

What's the Buzz

A Thinking Person's MTV

By Katherine Dieckmann

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alike. A quasisensituous MTV exec can alleviate the bad karma induced by Headbanger's Ball with a few choice mandates to "THINK" about the "world." As for us folks at home, it's easier to tsk-tsk at the sight of a bird trying to flap off Valdez oil, than write our congressman and haul old newspapers to the nearest recycling center.

The whole concept of bite-size consciousness raising should bring out the cynic in anyone. (Although C-Hundred Film Corporation's independently produced PSAs prove that the format can deliver, taking on such risky subjects as safe sex, abortion, chemical farming, and interracial love. Some of the spots can be found on MTV, VH-1, CNN, and TBS.) Luckily, the creators of the new 30-minute MTV series, *Buzz*, exhibit some healthy skepticism about the way their medium manufactures superficial concerns. Both Jon Klein, former Creative Director of MTV Europe, and Mark Pellington, an MTV promo whiz and music video director, have clocked considerable time with the network. They frenzied-

but-brainy debut episode of *Buzz* (airs April 22 and runs for 26 episodes) intensifies MTV's style-snatching aesthetic while loading it up with information that's closer to high falutin' culture critique than hyperpop imagemaking.

Rapidly edited, sometimes to the point of incoherence, *Buzz* blends found footage, commercials, a cacophonous sound mix, standard talking heads (frequently subtitled), excerpts from obscure international music videos, and the occasional spouting of a guest celeb (a needless distraction). Heavy use is also made of topical words and phrases, words flashing past in the blink of an eye: maybe that's where the title comes from. When the *Buzz* test pilot aired last May, Amy Taubin praised its promising fusion of art and news, but warned, "You could too easily come away from *Buzz* thinking that human variety is accidental or a mere matter of the personal, rather than a function of gender, race, class, and history." Perhaps Msrs. Klein and Pellington took Taubin's words to heart, for the first episode of *Buzz* is organized into loose "chapters," which tackle nothing less than the stereotypes lurking in national identity, a "we-are-the-world" headset, and sexism. It's a fitting agenda, considering that *Buzz* will also be broadcast in England (and there are plans to market it in other nations), but hardly a teensy one. The show is dense enough to beg repeated viewing and a rewind button (although Klein and Pellington are clearly striving for a one-time bombardment effect).

Taking some cues from Spike Lee, the segment kicks off with a grainy old film clip of a minstrel singer, a call to "Wake Up!" and a speedy montage meant to interrogate racism, particularly as it's constructed through language. Misdebbed voices emerge from unlikely heads: a Chinese-American opens her mouth and out pops a Swedish accent, suggesting that we judge

not merely skin color but economic class from the sound of speech. Backed by some disjunct choral jazz, a university linguist proselytizes for Esperanto as his choice for the ideal one-world language, since it's easy to learn and identified with no one country. Blithe assessments of national character abound: "Germans? They are blond and brave." Then there's the truly weird stuff, like two big-breasted black women singing a remake of Abba's "S.O.S.," substituting "Edelweiss" for the title word. *Whyy?*

The occasional randomness of the footage can make Klein and Pellington's intentions seem murky. When they're focused enough, they're great, like when they examine how Japan is almost universally perceived as a threat. (A black Brit calls them "sadistic" while an African speaks of "Yellownation.") But when they're not, they're low men with cameras who travel all over the place and who are taking over the world."¹ There is even an effort to historicize U.S. fears with some World War II movie footage—in 1945 the battleground was a physical site, but in 1990, warfare takes place on the more abstract plane of economics. Strangely the *Buzz* boys ignore other nations that are in the process of undergoing profound changes in identity, such as Germany, the USSR, and Nicaragua. There's no real logic behind which countries get represented—Ghana gets relatively ample air time—but maybe that's the point.

Clear borders start to dissolve once *Buzz* moves onto an indictment of the travel-brochure approach to culture. This is the mindset that levels distinctive landscapes and native rituals into an amorphous mass of seductive "otherness" with glittering come-ons like, "What enchantment awaits you beneath the golden surface of Thai-

land?" A black-and-white segment on a Hawaiian surfer named Tony E. is all Bruce Weberian beefcake pandering, but *Buzz* quickly redeems itself with a long-overdue attack on the Benetton ad, accompanied by the malevolent guitar grind of Camper Van Beethoven's "I Was Born in a) Laundromat." Questions of exoticia metamorphose to erotica, as a sequence critiquing the female obsession with fitness and beauty (using everything from health-club ads to graphic photos of anorexics) unfurls to a clunky female rap song lamenting, among other things, "I can't be perfect and still be other things." The sources here are anybody's guess; *Buzz* takes sampling, both aural and visual, to the realm of the sensual.

Talking about *Buzz* in conventional narrative terms seems inane, but Klein and Pellington do work up a thematic climax of sorts, when a series of texts appear on the screen: "name country race religion gender. These are labels. They help us define who we are. But labels limit our capacity, to know, to understand, to love ourselves and other people." Presumably we're hearing the show's "authors" talking now, albeit in a voice blunted and borrowed from Jenny Holzer. If that's their message, they seem utterly sincere. But one wonders whether MTV regulars inured to split-second cutting and hedgepodge imagery are going to "get it," or just see *Buzz* as one big retinal ride. Still, any show that questions the state of the world without ever *once* resorting to the exhausted symbol of the globe is all right by me. And I do love those deliberately lumpy *Buzz* logos, full of scan-lines and stains and scratches. Klein and Pellington urge you to go momentarily misty for a time when pictures moved more slowly—right before they snap your head off. —



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