Prof. Dr. David Galloway für den Katalog "biltshtöroong" zur gleichnamigen Ausstellung in der Galerie Epikur, Wuppertal, 1999

With unselfish and unflagging devotion, the German artist Volker Hildebrandt has proclaimed a one-man crusade to enrich the English language. Indeed, to continue the knightly metaphor, he has done no less than launch his lusty lance into the linguistic lists, waving the proud banner of Bildstoerung. With these three crisp syllables, the German language designates the visual "static" that distorts or even obliterates a television image: that which, in my own black-and-white childhood, was known as SNOW! These electronic blizzards were ruthlessly democratic, blanketing everything from Lassie's kennel to the newsroom of the Daily Planet, from Liberace's candelabra to the vast expanses of the Ponderosa Ranch. Unlike commercial breaks which served the needs of urination or the mortaring together of peanut-butter-and-jelly-sandwiches, these whirling clouds of speckles struck without warning and were of indeterminate duration. The result was pubescent panic: "DADDY, IT'S SNOWING!!!!!" And sometimes Daddy could indeed whisk the storm away with a magic touch, thumping his fist against the veneered wooden casing of the "tube."

And yet, for all its tyrannical power, my generation never got round to giving this pesky phenomenon a real name of its own. We might have called it "fnurd," for example, but didn't. Hence, the only alternative to "snow" was the broad and imprecise term "interference," which was more likely to evoke football than electrons. Furthermore, the word was a holdover from the radio era, used to describe static, scrambled signals or unwanted beeps and bleeps that spoiled one's listening pleasure. LISTENING is the key word here, not SEEING, but a lazy, illiterate boob-tube public could hardly be concerned with such trifles. After all, when not blinking through the blizzard, we were all occupied with fighting off the Communist Invasion, the Red Threat.

Though not universally celebrated for their spriteliness of tongue, the Germans rallied round the blizzard and gave it a simple, pregnant nominal by combining the word for picture (Bild) with that for disturbance or interference (Stoerung), and voilá: Bildstoerung became no less than a household word. There is, of course, a certain poetic and historic justice lurking behind this flash of verbal inspiration. Though a number of shadowy experiments had been conducted in Scotland, England and the United States long before 1936, television historians generally agree that the medium as we know it was born in August of that year with the broadcast of the Olympic Games. Regular programming came soon thereafter, as it did in England (November, 1936), France (March, 1938) and the Soviet Union (March, 1939), while the United States did not follow suit until July 1st, 1941. As so often the case in the wonderful world of words, the first to get it were the ones to name it.*

The process of word coinage was speeded by the German's fondness for fusing existing words into new ones. They are, as Mark Twain once pointed out, "compound words with the hyphens left out." Sorta. In his treatise on "The Awful German Language," the American wit extolled those "alphabetical processions" which march so majestically across the pages of German newspapers. Twain rolled his eyes and his tongue over such fusions as Generalstaatsverordnetenversammlung, which he Americanized into "Generalstatesrepresentativesmeetings," though not without wondering if "meetings of

the legislature" wouldn't suffice for the short-of-breath. Yet one can scarcely accuse Volker Hildebrandt of inflicting on us a case of "compounding disease." Indeed, what he offers is, measured by the strenuosities of Generalstaatsverordnetenversammlung, a mere wisp of a word: brisk, poetic and precise.

And such borrowings of foreign words and phrases have long since made American English into a bright, multicolored lexical quilt. Where would we be without our broad prairie (Fr.) and our Southern belle (ditto), our kayak (Esk.) and pueblo (Sp.), our blunderbuss (D.) and our cruller (ditto)? Who would dare to strip us of wigwam (Algonquin) and squaw (Am. Ind.)? And who would deny the enrichment we have already enjoyed from the German language? From Angst to Zeitgeist, poets and philosophers and simple immigrants freely shared their verbal riches. Stripping them from the language could prompt a national Trauma. Surely any red-blooded American would take up arms not just for his squaw and his wigwam but for Kindergarten, for Hamburger, even for the lowly Sauerkraut. To phrase the issue pragmatically: by adopting the word Bildstoerung we have much to gain and little to lose beyond our timehonored SNOW.

In addition to its teutonic precision, what Bildstoerung has to offer is an entire field of extended meanings and metaphors. These rest at the very heart of Volker Hildebrandt's artistic work. In his eyes, the Bildstoerung is the quintessential television image, the pointillistic flutter and flimmer, the primordial soup out of which any and all images are born. (And the word Bild, interestingly enough, also translates as "image.") For nearly two decades, this genial German artist has devoted his creative energies to pictorial interference, to that flutter of unwanted and indecipherable non-images that entered man's pictorial repertoire with the dawn of the age of television and have found cousinage in video and the computer screen. The Bildstoerung is thus no less than the hallmark and, for some, the curse of an age of electronic communication, and Volker Hildebrandt has seized on the phenomenon as the source of a new and surprisingly versatile form-language. More recently, he has also turned his attention to the intentionally "scrambled" signals of those cable channels to which one does not subscribe and which frequently offer viewers a limp brand of pornography. Yet here the technicolor confetti at least suggests phantom shapes that a squinting eye can often decipher. What to the untrained viewer appears to be a violently heaving Mount Vesuvius is thus "deciphered" as a vigorous BLOW JOB. Art historians have long since documented the impact of film and of photography, of aerial views of the earth, of new concepts of space and time on the pictorial idioms of the early Modernists. Intentionally, those pioneers also created Bildstoerungs in an effort to reflect new realities, unaccustomed ways of seeing. They ushered in the new century, and Volker Hildebrandt ushers it out. In a flurry of snow.

David Galloway

*For more on this subject, see my monograph on ''Hemmorhoids (haimorrhoides phlebes) in the Age of Homer.''