

THE PAST AS TELEVISION: ARE TELEVISION PROGRAMMES MORE THAN NOSTALGIC EPHEMERA?

[PUBLISHED AS:

'IL PASSATO SULLO SCHERMO' in FARE STORIA CON LA TELEVISIONE, ed. ALDO GRASSO, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 2006 pp.167-172 ISBN 88-343-1324-0]

JOHN ELLIS

PROFESSOR OF MEDIA ARTS, ROYAL HOLLOWAY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

There is a branch of history called archaeology. The source of information that archaeologists value most highly is what they call a "midden", known to the rest of us as a heap of rubbish. To an archaeologist, all of this rubbish is valuable as evidence of concrete patterns of existence, providing a sense of what it felt to be alive in a particular historical moment.

The same holds true for television. Television is still denounced as rubbish by a remarkable number of people, yet it, too, will provide evidence of what it felt like to be alive in the last fifty years. This evidence may include a few things considered to be valuable at the time, like the occasional precious piece of jewellery accidentally discarded in the archaeologist's rubbish heaps. But evidence of this type is likely to be found elsewhere as well: in television terms, it will be the prestige programmes made to satisfy an elite audience, often made in the image of culturally praised works of the theatre, cinema or novel. But the real and unique evidence offered by television will be the real rubbish. For the historian of the last fifty years, few things will be more worthwhile as evidence than the unconsidered trifles: the variety shows and the sitcoms, the crime series and the docu-soaps, the Jerry Springer freak-shows and the daytime discussions of unlikely moral dilemmas and weight loss. These will provide the evidence of what it was like to be alive in the last fifty years.

Of course, all evidence has to be interpreted. The archaeologist has to decide whether the presence of seafish bones in a rubbish pit far from the sea indicates a special luxury diet item or is, rather, evidence of a long-range trade in everyday foodstuffs. Equally the historian using television has to evaluate the evidence. Does a particular programme represent an ordinary or an exceptional example? Are the participants in Jerry Springer shows intended as moral warnings or are they explicit exhibitionists who invite howls of synthetic outrage that shade into laughter? Does a particular situation comedy featuring a character who is a right-wing racist – the popular 1960s British series *Till Death Us Do Part* – indicate an acceptance of racism or a growing awareness that racism is a major social problem? These are the very real questions facing the historian using television as evidence of what life was like.

To a certain extent only, the answers can be found from within the programmes. They are more clearly to be found in the surroundings in which

they were found, just like the archaeologist learns more about metal objects from the shadows in the soil around them, which indicate the traces of now-rotted wood. Television is more than programmes alone. It conducts a commentary on its own programmes, defining them by genre, summarising them in trailers, mocking them in comedy, dissecting them in discussions. Television is hugely self-referential. It feeds on itself for much of its material, and many of its meanings.

Television is more than programmes alone. It is a system for creating meanings. The television schedule divides up the day into different parts, with different expectations and meanings. Where a programme is placed in the schedule contributes significantly to creating its meanings at the time, and, if anything, this significance is even greater for the historian. Before understanding what kind of evidence a programme might offer, the historian of the last fifty years will have to ask: "at what time and on what channel was it scheduled; how long was the series; what was the budget; what was the cultural status of its stars and what were the ratings",

Television is more than programmes alone. It is the placing of programmes to create an immediate audience experience. Its programmes are planned to be available at the optimum moment for their potential viewers, who, by the way, are connoisseurs of the medium. Television is therefore about the everyday. It is organised into everyday patterns, shaping and shaped by the changing lifestyles of its viewers. Its programmes are familiar, known and predictable. Television is always there. It is pervasive. And this is why it is called rubbish. As a result of being considered rubbish, it is important evidence of what it felt like to be alive, and what it looked and sounded like to be alive, at a particular moment in history. This is my first point.

My second point is that television has also profoundly changed society during the last fifty years. Television is an actor *in* history as well as evidence *of* history. If the guiding image of the first part of my short address was that of an archaeologist sifting through rubbish, then the guiding image of my second section is the mundane one of the TV screen in the private spaces of our homes.

Television is a medium of mass communication, part of a series of solutions to the problems of governance posed by technologically advanced consumer societies with their huge populations. The large population growths in Europe at the end of the century before last, together with the increasing education and material welfare of ordinary people created a new form of mass society. Older forms of governance no longer worked. Ordinary people had a stake in their society, and needed to be informed. In the last fifty years, television has become the most pervasive form of communication for that mass of people.

I am conscious that the term "mass communication" is possibly archaic, and is to an extent inappropriate for television. We know that television is not a particularly effective means of communicating messages or content. It is better at stories, singing and dancing, jokes, testimonials, revelations, fragmentary information, spectacles and amusements of various kinds. But

the term 'mass communication' nevertheless provides the important emphasis that television is a mass medium, providing an intimate experience that is common to a vast number of people. The term is also helpful in directing us to ask what kind of communication is nevertheless taking place through this medium, even if it is not the communication of intended content and messages. McLuhan said 'the medium is the message', and I choose to understand this slogan to mean that the presence of the medium of television itself alters perceptions of what matters in the world. The medium itself constructs understandings of the world. That is television's role as an actor in history.

A better term for the process is 'mediatisation'. Television has been central to the mediatisation of Western culture. Everything that is shared by contemporary citizens passes through the medium of television. Television constructs our communal sense of the world in which we live. Television has become an intimate and ordinary part of the lives of the millions of people who have lived through the last fifty years. It has achieved this position precisely because it entertains rather than instructs. And as it entertains, it nevertheless instructs. It provides routes towards understanding, even if it often willfully withholds the information necessary to arrive at an understanding. Television provides perspectives rather than answers. And this is why it is important.

Examples of the kinds of understandings provided by television are:

- Story structures;
- Ideas about psychology;
- Ideas about socially acceptable behaviour

Allow me to look at each in turn for a moment.

Television story structures are like cinema stories in that they use the same generic forms. But they differ from cinema in their extensiveness and their unwillingness to come to an end. Most television stories are told in multiple parts, or at least are constructed in series that see the same main characters returning week after week. Television exploits a particular feature of the narrative form. The pleasure of a narrative lies in its middle rather than its beginning (tedious establishing information) or its end (wished for, but regretted as the end of enjoyment). By inflating the middle of the narrative, television story-telling multiplies incidents and explores character and situation to the point of exhausting them. Television story-telling is a form of variation on a theme.

This enables television fiction to explore moral uncertainties. This is the real strength of American long-form police shows like *NYPD Blue*. They allow the sustained exploration of the contradictions of characters, what happens when they make mistakes, how they grow and develop. Good and evil begin to be less operative categories. Evil becomes comprehensible. Good is very hard to sustain. Those of you who are devoted to particular series will know what I mean. You begin to follow the evolution of characters, bringing knowledge of their previous storylines to your understanding of what is happening to them now. The regular audience sees characters grow and develop, or sees them vary wildly in behaviour in the case of more melodramatic forms. Occasional

viewers have less understanding of this process, and those who do not bother with a series will regard all episodes as being alike. The extensiveness of television series means that few people have more than one or two to which they give the necessary attention. Nevertheless we bring this appreciation of 'always being in the middle of something' to our understanding of most television fiction.

My contention is that this provides a more modulated understanding of human behaviour, and a greater appreciation of alternative scenarios, of other ways that events can work out. This is one result of the mediatisation of our society: an ability and even willingness to hypothesise, to imagine alternative outcomes.

My next example of the effects of mediatisation is the widespread availability and use of ideas about psychology. The West is now a society permeated by psychological theories and speculations about human behaviour. Some of it is what used to be called gossip: speculation about the motives of celebrities and stars. Some of it is the application of psychological theories to our own lives and those of people around us. Some of it is the attempt to understand the nature of our intimate desires at a time when the market increasingly promises to satisfy them. Some of it is the attempt to understand the fundamentals of human existence without recourse to religious concepts or practices. But all of it comes from the avenue opened by television. The psychologisation of our understanding has evolved from the emphasis on character and potential in television stories. It has come, explicitly, in the expansion of day-time talk about feelings and emotions, with discussion shows which actively mobilise differing frameworks for understanding human behaviour, from the most mystical to the most functionalist.

And it has come from the concentration on the human face, which television emphasises much more routinely than cinema. We are aware of how emotion passes across a human face both in fiction and in documentary. Indeed, the current phase of reality-based game shows like Big Brother has intensified this process. The real pleasure to be gained from such shows is one of spotting what characters are 'really thinking' from the expressions on their faces and their body language. Anyone with such an understanding – and this is probably most people – will then apply it to politicians and public figures on the news. We search their faces for stress, anxiety, secret triumph and the psychological reality behind their shows of concern. Television has given us a spurious intimacy with our politicians which is transforming how politics works. I say that the intimacy is spurious – illusory if you like – only because we do not really know these familiar people. But one thing is not illusory about this intimacy: its real effects in public life. We feel close to our politicians emotionally. It is easy, therefore, for them to let us down. And we tend to judge our politicians by the standards of personal behaviour that we apply to those around us. If you doubt what I am arguing, go and have a word with Bill Clinton. He knows what I mean.

My final example of the effects of mediatisation – you notice they are all linked – concerns the exploration of ideas about the limits of social acceptability.

How else are we to understand the Jerry Springer Show, with its parade of trailer-trash and social misfits whose recourse to verbal baiting soon declines into physical violence? How else also do we understand the phenomenon of Big Brother and other such reality gameshows? These are impoverished texts when viewed simply as programmes. Their importance lies in the atmosphere of discussion that surrounds them. Their importance lies in the way they are talked about, both within the media (especially radio and newspapers) and in everyday conversation. They provide a series of convenient metaphors or exempla through which discussions of motives and socially acceptable behaviour can take place. This debate largely takes place within different national boundaries. The appearance of American shows like Geraldo or tends to emphasise national differences rather than communalities. This is television's strength and its weakness. It is a strength in that television has maintained national cultures in the face of attempts at internationalisation. It is a weakness in that television leads us to neglect the world beyond our borders in favour of a comfortable version of national togetherness.

But this is a digression. By discussing Jerry Springer and Big Brother I have returned to my starting point: rubbish. I hope that I have begun to demonstrate why the rubbish that is television is so important. It is important as evidence of how it has felt to live in these past fifty years. But it is also important because television is changing the way that history is produced and lived. Television is evidence of what it has felt like to be alive in these past fifty years because television has been increasingly a major contributor to building common understandings of what alive-ness is.