something, and not just let destiny take the lead. Suicide is the most elaborately constructed act of the human will, it's taking control of your destiny out of the hands of the world.

Yesterday I was organizing a bunch of my tapes. I found a program about my old-time heroes, the experiential reporters. "Crazies," as the foreign media call them. I pressed the play button and sat down to watch them. There are some pretty stupid people in this world, like the reporter who, after getting himself thrown in jail, started to insult the cops so that they'd beat him. He taped everything. The shots are especially successful because half the time he's on the floor trying to make visual contact with the faces of the cops who are pounding on him. Some people consider him a hero. But whenever you see the disfigured faces of the police who are beating him up you can't help thinking how ridiculous the situation is. The reporter is there because he chose to be there. Good job, amigo, boost your company's ratings. I also watched the famous operation on Grayx, one of the martyrs of entertainment. The reporter, trying to make a commentary on the depersonalization of the body, agreed to subject himself to surgery in which they'd remove his head and connect it to his body by way of special high-tech cables. The guy outdid himself, narrating his whole operation, describing what he was feeling while they connected his head to his body with cables that allowed him to be five meters away from his head. It is probably one of the most important moments of this century. When the operation's over you can see a subjective shot of the body on the operating table as Grayx tells it to stand up. The body gets up and begins to stumble, because the head that's sending it instructions sees things from a strange perspective. The body slowly approaches the head, picks it up and turns it around so that the eyes (and the camera) can look in the direction it's walking in, and at that point the viewer no longer knows who's giving the instructions, the body or the head. The body takes the head in its arms like a baby and stands in front of a mirror where you can see a decapitated body holding its head in its arms. The head doesn't seem to be very comfortable because it's a bit tilted; the guy didn't have enough coordination to hold it straight, so all these shots lack horizontal stability. Grayx is talking about the feeling of disorientation, about the possibilities that the surgery opens up, about what would happen if instead of cables they used remote control, about how marvelous the modern world is, while his arms try to hold his head straight and he keeps looking back, his face twisted with the effort of trying to make his body do what he says, all the while failing to control it.

This program always brings me odd memories. I had sex for the first time after watching it with a girlfriend from high school. We were at her

house watching the broadcast. No one was around. I don't know how many people might've had sex after the inauguration of the first lunar colony or when they broadcast the assassination of Khadiff, the Muslim terrorist leader, or at any other key moment in the televised history of our century, but I can tell you that it's an unforgettable experience. Watching a man with his body separated from his head on the same day that you become aware of how your body can unite with another and become one is something you don't easily forget. Every time I watch it I have pleasant memories.

Now Grayx is in a mental institution. Seems the technology he was helping to develop causes mental instability. Apparently people need corporal unity in order to remain sane. Grayx lost contact with reality, and they say he now lives in an imaginary world. He had so much money that he built a virtual environment and connected it to his retina, and that's the only thing that keeps him alive.

I haven't felt good ever since the explosion. I have severe pains in the pit of my stomach. Yesterday I told them to deposit the check into my account. Seems I won't be having any trouble over the security guards. To create news with your own body, like the crazies do, is perfectly legal, but make news at the expense of other people's rights and you can wind up spending the rest of your life in jail.

I go to the bathroom and start to pee. I look down and see that the water and my urine are full of blood. I start to hear voices just as a green light goes on in my retina.

"If I were you I'd go straight to a doctor. That red color in your piss don't look healthy at all."

"Leave me alone."

"I can't, you've gone two days without doing a single thing. You already know how it is with contracts. Besides, don't be ungrateful. I was only calling to tell you your check's been deposited. Maybe when you see your pay your mood'll improve. The ratings were really phenomenal."

I've gone down into the sewers of the city a number of times trying to prove one of the oldest urban legends. Thousands of rumors say there are human communities in the deepest parts of the network of underground pipes. A lot of people believe they're freaks, mutants, that their eyelids permanently cover their eyes and their skin is so white they can't tolerate the sun or even the flashlights that everyone who goes down to look for them uses. A new race, grown out of our garbage.

A society that doesn't rely on its eyes, that doesn't have to look at it-

self for self-recognition. Their behavior must be weird. They'd have to touch each other, they'd have to listen to each other. They wouldn't have to look like anything or anyone. A different world, different creatures.

Every time I descend on one of my exploratory trips I use my infrared glasses and carry very low intensity lights. I've gone down more than ten times and not once have I found anything. No mutants, no freaks, no subterranean race offering something new to humanity, something different from what's shown on TV.

It's just me down there.

Last night my right arm began to convulse. I couldn't do anything to stop it. My fingers opened and closed as if they were trying to grab something, to hold on to something.

Maybe I'd prefer a less sensational exit. Get a tank of gas, seal off a room and fall asleep . . .

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR HUMAN BEINGS TO AVOID BLINKING, BUT IT IS POSSIBLE TO PROLONG THE PERIOD OF TIME BETWEEN ONE BLINK AND THE NEXT. REPORTERS SHOULD DO EXERCISES TO ACHIEVE THIS CONTROL. FURTHERMORE, THE OPERATION ON THEIR EYES IS DESIGNED TO STIMULATE THE TEAR DUCTS SO THAT THE EYES DO NOT DRY OUT SO EASILY, AND THUS REPORTERS CAN KEEP THEIR EYES OPEN LONGER THAN THE ORDINARY INDIVIDUAL.

WHEN MUSCLE MOVEMENT IN THE EYELIDS IS DETECTED, SPECIAL SENSORS IN THE EYE "ENGRAVE" THE LAST IMAGE THAT THE EYE HAS SEEN, AND WHEN THE EYELID THEN CLOSES THIS IMAGE IS THE ONE WHICH IS TRANSMITTED. WHEN THE EYELID RAISES, TAPPING CONTINUES. THIS NECESSARY ERROR IN THE WORKINGS OF THE HUMAN BODY HAS CAUSED MICROSECONDS OF MEMORABLE MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF LIVE TV TO BE LOST FOREVER.

A more spectacular news story, a riskier stunt. They always want something more. More drama, more emotion, more people sobbing before the cameras, before my eyes. I don't want to think, I'm not made to think, just to transmit. But with every transmission I feel I'm losing something I won't ever recover. The only thing I hear in my head is *more, more, more*.

I could also take everything I feel some attachment for, fill a small bag, find a sewer drain, and head down it, but this time without any lights. I'd wander around for entire days, I'd have to start eating rats and insects and drinking sewer water. Maybe I'd spend the rest of my life wandering among the tunnels that form a labyrinth under this city, but at least I'd

be searching for something. Or maybe I'd find a new civilization. Even if they didn't accept me, even if they were to kill me for bringing in outside influences, it'd be comforting to know that there are choices in this world. That there's someone who has possibilities the rest of us lost centuries ago. Or maybe they would accept me, and I could live for years and years without having to worry, doing manual labor and finding a new routine to my life. To be what I think I can be and not what I am.

Maybe, maybe . . .

These are the voices in my head:

"There's a fire, don't you wanna go check it out? Fires and ratings go hand in hand."

"Armed robbery, a black car with no license plates, model unknown, get some shots."

"This is good, a lovers' quarrel, she was making a cake and she destroyed his face with a mixer. The boyfriend, a little miffed, decided he was going to stick *her* in the oven instead of the cake. The neighbors called it in, but it didn't turn into anything big. Good stuff for a comedy."

"You wanna talk? The night's slow and I ain't got nothin' to do, they're broadcasting games from last season."

"Another family suicide. In the subway, a mother with her three kids."

And so on, continually.

The whole world is on TV. Anyone can be a star. Everyone acts, and every day they prepare themselves because today could be the day that a camera finds them and the whole world discovers how nice, good looking, friendly, attractive, desirable, interesting, sensitive, and natural they are. How human they are. And all day long everyone sees tons of people on screen trying to be like that, so people decide to copy them. And they create imitators. And life just consists of trying to seem like somebody who was imitating somebody else. Everyone lives every day as if they were on a TV show. Nothing's real anymore. Everything exists to be seen, and everything that we'll see is a repeat of what we've seen before. We're trapped in a present that doesn't exist. And if the transmitted don't exist, what about those of us who do the transmitting? We're objects, we're disposable. For every reporter who dies on the job or who dies of AIDS, there are two or three stupid kids who think that's the only way of finding anything real, of living something exciting. And everything starts all over again.

I always try not to chat with the program directors. Normally they're a bunch of idiots. Their work is easy and they use us like remote-control

cameras. Normally I don't even ask 'em their names. There's no point. Who wants to know more people? Ain't nothing new under the sun. Everything's a repeat, everything's a copy.

There's only one program director who knows me a little more intimately. His nickname's Rud, I don't know his real name. I met him (well, I listened to him) when I was drinking, that is, when I was trying to get so drunk I wouldn't have to think, wouldn't have to want anything. I wanted the alcohol to fill me so that I wouldn't have to make decisions, so that whatever decision I made would be the liquor's fault, not mine: "I was drunk."

I sure do miss booze.

Alcohol and my profession are not good friends. In my body I have equipment that belongs to a corporation, so they can sue me if I willingly damage the machinery. Besides, it's not unusual for program directors to tape your drinking sprees and then use them to blackmail you. Some even put them on the air. Once they broadcast two guys who were beating me up 'cause I'd insulted them. I remember thinking that the only good thing about it was that my face wouldn't be shown on the air, they could transmit everything I did but no one would see me, no one could recognize me. Anonymity is a double-edged sword.

Rud calls me the Cynic because he doesn't know my name either. It's easier to talk with someone that way. You avoid problems, as well as commitments. Well, it turns out he'd listened to one of my booze-induced rants. He listened to me patiently all night long, complaining, crying, laughing. I walked over five kilometers. The only thing I did was stop at liquor stores to buy another bottle. I wanted to forget everything, so each time I got a different type of booze. I don't even want to remember all the stupid things I said. Anyone with a little sense of humor would call that night "Ode to Dad" because I spent the whole time talking about him. There was even a stretch when I asked Rud to pretend to be my father and I accused him of stuff, I shouted at him and spit at him. My father was inside my head. At one point I started to beat my head against a wall. I don't have any real memories of that. Turns out Rud recognized the street I was on and called the paramedics to come take me home. They had to put eight stitches in my forehead. Not even modern surgical techniques let me get off without a scar.

Five days later I got a package with no return address, just a card that said, "Greetings, Rud." Inside was the bill from the paramedics. There was also a videocassette. Rud had taped my whole binge.

Sometimes, when I'm in the mood to drink, I play the videotape and cry a bit. That way there's no chance I can deceive myself, everything is recorded, I can't lie. It's no illusion, it's me. Sometimes, but not always, I manage to feel better after watching it.

I'd like to go up to the top of the building where I shot my first transmission. I'd set up two external cameras, one with a long shot, the other medium-range. I'd get close to the edge of the building, turning my back to the street so that the shots would be frontal, and I'd press the button in my thigh. Someone would criticize me for thinking that rooftop terraces were news, until they received the signals from the other cameras and realized what I was about to do.

Suddenly, a red light would illuminate my gaze. I would think about all sorts of things. I would want my father to be able to see this, but it wouldn't matter, a lot of people would see it from the comfort of their homes. It's the same thing. I'm everyone's son.

I would clear my throat to say something live with the broadcast, but I'd remain silent. What more can one say? What could I say that someone before me hasn't already said better?

I would look at the cameras and then up at the sky, where they say that gods who loosed plagues onto humanity once lived. In the sky I would find nothing.

The wind would begin to blow and my hair would get in the way of the camera in my eyes.

I would take one step backward and begin to fall.

And maybe, just maybe, I would forget about that buzzing sound for once.