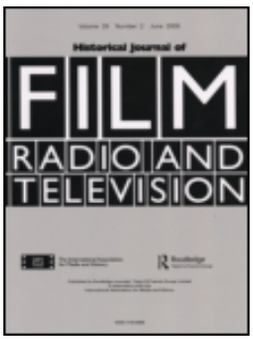

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De la chute du mur de Berlin au 11 septembre 2001: le journal télévisé, les memoires collectives et l'écriture de l'histoire

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BOOK REVIEWS

De la chute du mur de Berlin au 11 septembre 2001: le journal télévisé, les memoires collectives et l'écriture de l'histoire
KATHARINA NIEMEYER
Lausanne Editions Antipodes, 2011
342 pp., bibliography, 30.00 EUR (paper)

Hegel once remarked that reading the morning newspaper was the realist's morning prayer. Katharina Niemeyer writes that some regard the television evening news as the 'high mass of 8 p.m.' Both are shared daily rituals that are supposed to connect us with the real world outside our living rooms. Now that both newspapers and daily television newscasts (and perhaps religious observances too) are slipping into obsolescence, a book that focuses on network news may have the air of celebrating an endangered species before it becomes extinct. But there is no doubt that until recently, in western countries at least, network news reigned supreme as the primary means of informing a vast public audience of the news of the day.

Niemeyer wants to subject this phenomenon to a rigorous analysis from two contrasting perspectives. The first is a broad one, which places the news in relation to memory and history. Journalism has been called the first draft of history, but television journalism introduces special elements into this connection. The typical network newscast is actually modeled on the daily newspaper (the French call it the *journal télévisé*, literally the televised daily paper), starting with 'headlines' and organizing political events and human-interest stories, sports and culture, in order of importance. But thanks to its use of moving images, live and recorded, it has a greater impact on the public memory than print media. Thus it not only begins the process of narrative organization, which is the goal of the historian; it also deepens the emotional connection with events by installing them in the collective memories of spectators and historians alike. Niemeyer is able to illuminate these themes with a discussion of philosophical, psychological and sociological theories of memory, collective memory (Bergson, Halbwachs), and the emergence of narrative out of memory and temporal experience (Ricoeur).

But Niemeyer's real purpose, after this theoretical introduction, is to examine network television when it is tested to the extreme by the irruption of unexpected and world-changing events. TV coverage of the fall of the Berlin wall, on November 9, 1989, and of the attacks of September 11, 2001, becomes the object of her meticulous, detailed and sometimes gripping analysis. Everyone old enough

to be aware of these events (except for direct participants and, of course, victims) learned of them first through television. Live coverage gave us direct, simultaneous access to what was happening. What we 'saw' was so amazing that few of us reflected on the medium that provided this access. Niemeyer, who teaches media studies at the University of Geneva, now examines network coverage in Germany, France and the USA of the events themselves and of their later commemorations. Her work is a model of exhaustive research combined with informed philosophical and historical reflection.

What emerges is the tension of the networks and their commentators struggling to make sense for their audiences of unexpected events unfolding before their eyes. 'Making sense' means constructing a narrative context by showing the past (e.g. showing clips of the construction of the Berlin wall in 1961) and speculating about the future. But then something new begins to emerge. Coverage not only shows events but also contributes to them. In Berlin, people are moved by what they see on television to go to the wall, climb on it and attack it with pickaxes. In London, the great Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich is so inspired by what he sees that he flies to Berlin the next day and gives an impromptu recital at Checkpoint Charlie.

Between 1989 and 2001, in a world now undivided by the cold war, the technological capacity for global live coverage vastly increased. By 2001, the terrorists could count on television to turn their murderous attacks into a worldwide instant spectacle. As Niemeyer says, they hijacked not only airplanes but also the media for their own use. At the moment of their suicide, they are far ahead of the hapless commentators and reporters, who join their audiences in their consternation, incomprehension and emotional disarray. And like their audiences, many of them are watching events on their television screens. Desperate to find a way of making sense of the unbelievable, many have recourse to science-fiction films, *Star wars* in particular, where the unbelievable is something familiar.

In one of the most fascinating passages of her book, Niemeyer describes combing through TF1's archives in 2005, alerted by the testimony of a spectator, and discovering a two-second clip from *Star Wars* interspersed with live images from the World Trade Center shortly after the attacks. How did this happen? Was the clip introduced at the time? Or did someone tamper with the archives? Promising to look into the matter, the network never comes up with an explanation. What was the point? Merely to highlight the fantastical nature of the images? Or was someone making the point that Ronald Reagan's 'Strategic Defense Initiative,' called 'Star Wars' by its critics, would have been useless in deterring attacks like these? Or, as Niemeyer suggests, is the point that reality is stranger than fiction, and that the good guys don't always win?

Niemeyer examines the coverage of these events in minute detail, analyzing the use of images, live and recorded, and the interplay between anchors and reporters. She is especially attentive to language, and the use of tenses in the German, French and English excerpts she examines. This, of course, plays an important part in the description of events that are occurring in real time before the cameras and before the eyes of reporters and audience alike. But while this microscopic attention has the effect of slowing down the action of events that are speeding by, she also manages to convey the immediacy and improvisation of journalists who are struggling to keep up with events as they happen.

This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in recent history, the history and analysis of media, and the philosophy of history.

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Hollywood's Detectives. Crime Series in the 1930s and 1940s from the Whodunnit to Hard-boiled Noir
Fran Mason
Hampshire/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012
ix+187 pp., bibliography, index, £50.00 (cloth)

This book is a contribution to the publisher's *Crime Files Series*, which the general editor labels 'a ground-breaking series offering scholars, students and discerning readers a comprehensive set of guides to the world of crime and detective fiction.' The editor promises the reader 'clear and informative texts offering comprehensive coverage and theoretical sophistication' (p. vi). Fran Mason, a senior lecturer in Film Studies and American Studies at the University of Winchester, certainly provides a comprehensive and detailed discussion of his topic. But, though his writing is clear and his book informative, the bulk of the 'theoretical sophistication' derives from the literary theory sources he extensively quotes. In addition, the book lacks a clear thesis and omits important information about 'hard-boiled noir' films.

His main point seems to be that what is termed the 'hard-boiled' detective movie was not the dominant style until rather late in movie history (early to mid-1940s). Until then, the 'whodunnit' and 'action-based thriller' dominated. The latter have been overlooked, Mason states, 'because they are considered to be contrived, inauthentic or formulaic as '"generic" B-movie product, whereas hard-boiled films either express a perceived authenticity that makes them meaningful explorations of American society or else they are deemed to transcend genre to become more complex' (p. viii) and deal with a whole series of difficult ideas or ideologies.

On the other hand, the whodunnits and thrillers are 'quite often uncertain or fractured in their mapping of ideology,' but they contain 'a profuse number of codes …, so that there are often competing or conflicting meaning systems in operation' (p. viii). The result is that the codes of the detective genre are diffused 'through the operation of a form of cinematic vaudeville that articulates a range of generic codes to provide entertainment over and above the mystery narrative' (p. ix). Whodunnit and thriller codes constitute the majority of Mason's discussion.

What, then, is the significance of these 'codes' and in what ways are they distinct from ideologies? In the first chapter, 'Exploring Detective Films in the 1930s and 1940s,' we learn that these films regularly employ 'cross-generic coding' or the deployment of 'multiple formats' (p. 9), which indicate the existence of 'a concept of narrative "bafflement"' (p. 27). Bafflement cannot, I submit, be an ideology, but Philippa Gates, who Mason approvingly cites, believes it offers the viewers a comforting vision of a '"stable and happy society"' (p. 25).