
Inside the Magic Rectangle:

Recent Research on the

History of Television

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- Ada Ferrari and Gaia Giusto (eds.), *Milano città della radio televisione* (Milan: Francoangeli, 2000) 139pp., L 24,000 (pb) ISBN 88-464-1721-6.
- Chiara Giaccardi, Anna Manzato and Giorgio Simonelli, *Il paese catodico. Televisione e identità nazionale in Gran Bretagna, Italia e Svizzera Italiana* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1998) 135pp., L 24,000 (pb) ISBN 88-464-0734-2.
- Ralph Negrine, *Television and the Press since 1945 Documents in Contemporary History*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 212pp., £12.99 (pb) ISBN 0-7190-4921-0.
- Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different. British Television and American Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 208pp., £12.99 (pb), ISBN 0-8166-3241-3, £31.00 (hb) 0-1866-3240-5.
- Marie-Francoise Lévy (ed.), *La Télévision dans la République. Les années 50*, Collection 'Histoire du temps présent' (Paris: IHTP/CNRS, Editions complexe, 1999), 242pp (pb), €18.30, ISBN 2-87027-730-X.
- Francesca Anania, *Davanti allo schermo. Storia del pubblico televisivo* (Rome: Carocci, 1997), 152pp., L 30,000 (pb), ISBN 88-430-0535-9.

The question of the history of television has not occupied a central place within academic disciplines, apart from those linked directly to media or cultural studies. However, a number of recent works of history and sociology have begun to concentrate on television, and its history. In addition, a series of histories of television have begun to appear, such as the two excellent works available only in Italian, by Aldo Grasso and Franco Monteleone.¹ Other, more general, histories have tended either to include sections on television, or to lump television's history in with that of cinema, the press and other cultural industries. Some histories still find it possible to ignore television altogether, while there is an opposite tendency, particularly in Italy, to tell the history of Italy almost as a series of different television moments. This trend is especially true in the numerous popular history books

¹ Aldo Grasso, *Storia della televisione italiana* (Milan: Garzanti, 1992); and F. Monteleone, *Storia della radio e della televisione in Italia. Società, politica, programmi 1922-1992* (Venice: Marsilio, 1992).

produced for a mass Italian public which sell by their thousands and sit uneasily between narrative history and the nostalgia industry.

One problem with the study of television is the continuing deep confusion about what 'television' is, or was, and how to carry out research into its history. Many studies concentrate on television *programmes*, treating them as texts for criticism similar to films or books, or as a way of telling the history of a country through its various television programmes.² Following this kind of methodological approach, within universities, *television studies* would be seen as similar to *film studies*. Yet the reification of cinema over television remains firmly entrenched within the media studies world. Television is not seen as a serious medium, in comparison with the 'art' of cinema production. These are often artificial distinctions, as there was much crossover between these various media in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s in many countries. Roberto Rossellini, for example, worked frequently for Italian television,³ and many British authors and playwrights cut their teeth at the BBC and later on Channel 4. This unrepeatable period of creativity within the public sector (which often used live transmission) deserves further study. In addition, the links to radio and the continuities with radio production are often ignored. Although the specificities of television – as a watched, domestic medium – are important, it is still an artificial distinction to separate television from other media in an automatic sense and to reify the semiotic importance of television messages and mediums. Television is and was part of a mass cultural media system and should be seen as such, which does not mean that specific historical and sociological work on specific aspects of television history should not be attempted, but that this aspect of television – as part of a *system* – needs to be made clear in all work which is done.⁴

Other works see television essentially as a *bearer* of mass culture, placing the medium within a certain historical period as a symbol of and carrier of cultural or social change. Occasionally television and mass culture are literally seen as *the same thing* – mass culture arrives with the arrival of television. This is particularly true for Italy, where the onset of television coincided (and helped to produce) the 'economic miracle' of the 1950s and 1960s. Here, research has generally ignored the actual effects of television (apart from some early, pioneering studies, such as De Rita's (see below)) or has assumed that these effects can be explained through a general reproduction of clichés and stereotypes concerning television. Hence, different historical periods are forgotten – the 'collective' period of early television in Italy, when television was watched in public places – in favour of a generally negative view of television as an individualising, familistic phenomenon. More work is needed on the relationship between television and national identity. If we

² One example of this tendency is Walter Veltroni's *I programmi che hanno cambiato L'Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1994).

³ See Adriano Aprà, 'Rossellini's Historical Encyclopedia', in D. Forgacs, S. Lutton and G. Nowell-Smith, eds., *Roberto Rossellini. Magician of the Real* (London: BFI, 2000), 126–48.

⁴ For the media seen as a system see Peppino Ortoreva, 'A Geography of the Media since 1945', in D. Forgacs and Robert Lumley, eds., *Italian Cultural Studies: an introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 185–98; and *Mass Media: nascita e industrializzazione* (Giunti: Florence, 1995).

concentrate on the Italian case, it is generally assumed that television helped to unite Italy, linguistically, culturally and socially, and played a large part in the mass internal migrations of the 1950s and 1960s. Southerners, it was argued, were already well-disposed to the glittering northern cities they had imposed on their television screens. However, the evidence for the central role of television within this 'unification' is generally rather patchy, and based on a few, canonical works.⁵ Other factors tend to be ignored or downplayed – mass education, migration itself, mass literacy, radio, earlier forms of mass culture, sport, mass tourism.

At a more theoretical level, the semiotics of television have dominated the scene, particularly through the influence of the work of Umberto Eco and the long-running debates between loose schools taking an 'apocalyptic' view of mass culture (broadly that mass culture was a necessarily trashy and consumerist product, leading only to negative outcomes, waste and 'brain-washing') and those who saw the artistic and political possibilities in the use, production and study of mass cultural forms.⁶ Apocalyptic ideas were also political ideas – and have remained hegemonic within Italian debates. One key indicator of this is the exaggeration of the effects of television politically as a factor in the destruction of popular culture and local traditions. The fact that it was capitalism itself which was the main leveller of cultures, not one aspect of the capitalist cultural market – television – has escaped the attention of most. It is far easier to pine for the 'lost world' of a bucolic working class or peasantry, and to exalt the prophetic qualities of brilliant political polemicists like Pasolini, than actually to study the ways in which cultures and traditions have disappeared, remained and transformed themselves in line with economic, political and anthropological change.⁷ Much of this semiotics, moreover, is applied to advertising. Yet, in Italy, advertising was strictly controlled until the early 1970s and took the form of a very original type of programming which centred on short stories using actors where the product was only mentioned at the end of the film. The specifics of this control mechanism, although frequently mentioned in studies, have not been adequately researched in comparison with other European and non-European countries. The period after the advent of private television is, of course, vastly different and has privileged advertising of an American type which has dominated all other considerations about programming and quality.⁸

Other research looks at television as an *industry* (culturally and economically) – and tries to make links between markets, different media and consumption and economic trends at national and local levels. Very few long studies have attempted this difficult task for Italy or elsewhere, as studies have tended to concentrate on

⁵ For example, Tullio De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, 3rd edn (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1993).

⁶ A point well made by Forgacs and Lumley, 'Introduction: approaches to Culture in Italy', in their *Italian Cultural Studies*, 6–9.

⁷ See Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* (Milan: Garzanti, 1993); and John Foot, *Milan since the Miracle. City, Culture and Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), chs. 2 and 5.

⁸ See Forgacs and Lumley, 'Introduction', in *Italian Cultural Studies*; Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della cultura di massa* (Milan: Bompiani, 1993); P. Ortoleva, *Un ventennio a colori. Televisione privata e società in Italia* (Florence: Giunti, 1995).

specific sectors of the media or specific historical periods (the birth of television, the political press, the satirical press, early radio, Fascism and the media, the Church and the media). One exception is Forgacs's *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880–1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public*.⁹ This tendency to view and study the media by sector, in part a reflection of the corporate organisation of university departments and research products, has also helped to prevent any serious comparative work on cultural industries and even television industries across nations and continents. This is another possible rich seam of research which could tell us much about the exceptional nature, or otherwise, of media histories in various countries, cities and villages.

Until recently, very few works have studied one of the most important aspects of television history – the public, those who watched. In addition, there have been very few local studies (apart from some excellent work during the early years of television, such as De Rita's *La televisione e i contadini*). Some of the books reviewed here go part of the way to redressing this strange imbalance, and to providing a more complete picture of the importance and details of television history, above all in Italy where history is often told by repetitive reference to the effects of television and some key programmes, without any real basis in actual research or historical study. One explanation for this tendency to ignore the public, and overstate the importance of television production in itself lies with a specific kind of methodology when looking at the media which owes more to literary criticism than to serious social history or any tradition of cultural studies seen in a wider sense. It seems that specific 'subjects' enter in the historical realm through different prisms, shaped methodologically by the disciplines or contexts who first tackled them. The parallel between television and cinema studies is of course very relevant here again (with television seen as a kind of poorer relative of cinema, or its lower-quality offshoot). Inevitably, television as an historical subject will have to confront the same hurdles that cinema has had to. At certain times, all objects in the cultural realm tend to be apprehended as cultural products in terms of, and with the tools of, the critic, and as objects of *criticism*. History has to use, and understand, these tools and these terms of engagement, but also to invent its own.

Francesca Anania's excellent monograph looks at the history of the Italian television *public* over a fairly wide period of time. Using various sources (opinion polls, surveys, newspapers) Anania traces the complicated history of this public, with its various 'moments' (such as the early collective phase, when people watched television in bars and public places) and different regional and social histories (many parts of the South did not get television reception until much later, well behind the North). Anania also looks at the crucial question of the ownership of television sets, and the varied and often contradictory effects of television at various times. This study (which has opened up a new way of looking at television in Italy, but there is still much work left to be done) benefits from a much more open attitude to

⁹ (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990), published in a revised edition in Italian, *L'industrializzazione della cultura italiana, 1880–1990* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993).

television than is the norm in historical studies, which tend to emphasise only the individualising and ‘mass cultural’ effects of television watching and ownership. Anania’s work follows in the tradition of the ways in which some film studies work has been progressing in recent years with a greater emphasis on cinema history and the histories of movie theatres and cinema as a global cultural system.¹⁰ Anania’s work can be read in conjunction with the series of extremely useful surveys and studies now available which discuss television in other historical contexts: for example, Stephen Gundle’s work on the relationship between Italian communism and mass culture (*Between Hollywood and Moscow*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), Forgacs’s already cited research on the Italian cultural industries and the attention given to television in Forgacs and Robert Lumley’s edited volume, *Italian cultural studies*.¹¹ The work of Ortoleva is also central to any discussion of Italian media histories over the last ten to fifteen years, especially given its focus on the connection between cultural and media history and geographical space.¹² New work on television, the internet and the digital era makes much of the breakdown of space brought about by these forms of communication. In fact, the proliferation of media in the computer age makes it more and more likely that the era of *terrestrial* television¹³ will be seen, historically, as a fixed and limited period within the general history of the effects of mass culture and mass media over the last fifty or so years.¹⁴

This relationship is the focus of one of the first local studies of television history. The volume edited by Ferrari and Giusto contains some very interesting observations on the relationship between television and the history of Milan in the early period of the RAI (1954–8) when Milan was briefly the capital of Italian television. However, the book is thin, and contains too many unedited conference ‘contributions’ (including one from the legendary television presenter Mike

¹⁰ For Italy see Gian Piero Brunetta’s seminal *Buio in Sala. Cent’anni di passione dello spettatore cinematografico* (Venice: Marsilio, 1997) and ‘Il cinema legge la società italiana’, in *Storia dell’Italia Repubblicana*, Vol. 2 (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), 781–844; V. Spinazzola, *Cinema e pubblico. Lo spettacolo filmico in Italia 1945–1965* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1985); and Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema, 1896–1990* (London: Routledge, 1997). For some methodological discussions see G. De Luna, *L’occhio e l’orecchio dello storico. Le fonti audiovisive nella ricerca e nella didattica della storia* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1993); G. Miro Gori, ed., *La storia al cinema. Ricostruzione del passato, interpretazione del presente* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1994); P. Ortoleva, *Cinema e storia. Scene dal passato* (Turin: Loescher, 1991); A. Hansen et al. eds., *Mass Communication Research Methods* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); and G. De Luna’s brilliant survey of contemporary historical methods and debates, *La passione e la ragione. Fonti e metodi dello storico contemporaneo* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 2001).

¹¹ 1996.

¹² ‘A geography’ see also Ortoleva’s *Mass Media. Dalla radio alla rete* (Florence: Giunti, 2001) and *Mediastoria. Comunicazione e cambiamento sociale nel mondo contemporaneo* (Rome: Pratiche, 1997).

¹³ Thought of broadly as *non-cable* and/or *non-satellite* television, but also in the sense of small, fixed numbers of (free, or licence-funded) state channels and little choice, the model which marked the early history of television in most Western countries.

¹⁴ There is no time to go into this very important area here, but for a taster of the debates see M. Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); and S. Graham and S. Marvin, *Telecommunications and the City: Electronic Places, Urban Places* (London: Routledge, 1996). See also, for Italy, the special issue of *Modern Italy* devoted to *Italy in the Digital Era* (D. Forgacs and S. Magistretti, eds.), 6, 2 (2001).

Bongiorno).¹⁵ Little use has been made of the vast and untapped RAI archives (both in text form and in terms of film archives).¹⁶ Television is seen here in a very narrow way in relation to the city. There is no discussion of the role of television in shifting geographies and urban growth and in transforming the city physically and visually (and in presenting it to others). Neither does the book consider the role of television in the home, its effects on the shape of housing inside and outside, and its relationship with family life and daily life, and with political and cultural ideologies. In general, this is a useful volume as a starting point (and other books would appear to be imminent in this series) but very conservative in its take on the city–television relationship. No mention is made of the relationship between migration and television, a key subject and a fascinating aspect of the continual and rich migrations which have built and rebuilt Milan over the years. The *Il paese catodico* volume is much less useful, and has all the signs of a hastily prepared collection of conference papers which under-theorise the key questions of national identity and take a very minimalist view of television – as basically seen through its programmes, and not as a wider cultural and social system. The excellent idea behind this volume, a comparison of the relationship between national identities and television programming in various European nations, is let down by an overly technical approach to the subject and a sense that this book is essentially one for those within the sector, not for researchers or students.

Moving away from Italy, to the much richer area of media and television studies in the United Kingdom, we come to Negrine's impressive volume. This is a beautifully produced book, as are all the books in Manchester's eclectic 'Documents in Contemporary History' series, and is a very useful introduction to the history of television and the press in the United Kingdom, using a series of documents from various sources, from government reports to biographies and newspapers. The use of documents of all kinds both provides readers with an interesting collection of

¹⁵ Mike Bongiorno, an Italian–American, was the presenter of Italian television's most important and popular game show, *Lascia o raddoppia?*, in the mid-1950s, and later fronted a series of incredibly popular quizzes. He presented Italy's San Remo song festival on numerous occasions. Bongiorno then moved to private television in the 1970s and still hosts a daily quiz game. His presentation style and language were the subject of a seminal article by Umberto Eco, 'The Phenomenology of Mike Bongiorno', now in *Misreadings* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 156–65.

¹⁶ The question of sources and archives is an important one here. Oral history has been used far too rarely in relation to the history of television. The study of (and teaching of) television has been dominated by visual material, unlike, for example, the discipline of art history. This fascination with visual material and its technical aspects has often excluded the application of serious historical study (and proper historical methodology) from media studies in general. Somehow, media studies work seems excluded from the need for wider research which applies to all other disciplines which look at *texts* of various kinds. Visual archives are often very hard to access for academic researchers, and their methods of organisation are no match for those of other, more traditional archives. Newspapers are an excellent source for information about the effects of television and the crossover between various medias, but have been hardly used for this form of study – and never in a systematic fashion. Finally, more traditional 'written' archives relating to the running of television channels, or the preparation of programmes, have never been made available, at least in Italy. Far more work has been done on other businesses, and their archives, than on those of the media industries. It may also be the case that the very nature of the television business is one where classic, paper-based archives, were simply not kept in the same way.

primary material and is intended to be used as the basis for teaching and seminar discussions. Negrine's informed and informative introductions to each section put the documents themselves in context and provide an analysis of their importance and origins. This book concentrates on the official history of television and the press, and more could have been done on the *everyday* social and cultural transformations in television and press history. In addition, the decision to cover both television and the press in the same volume (surely they required separate books, but maybe an elaboration on the difference between the two products industries would be illuminating) rather jumbles the material available to the reader and the student and positions this book, unfortunately, as one purely for media studies courses, when such material should really be used in 'straightforward' contemporary history courses and classes. This does not undermine my earlier point over the consideration of the media as a complicated system of industries – lumping two such sectors of the mass media together does not mean that this approach has been adopted. Nonetheless, this series remains an excellent one and it is a mystery why more contemporary history work does not use similar documents and sources as a matter of course, given their usefulness for teaching and class-based discussions and for further study.

Miller's volume takes a traditional approach to television (the study of programmes) but transfers it to an original subject matter, the transfer of British television programmes to the United States and their influence there. Miller rightly points out that there are countless studies of US influence in the world, but very little on the influence of other countries' cultures within the United States. Miller's approach is refreshingly flexible, sitting somewhere between 'theories of unilateral media dependence and empowered active audiences, rejecting neither in toto but demonstrating the limits of each when applied to specific historical practice' (p. xiii). This book is also an antidote to traditional mantra-like claims of overarching United States cultural imperialism. However, the book itself, in some ways, fails to live up to its promise. Some of the analysis borders on incomprehensible postmodern over-theorising, and the analyses of specific programmes, although always interesting and often very funny (such as the study of the American Alf Garnett, or the United States's black *Steptoe and Son*), perhaps tell us less than the author thinks they do. He admits the narrow focus of this research (primarily entertainment programmes) but perhaps we should be glad that we were spared 'detailed discussions . . . [of] the important comedy series . . . *The Benny Hill Show*', left out 'for reasons of time and space' (p. xvii). At times, the translation differences between UK and US programmes are perhaps not so much important indicators of cultural transfer, but merely dictated by the quickest and easiest ways of making successful programmes 'American' and, therefore, of the desire of producers to make as much money as possible by taking tried and trusted formulas and simply 'adapting' them to other audiences. Too much weight is given to the supposed 'creative' aspects of television, whilst the advertising-led priorities of (in particular the US) system are played down. However, despite these criticisms, this is a lively, well-written and always interesting study which recasts the role of British television in US popular culture. It

might be argued that recent trends move the other way, with the dominance of US quality programming of the UK schedules, and the failure of British television to continue in the same rich cultural vein after the 1980s.

Finally, the volume edited by Lévy is the best example of a historical and variable approach to television history in this collection of books. Here is a basis for a wider understanding of the important (and under-studied) problems of television history through a broader analysis beyond programmes and film-makers. There is a fascinating local study of television clubs in the 1950s, a useful piece on the ways in which audiences were viewed in the 1950s and of the strategies used to win over audiences to different programmes; finally, there are chapters on television magazines, on the cultural debates surrounding television, on television critics and on the relationship with cinema.¹⁷ Lévy's article in particular explores the ways in which télé-clubs replaced ciné-clubs in the L'Aisne region, near Paris, above all within small villages in the zone. Using local and national archives, newspapers and other studies, Lévy draws out the first ways in which television watching and broadcasting was organised locally, and the debates provoked and set up by the first television entrepreneurs and educators. Some saw television as a powerful medium of popular education in those early, utopian days – a far cry from the idea of television as purely a medium for selling which dominates European production today. The book is also produced with a proper scholarly apparatus (so often lacking in media studies books) – photographs, maps, a chronology, a very useful bibliography and an excellent index. It is to be hoped (I could find no mention of this) that other similar volumes will take the story on to the 1960s and 1970s.

Television, then, continues to attract research and historical and sociological study. However, much of this research suffers from an excessively narrow view of what television is and was, and of its effects within society, historical periods and everyday life. Oral history would be a key way of examining some of these issues in more detail and in a more multi-layered fashion. This 'original sin' of many scholars who work on television history has marred much of their work, separating 'parts' of television's history from others, privileging television programmes over the watching public and the impact of this medium over more than fifty years of the last century at a series of geographical and everyday levels which are so often ignored as 'unimportant' – such as changes to meal times, education and views of the world. Grasso's recent encyclopaedia of Italian television is the most complete work I have seen in this area.¹⁸ Much work is still to be done. The sources and archives to be used need, for Italy at least, to be systematically re-ordered and examined. Oral history, micro-history and cultural studies approaches can be combined here with

¹⁷ Respectively: Marie-Francoise Lévy, 'La création des téléclubs. L'expérience de L'Aisne', 107–33; Guy Lochar, 'Des "adresses" incertaines. Approche des formes d'interpellation du téléspectateur', 133–55; Colette Lustiere, 'Le journal télévisé. L'évolution des techniques et des dispositifs', 43–65; Évelyne Cohen, 'Télévision, pouvoir et citoyenneté', 23–42; Caroline Ulmann-Mauriat, 'Le critique de télévision, initiateur et témoin', 155–68; and Jean Ungaro, 'La fille prodigue ou le cinéma après la télévision', 169–201.

¹⁸ Aldo Grassi, *Enciclopedia della Televisione* (Milan: Garzanti, 1996).

more traditional social or political historical methodologies. The still-strong boundaries between history, media studies and sociology need to be broken down further for this task to be taken forward with any real success. Above all, we need to be clearer about *what* we are studying and to move freely across disciplines – seeing television as

a psychological, cultural and social form, as well as an economic and political one. We need to think about the medium as more than just a source of influence, neither simply benign nor malignant. We need to think about television as embedded in the multiple discourses of everyday life.¹⁹

Television can only be understood in a multidisciplinary fashion. It revolutionised all aspects of life, from the position of sofas to the cultural outlooks of (almost) everyone. This combination of the micro and the macro is thus at the heart of the history of television, and is a key aspect of understanding the complicated range of effects – big and small – which television brought to the history of the last century, and this one.

¹⁹ Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), ix.