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TV Socialism / Broadcasting Modernity

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TV Socialism / Broadcasting Modernity

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The study of television is often viewed as a crucial window into a given society's popular culture. Dominant codes of meaning contained within the programming, and the ways in which various cultural groups decode those meanings – even the very broadcast technology itself – can reveal much about a society's values, politics, and cultural traditions. But television broadcasts are never neatly contained within national borders, and are often utilised by governments to project their ideal national self-image to the rest of the world. Given this reality it is imperative that television historians analyse how the cultural, political, and economic forces of disparate cultures influence one another through the medium of television. For both Anikó Imre in her book *TV Socialism* (Duke University Press, 2016), and Yeidy Rivero in *Broadcasting Modernity, Cuban Commercial Television 1950-1960* (Duke University Press, 2015), exploring this liminal space between the evolving televisual practices of the West and televisual practices in Socialist Europe and Cuba, respectively, reveals much of the internal politics of the Soviet Union and Cuba, and more importantly reveals the symbiotic nature of the geopolitics of the Cold War.

Imre identifies that the physical proximity of the Soviet bloc to Western Europe helped to shape the evolution of television under socialism, as socialist programming had to compete with Western programmes for audience share. Similarly, Rivero sees the origins of Cuban television as interdependent with the United States; the direct influence of the US on Cuba's economy ultimately defeated the effort to wrest Cuban television away from the US commercial model. Both books seek to understand the history of television as a border-crossing, transnational phenomenon and interrogate many of the assumptions that the politics of the Cold War have created in prior scholarship, as well as in the memories of the television professionals and media producers of the era. They both see the historical experiment of socialism as

‘so profoundly rooted in the history of modernity that socialism and liberal capitalism cannot be disentangled’ (p. 2) – an observation from Heather Gumbert that Imre uses to frame the stakes of her project, and a sentiment which echoes Rivero’s understanding of the evolution of Cuban television.



Imre discovered two surprises in the course of her research, which became central aspects of her argument. The first was that unlike other arenas of socialist cultural production, television was largely underfunded and received significantly less state scrutiny, despite being an important tool of mass communication. It was widely perceived as low culture and did not enjoy the prestige that cinema did, for example. Television broadcasters often had little direct governmental oversight, in fact many top party officials were widely known to never watch television at all. This is surprising largely because it violates the Cold War expectation that state-run socialist television would be highly propagandistic. Close attention to the various manifestations of this counter-intuitive process exemplifies much of Imre’s project: she focuses her attention on the ways in which socialist television navigated the contradictory demands that it simultaneously model socialist ideals and entertain. The second surprise was that her research yielded new insights into socialist audiences that had been overlooked in the vast amount of high-culture focused scholarship on dissident literature, cinema, and journalism under socialism.

She notes that the 'binary opposition between official party-led cultures and dissident intellectual cultures' (p. 10) ignores the fact that these high-culture texts addressed an audience of educated intellectuals, creating a cultural feedback loop that was disconnected from the reality of everyday life under socialism. Television's success depends on its ability to entertain a mass audience, and those demands created a corpus of programs that, under Imre's analysis, reveals a complex and nuanced view of socialism. She brings to bear a wealth of primary sources, ranging from archived production documents, viewer letters, and numerous first-hand interviews that she conducted with Hungarian television professionals of various eras.

In conducting the research for her book, Imre found that existing scholarship has tended to view television under socialism through the Cold War-tinted lens of East versus West, or restricted its study to one nationality in an ethnic studies context. In response her project sets out to chart socialist television along transnational, global lines, focusing as much on the continuities between socialist satellite nations as the differences, and highlighting interesting ways in which socialist television has existed in conversation with Western broadcasters, often directly competing for viewers. It is in this way that Imre's choice to organise the book around genre yields rich rewards. All of the genres that she highlights are familiar: reality shows, game shows, true crime dramas, historical adventure dramas, soap operas, and comedies have recognisable analogues in Western European and American television. This organisation allows Imre to compare and contrast programs in each genre across national boundaries, as well as place them in conversation with their Western counterparts. For example, Imre discusses the West German crime programme *Aktenzeichen XY*, which not only spawned similar shows in the West – in England (*Crimewatch UK*) and the Netherlands (*Opsoring Verzocht*) – but was also influential throughout the socialist East – in Czechoslovakia (*Federální kriminální ústředna pátrá, radí informuje*), Romania (*Reflector*), and Poland (*Kryminalny 997*). She discusses not only how the adaptations of the show changed in the various cultural contexts, but also how the success of the West German show with audiences in the Soviet Bloc forced socialist producers to create similar programmes in order to compete for audience share. She also demonstrates how each genre changed throughout socialism and into postsocialism, but stresses the continuities between television under socialism and postsocialism. In this way her organisation of the material affords her the ability to span decades of history, across dozens of nationalities, and synthesise all of that material into a comprehensible shape that never loses

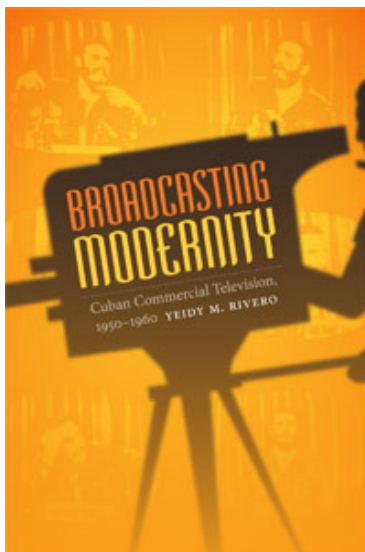
the necessary nuance that a serious study of both socialism and television require.

In addition to television programming, Imre devotes a chapter to socialist television advertising. It is here that her analysis best complicates the binary East/West view of socialist cultural production. Noting that ‘the entire [socialist] system was geared toward advertising’ (p. 174), Imre traces the evolution and expansion of television ads under socialism as they increasingly resembled Western advertising. She then analyses postsocialist advertising and its nostalgic reimagining of socialism as a marketing technique, seeing it as a ‘continuity between late socialism and postsocialist capitalism’ (p. 183). The ads allow consumers to use nostalgia as a way to sublimate the anxiety produced by the endless array of choices imposed on them by the capitalist marketplace. The continuity of advertising not only blurs the distinction between socialism and postsocialism, but also forces us to acknowledge the unseen presence of capitalist market forces present within socialism.

Where Imre presented socialist television’s interdependence with Western televisual forms, Rivero similarly views the early years of Cuban television in an explicitly global context, arguing that the government policies, technological implementation, programming choices, and the attendant critical responses all served to present Cuba’s modernity domestically, and more importantly internationally. She moves through Cuba’s early television history chronologically, seeing television in each changing political moment during the turbulent decade of the 1950s as producing various spectacles: of progress, of decency, of democracy, and of revolution. She argues that this process ‘operated by “reflecting, selecting, and deflecting,” aspects of Cuba’s society, culture, politics, people, and television’, and by ‘highlighting Cuban television’s innovations, international successes, production quality, high-culture performances, and morally appropriate programming (read Catholic and sexually contained)’ (p. 2). In this way Cuba became the most sophisticated television broadcaster in Latin America and thus saw itself as a leader in the region.

Echoing Imre’s desire to reimagine global television history in the postsocialist era, Rivero finds that ‘Cold War politics still frame academic discussions and silences about Cuba’ (p. 14), and this influence affected her research. Because of her inability to find subjects where the remnants of Cold War politics had not significantly coloured their memories, she decided to abandon interviews as a research methodology and focus on archival research from magazines, newspapers, unpublished audience surveys, legal documents, and

the collected papers of industry professionals, both Cubans and Americans, who worked in the early years of Cuban television and advertising. A good example of this research is Rivero's thorough analysis of the early laws defining radio broadcasting, which would serve as the model upon which television's laws and industry practices were based. She charts the conflicts in Cuban radio laws between a desire to carve out space for public educational broadcasting, and a desire to emulate the United States commercial broadcasting system, conflicts which would remain in later attempts to define laws to govern television. Early laws in the 1920s defined radio as a public service and in the early days transmission hours were limited; eventually commercial interests began to rent radio time and advertisements proliferated. Though these practices were technically illegal, there were few supervisory mechanisms in place. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Cuba enacted laws that institutionalised commercial broadcasting, at first with minimal control over content, while stressing the importance of public broadcasting and providing for the state to set up a public station. While these laws saw, in radio, the potential to educate and uplift the Cuban public, they also saw the danger of 'uncultured, bad customs, and other perturbations that... can be introduced to the core of the Cuban family' (p. 31). For Rivero, this assessment of the public dangers that broadcasting has the potential to inflict is the beginning of a longstanding tradition of censorship practices designed to promote, through radio and television, the image of Cuba as European, morally decent, and progressive.



The core innovation of Rivero's argument is its synthesis of both legal and cultural archival materials, which together demonstrate a persistent national effort to use television as a site of national pride, and as a way to cultivate a very specific national image – one that emphasises Cuba's technical aptitude, whiteness, Catholic morality, and democratic convictions. These efforts are categorised as 'Spectacles', and the book expertly charts the dramatic changes in politics through the attendant changes in discourse on television. The first of these categories is labelled 'Spectacles of Progress'. Riding an economic boom, Cuba quickly established itself in the early 1950s as a leader in television technology and production throughout Latin America. As a result of its extensive economic ties to the US, there already existed a well-established commercial advertising industry in Cuba. Likewise Cuban radio infrastructure was well-funded and technologically advanced; the experienced radio personnel quickly mastered television technology. Television was promoted by critics, station owners, and Cuban newspapers and magazines as a symbol of progress and evidence of Cuban modernity. As a counterpoint to this Rivero proceeds to meticulously document the geographically fragmented nature of television distribution, and who was left out of these 'Spectacles of Progress'. She focuses on a region, Pinar del Río, which was geographically closer to Havana than other provinces that had television stations, and yet was overlooked due to its low-class economic status and racially black population, and demonstrates how the television owner's response to public complaints regarding this oversight 'demonstrates that the narrative that formed the spectacles of progress not only included technological superiority and sophisticated television spaces and equipment but also encompassed audiences who lived in modern cities or regions' (p. 65). Rivero also charts the move away from state-protected public programming that characterised the early years of television and the erosion of legal provisions that mandated the amount of locally produced programming, concluding that 'the new function of television in Cuba was to serve the interests of the market and, progressively, the mandates of the state' (p. 74).

Rivero then defines 'Spectacles of Decency' through her discussion of the censorship practices of the Commission on Radio Ethics (CRE) – the television industry's attempt to self-censor so as to keep the government from taking an active role in controlling television programming. The CRE focused on censoring overt displays of sexuality, from a passionate kiss to rumba and mambo dancing, which was seen as not only sexually inappropriate but was also coded as racially black. She argues that 'the decency decree was designed

to repress the racial, cultural, gendered, and sexual *mulataje* that produced the “Cuban race”, and by coding the female dancer as an ‘immoral national mark, an emblem of “unproductive eroticism”’ (p. 82). Similarly, other forms of Afro-Cuban culture, such as *Santería*, were banned, as well as men in drag who were seen as symbols of homosexuality. By banning these popular forms of entertainment on television the censorship board could preserve Cuba’s national image as bourgeois, sexually-contained, and modern.

Rivero’s next two categories, ‘Spectacles of Democracy’ and ‘Spectacles of Revolution’, both centre on television’s role in the turbulent political times of the Batista regime and the early years of Castro’s regime. With the threat of revolution looming, Batista broke from the liberal democratic model that had defined Cuban media censorship prior and took direct control of television, radio, cinema newsreels, and newspapers. She argues that, ‘according to the narrative that formed the spectacles of democracy, legalisation of media censorship and the minister of communication’s suspension of shows (for subversive and/or allegedly immoral content) were understood as necessary courses of action to combat the communist menace that was threatening the island’ (p. 105). In this way Batista attempted to position his regime as the defender of democracy in order to retain the political support of the US, and to legitimise his suspension of elections and other democratic freedoms. Rivero also observes the continuity of censorship under Batista with the previous censorship practices of the CRE. While news programmes were completely controlled by the minister of communication, so much so that they could not even report that they were being censored, entertainment shows were more difficult to control; the policing of morality and decency then became a valuable pretext for silencing dissent and criticism of the government, which could easily enshroud itself in the innocence of humour and satire.

The continuity that Rivero finds between spectacles of democracy and revolution is that both regimes saw the direct intervention of the government in television as a necessary means by which they could manage public opinion and sway both Cubans and the rest of the world to be empathetic to their cause. Where the Batista regime chose to exert its influence outside of the public eye, Castro used his direct participation in media spectacles to make use of his popularity, charm, and oratory ability to convince Cubans of the righteousness of the revolutionary cause. Rivero argues that additionally this tactic was effective in normalising unexpected and prolonged interruptions in the televisual flow by the state, and it prepared the state for the eventual nationalisation of the media.

Both of these authors attempt to bridge the divide of Cold War politics by locating both liberal democracy and socialism within their shared historical tradition of modernity. For Imre, it is impossible to understand television under socialism in isolation from the West and from the influence of proximate cultures, and by considering those influences a more nuanced view of socialism emerges, one that takes into account audience tastes, market forces with socialism, the relatively *laissez-faire* approach of the governments to propaganda – all of which run counter to the assumptions of Cold War rhetoric. Similarly, Cuban television emerges in a US-style commercial form, and Rivero's analysis of its evolution as exemplary of Cuba's attempts to define its own modernity, and her analysis of television during the revolutionary political moment as one that is continuous with commercial practices, underscores the symbiotic relationship of socialism and capitalism and defies the convenient simplicity of Cold War binaries.

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