

Anthony Smith (Hg.): Television. An International History

Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, 419 p., ISBN 0-19-811999-2, £ 25.00

This volume claims to be the first authoritative illustrated history of television, a claim that is difficult to fulfil. The international development of television has been so diverse from the start that it cannot be understood as one coherent history. This problem is reflected in the volume's 15 articles, which are fortunately divided in four parts. Part one focuses on the „Origins and Institutions of Television“, the way in which research resulted in television's technological possibility and how this is concretely organised in commercial and public services. Part two

is concerned with „Forms and Genres“ specific to the television medium. This means that the different articles focus on international histories of drama and entertainment, non fiction, sports and the broadcasting of political ceremonies. Sociological aspects are looked at in the part entitled „Television and Society“. The role of television in the family as well as the debates on taste and decency are discussed. This part concludes with a look at the specific role of television in political violence and terrorism. The final part looks at „Television across the world“: the American networks, Japan, the Third world, Australia and Africa. This volume starts by raising essential questions about the cultural position of television as a technological medium. The ways in which television is debated and organised in pioneering countries like the U.S., Britain and Germany seems to set the pattern for debates in other countries as well. The articles on specific forms of television show how cultural aspects like the international position of television programmes and cultural identity are expressed in institutionalized forms like drama. Even though the organisational patterns among countries can differ, the sort of programmes broadcast are quite similar. The debates over such topics as the influences of television about the fear of changing attitudes, the influence of foreign (mostly American) programmes as well as debates on quotas for import of programmes seem familiar throughout the world. In several articles the democratizing powers of television are reflected in the discussion about, for instance, the position of women in Western countries as well as in the Third World. It is claimed that the liberation of women is partly due to the introduction of television as it exposed them to a ‘world’ they had never seen before. This raises the issue of television and political control. Several essays discuss television as a medium for political communication in Western democracies, and a mechanism of control essential in the maintenance of totalitarian regimes. All these issues are well discussed in the various articles, and repeatedly, but unfortunately not systematically taken into account in the book as a whole. In the repeated questions raised in the essays, references to the other articles are rare, with the effect that the book is a gathering of individual insights rather than a coherently edited whole. On the other hand the book does show the international differences of television, especially in the role of television as a mass medium. In Africa for instance the television is becoming more important every day, although sets are not yet possessed by the majority of people. The first three parts focus mainly on the Western societies. The cultural contexts which are discussed together with the forms and the role of television in society offer a starting point for the study of media in non-western countries. In the fourth part it is made clear that although Western countries supplied hardware and software, the television in non-western countries has formed its own identity. The challenges for the future of television are discussed in an epilogue, but leaves us with the conclusion that this future is unpredictable. Although not without problems, the book offers a useful (if selective) overview of the central debates affecting the development of television

worldwide. Many of the authors have contributed substantially to the development of television studies (Abramson, Boddy, Collins, Schlesinger and Katz among them) and their focus on the cultural aspects of television offers an insightful introduction to their work. Although the connection between the essays could have been more explicit, and the arguments better edited, the book remains a good starting place for the general reader.

Bas Agterberg (Utrecht)