



## Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe

Samuel Mateus

To cite this article: Samuel Mateus (2014) Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 34:3, 482-484, DOI: [10.1080/01439685.2014.943957](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2014.943957)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2014.943957>



Published online: 01 Aug 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 104



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

another clear example of how economics and technology can have a determining influence on television style' (p. 142).

Indeed, Cooke draws mainly on the production conditions, touching at the same time on elements of the specified milestones in technological progress, not without setting these into a considered dramaturgical context on the basis of meaningfully selected examples. On the edge of what is feasible, manual craft behaves like art, and innovation is a variety of instrumentation, like the people who work with it. This is as true for television as it is for any new medium. By this example Cooke refutes the director Don Taylor: 'Instead, he [Taylor] believed television needed to draw on the forms of drama developed for the stage, rather than make a radical departure from those traditions' (p. 140).

Relying on the previous media and its contents is however only the first step for a new medium. A medium needs to evolve the possibilities—mechanical as well as human—to find itself. If we take Cooke's results on balance, we can state that television has achieved this step with high quality serial storytelling.

What remains in the background of the aforementioned triad, is the reception side, which Cooke rather succinctly describes as '(...) with a fragmenting television audience demanding different kinds of drama, with different styles' (p. 142). Cooke's book is by no means a study of reception. This lack indicates further opportunities for research, since the described artistic-aesthetic climax of television is almost paradoxically appearing in the face of the Internet, social networks and 'second screen.' Perhaps scholarship can provide further partial answers, such as those that can be maintained and developed regarding the decades-long—as thoroughly presented by Cooke—expertise of television in the age of 'streaming,' 'sharing' and 'downloading,' and of an increasingly diversified audience.

HEIKO MARTENS

*Independent scholar, Potsdam, Germany*

© 2014 Heiko Martens

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2014.943956>

## **Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe**

PETER GODDARD (Ed.)

Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013

216 pp., index, £65.00 (cloth)

The constitution of European identity is today a topic crossing a wide range of disciplines from Political Science to Communication Sciences. Television studies have responded to this focusing, among other aspects, on the historic impacts television has had on political culture and in citizenship. Some collective books paid special attention to television from a trans-national perspective studying how specific national cultures responded to television content. A comparative methodology was taken with the objective of build a unified picture of television from a diverse and multi-cultural set of national societies. Bignell and Fickers's *A European Television History* (2009) or Fickers and Jonhson's *Transnational Television History—a comparative*

*approach* (2012) are major examples of the history of the medium in divergent political, economic, cultural and ideological contexts.

*Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* edited by Peter Goddard is the latest example of this *trans-national turn* contributing with a noteworthy and significant set of studies on the consolidation and transformation of established political and social orders in different authoritarian regimes. A history of national European televisions is pursued trying to overtake the difficulties associated with the fact that many researches on television and state are often taken on national languages preventing it from a wider, world dissemination (take for instance, the Portuguese book of Rui Cádima, *Salazar, Caetano e a Televisão Portuguesa*, 1996).

*Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* makes an innovative and memorable contribution bringing to the English-speaking world different national outlooks in television's contemporary history. It provides a panorama on European national television systems previously neglected by the mainstream scholarship consisting in 11 chapters divided into three parts: the history of television and authoritarian regimes in Southern Europe, in Eastern Bloc and in the German Democratic Republic. Two chapters relate to television in Spain during Franco's dictatorship, two examine the Greek dictatorship in television fiction and entertainment, three papers take on popular television in German Democratic Republic and there are also essays about Czechoslovak Communist Television, Romanian Television on Ceausescu's communist regime and live television on the Soviet Union.

The book may be divided in two types of essays: those dealing with the role of popular television on the critique of the existing government or social life; and those dealing with the use of television in the dissemination of state propaganda. On the first case, we have, among others, Binimelis et al.'s 'From puppets to puppeteers: modernising Spain through entertainment television' or Christina Adamou's 'Staying outside of the egg: surrealist entertainment during the Greek dictatorship.' In the second case, for instance, there is Lozano's 'Football and Bullfighting on television: spectacle and Spanish identity during Franco's dictatorship' or Trützsch and Viehoff's 'Undercover: how the East German political system presented itself in television series.'

Two central notions are pervasive in the whole book. In fact, *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* wants to tackle the slippery categories of 'the popular' and 'the instrumentalization of television' or in the words of Peter Goddard, 'control' (p. 5). The assumed effort to ponder, at a transnational basis and from a historical standpoint, such questions as 'What is the popular?', 'Is it the people?', 'Who defines it?', 'How the popular relates to elites?' is a key contribution to television studies.

Reifova, Bednarik and Dominik's study '*Between politics and soap: the articulation of ideology in Czechoslovak communist television serials, 1975–89*' is illuminating in this respect. The narrative strategy adopted in *Man at the City Hall*, in the 1970s, favors a lyrical voice and a political and ideological voice. In identifying a melodramatic and an ideological storyline in television serials, the chapter stresses the tensions between the need of Czechoslovak communism to disseminate its ideology and at the same time the need to attract a large number of audiences to receive the political propaganda. 'The fluctuating convergence and divergence between ideology

and melodrama opened the texts up for different readings positions, making the television serials more flexible and thus available for broad consumption' (p. 103).

The second concept the book works upon is the problem of control and how audiences build 'points of resistance' to television programs serving the interests of socially dominant groups. Janco's paper '*KVN: Live television and improvised comedy in the Soviet Union, 1957–71*' is paramount in showing how audiences can bring their own—at time subversive—readings imposing a certain kind of critique to existing social and political conditions. As claimed, many of the skits and jokes of KVN contained bitter critiques to everyday problems. Even if the youths participated in a state-centralized entertainment television show, they did not follow signals from above but set the agenda themselves.' The monological voice of the state broadcaster (*diktor*) was replaced by young voices eager to push limits and to speak of issues relevant to common Soviet citizens' (p. 136).

The book offers precious insights on European television history. However, and despite its effort to give a balanced trans-national perspective, it lacks analysis on major European authoritarian regimes. Indeed, and quite surprisingly, there are, for instance, no chapters about Portugal's television system under the dictatorship of Salazar or Italy's television system on Mussolini's leadership. Those would have been important perspectives to give a deeper understanding of European national television systems. Reading the book, one may be led to think this is only (a partial or) an incomplete survey of television in authoritarian Europe. Although there is a pretty good diversity of television genres in analysis and a solid historical and political background, generally speaking, not all the chapters equally address the issues about the popular and control. Some chapters deal directly with it, while others refer to them only superficially.

Nonetheless, *Popular Television in Authoritarian Europe* makes a significant contribution not only to Television History Studies but also to European Media Studies. It presents valuable insights about the development of television under authoritarian regimes giving us a fresh perspective on the tensions between the popular and the elites, or television's ideological usages and the dissident practices made by the audiences. We are offered an understanding of the historical tensions involved on the need to entertain large audiences, and the need of political apparatus to indoctrinate popular television at the crossroads of political resistance and political affirmation.

SAMUEL MATEUS

Nova University

© 2014 Samuel Mateus

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2014.943957>

## The Sopranos

GARY R. EDGERTON

Detroit, MI, Wayne State University Press, 2013

ix+100 pp., illus., bibliography and indexes, \$15.95 (paper)

*The Sopranos* has long been a subject of academic study, inspiring research in a wide variety of fields. A quick look at Amazon or Project Muse reveals a glimpse of the