

TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M

Topic IV. Television and History.

Outline:

This topic will address the different ways in which television is related to History. In the first section we will talk about the problematic issue of television archives and the use of television sources in order to develop methodologies in television historiography. The second section, which uses theoretical concepts by E.H. Carr and Elihu Katz, deals with television as “history of the present” through the coverage of news and the broadcast of media events, which are particularly relevant to understand the way in which certain events have been established as essential elements for the contemporary world. The Space Race and the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, are case studies of how television set a framework for interpreting the political, social and cultural changes in the second half of the 20th century.

The third and final section will address the role played by television in the popularization of History. We will focus on the fact that most citizens receive most of their historical knowledge from television, and we will give an overview of the emergence of documentary television channels focused on History, and its relevance within a television system which is gradually fragmented and globalized. This approach will consider the representation and dissemination of historical knowledge in factual, entertainment and fiction genres. Special attention will be paid to the importance of television in the development of narratives of the past that explain and affirm national identity and collective memory. The three compulsory readings deal with different aspects of the relationship between television and history, including how TV writes the history of the present, the representation of dictator Francisco Franco on Spanish TV and the problematic situation of the television archives.

Specific objectives of the topic:

- Knowledge of the social function played by television and its relevance to understanding contemporary cultural change.

- Knowledge of the institutional factors that determine the creation and reception of television texts.
- Ability to recognize the historical and cultural references in the creation and reception of television texts.
- Knowledge of television theory and its application to media story-telling.

Detailed content:

- The TV and History of the Present.
- The Media Events.
- The TV industry and historical programming.
- Producing history.

Case study: The Space Race.

- Changing History.

Case Study: The 9/11

- Showing the History:

Case Study: Historical fiction.

Introductory notes:

In the classic essay *What is History?* E.H. Carr established some of the most relevant questions that anyone thinking about the process of writing history must ask themselves:

“What is a historical fact? This is a crucial question into which we must look a little more closely. According to the commonsense view, there are certain basic facts which are the same for all historians and which form, so to speak, the backbone of history - the fact, for example, that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066. But this view calls for two observations. In the first place, it is not with facts like these that the historian is primarily concerned. The historian must not get these things wrong. But when points of this kind are raised, I am reminded of Housman's remark that 'accuracy is a duty, not a virtue'. To praise a historian for his accuracy is like praising an architect for using well-seasoned

timber or properly mixed concrete in his building. It is a necessary condition of his work, but not his essential function. It is precisely for matters of this kind that the historian is entitled to rely on what have been called the 'auxiliary sciences' of history - archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, chronology, and so forth. The historian is not required to have the special skills which enable the expert to determine the origin and period of a fragment of pottery or marble... These so-called basic facts, which are the same for all historians, commonly belong to the category of the raw materials of the historian rather than of history itself.

The second observation is that the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an a priori decision of the historian. In spite of C. P. Scott's motto, every journalist knows today that the most effective way to influence opinion is by the selection and arrangement of the appropriate facts. It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. It is the historian who has decided for his own reasons that Caesar's crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all. The historian is necessarily selective”.

In the case of television, the first critical concept thinking about television and history is that of media events. According to Elihu Katz (“Media Events: The Sense of Occasion”, 1980), the main characteristics of media events are:

(1) live transmission, (2) of a preplanned event, (3) framed in time and space, (4) featuring a heroic personality or group, (5) having high dramatic or ritual significance, and (6) the force of a social norm which makes viewing mandatory.

He added that: “These conditions may not be sufficient to ensure the success of the event in sustaining the attention of a mass audience or in accomplishing its political or ritual purpose. But they are basic ingredients”.

He also established a typology of Media Events:

- CONQUEST

“The most noble type is what might be called the heroic mission. It includes the astronauts, Sadat, John Paul II, perhaps Nixon's visit to China. It is the story of a hero defying natural law-entering the enemy's camp unarmed, flying beyond the atmosphere of the earth-on a mission of exploration or reconciliation in the name of humanity. Of course, history is full of such exploits. What is new is our ability to follow the process of these heroic deeds, step by step, before anyone can know what the outcome will be”.

- CORONATION

“A second type of media event is the occasion of state. But it is only under particular circumstances that such occasions will be treated as media events. When the occasion marks the beginning or end of an era, such as the funeral of Churchill, or when it opens a well of uncertainty, as in the funeral of Kennedy and the anxiety over the succession, the nation or the world will participate, transfixed, in the ceremony. Similarly, when the Israel-Egypt peace treaty was signed at the White House, there was a sense of a new beginning, and indeed many observers likened it to a wedding. Michael Arlen has likened all such events to parades, even including such secular and minor events as the Hollywood Academy Awards”.

- CONTEST

“The third type of event is the more familiar contest, but only when the confrontation has important symbolic meaning. Thus, the Kennedy-Nixon or Ford-Carter debates, or the World Cup, or the Eurovision song contest are events of this sort. Traditional rivalries are enacted before audiences of hundreds of millions, but these rivalries are subject to shared and enforceable rules, and the sense of what there is in common typically outweighs the partisanship”.

The Space Race, a conquest type, was a great example of how to media events were key to connect the public with the political conflict taking place during the Cold War. The Moon Landing in 1969 was one of the most popular media event in the history of television.

In the case of 9/11 is a more complex, because it was a pre-planned event for television channels. But it was a global phenomenon which proved the constant impact of television broadcasting and the limits in the representation of horror.

In contemporary television, history has become a commodity. In the text “Television as Historian” (from the book *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, 2003) Gary R. Edgerton established seven basic characteristics in the relationship between history and television:

“My first and most basic assumption is that television is the principal means by which most people learn about history today. Television must be understood (and seldom is) as the primary way that children and adults form their understanding of the past. Just as television has profoundly affected and altered every aspect of contemporary life—from the family to education, government, business, and religion—the medium’s nonfictional and fictional portrayals have similarly transformed the way tens of millions of viewers think about historical figures and events. Most people, for example, recall the Gulf War and the major individuals associated with that conflict through the lens of television, just as their frame of reference regarding slavery has been deeply influenced by TV miniseries such as *Roots* (1977) and *Africans in America* (1998), along with theatrical films such as *Amistad* (1997), which characteristically has been seen by more people on TV than in theaters.

Second, history on television is now big business. There are over one hundred broadcast and cable networks in America alone, and roughly 90 percent of these services resulted from the dramatic rise of cable and satellite TV over the last twenty-five years. Scores of cable networks have become closely identified with documentaries in general and historical documentaries in particular for two main reasons: (1) Nonfiction is relatively cost-effective to produce when compared to fictional programming (i.e., according to the latest estimates, per-hour budgets for a dramatic TV episode approximate \$1 million, while documentaries average \$500,000 and reality-based programs \$300,000); and, (2) even more importantly, many of these shows that have some historical

dimension are just as popular with audiences as sitcoms, hour-long dramas, and movie reruns in syndication.

Third, the technical and stylistic features of television as a medium strongly influence the kinds of historical representations that are produced. History on TV tends to stress the twin dictates of narrative and biography, which ideally expresses television's inveterate tendency towards personalizing all social, cultural, and (for our purposes) historical matters within the highly controlled and viewer-involving confines of a well-constructed plot structure. The scholarly literature on television has established intimacy and immediacy (among other aesthetics) as inherent properties of the medium. In the case of intimacy, for instance, the limitations of the relatively smaller TV screen that is typically watched within the privacy of the home environment have long ago resulted in an evident preference for intimate shot types (i.e., primarily close-ups and medium shots), fashioning most fictional and nonfictional historical portrayals in the style of personal dramas or melodramas played out between a manageable number of protagonists and antagonists. When successful, audiences closely identify with the historical "actors" and stories being presented, and, likewise, respond in intimate ways in the privacy of their own homes.

Fourth, the improbable rise and immense popularity of history on TV is also the result of its affinity and ability to embody current concerns and priorities within the stories it telecasts about the past. Television's unwavering allegiance to the present tense is not only one of the medium's grammatical imperatives, it is also an implicit challenge to one of the traditional touchstones of academic history. Professional historians have customarily employed the rigors of their craft to avoid presentism as much as possible, which is the assumption that the past is being judged largely by the standards of the present. The revisionist work of postmodernist historians like Hayden White have lately challenged this principle in academic circles.⁶ White and others have argued that historiography is much more about telling stories inspired by contemporary perspectives than recapturing and conveying any kind of objective truth about the past. This alternative scholarly outlook has gained increased momentum in some quarters over the last generation, even calling into question whether or not there is an

authentic, knowable history at all beyond the subjectivity of the present. Most popular historians for their part, such as television producers and filmmakers, take this postmodernist viewpoint one step further. They tacitly embrace presentism through the back door by concentrating only on those people, events, and issues that are most relevant to themselves and their target audiences.

(...)

Fifth, TV producers and audiences are similarly preoccupied with creating a “useable past,” a longstanding tenet of popular history, where stories involving historical figures and events are used to clarify the present and discover the future. There is a method behind the societal self-absorption implied by presentism. Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*, for example, attracted nearly forty million viewers during its initial telecast in September 1990 and has since been seen by an estimated seventy million Americans. Much of this documentary’s success must be equated with the way in which Burns’s version of this nineteenth-century conflict, stressing the personal ramifications of the hostilities, makes the war comprehensible to a vast contemporary audience. (...) In this way, *The Civil War* as useable past is an artistic attempt to better understand these enduring public issues and form a new consensus around them, serving also as a validation for the members of its principal audience (which was older, white, male, and upscale in the ratings) of the importance of their past in an era of unprecedented multicultural redefinition.

Sixth, collective memory is the site of mediation where professional history must ultimately share space with popular history. The mutual skepticism that sometimes surfaces between professional and popular historians is understandable and unfortunate. Each usually works with different media (although some scholars do produce historical TV programs, videos, and films); each tends to place a dissimilar stress on the respective roles of analysis versus storytelling in relaying history; and each tailors a version of the past that is designed for disparate—though overlapping—kinds of audiences. These distinctions are real enough. Still the scholar and the artist, the expert and the

amateur, can complement each other more than is sometimes evident as they both make their own unique contributions to the collective memory, a term referring to the full sweep of historical consciousness, understanding, and expression that a culture has to offer.

(...)

Seventh, the flip side of presentism is pastism (a term coined by historian Joseph Ellis), which refers to the “scholarly tendency to declare the past off limits to nonscholars.” Robert Sklar perfectly captured this longstanding bias in the context of “film and history” with his metaphor, “historian-cop,” which alludes to the tone of policing that usually emerges whenever professional historians apply to motion pictures the standards they reserve for scholarly books and articles. In this specific instance, Sklar calls for a greater awareness of both the production and reception processes of filmmaking as a way of better appreciating how these more encompassing frameworks influence what audiences actually see and understand as history on the screen. “Television as historian” is an even more tempting and incendiary target than film and history for the proponents of pastism, especially since its impact and popularity with the general public far outstrips anything that can ever be achieved in theaters. As a result, histories on TV are sometimes rejected out of hand for either being too biographical or quasi-biographical inapproach, or too stylized and unrealistic in their plot structures and imagery. Occasionally these criticisms are well-founded; historical programming certainly furnishes its share of honest “failures” or downright irresponsible and trashy depictions of the past. Other times, though, “television as historian” delivers ably on its potential as popular history, having even gained a degree of support in academe and increasing interest in the scholarly literature during the 1980s and 1990s, no doubt reflecting the growing desire among many professional and popular historians to finally reconcile each other’s traditions in a mutually respectful, if cautious, working relationship”.