

## **Interrogating an Anglo-American Context in Media Studies**

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### Falling on the Ground Between Two Chairs, or, Translating Television Studies

Television has undoubtedly gone global since the early 1980s. A handful of media conglomerates have woven a tight distribution network around global Hollywood, only intersected by program flows from a few other major production centers in Asia, Europe and South America. Transnational (de)regulation and commercialization have posed an increasing threat to the remnants of national public service broadcasting and local television. Although viewers may still statistically prefer programming in local languages, even local shows increasingly derive from globally circulating formats.

Media and communication studies, much like cinema studies at an earlier stage, have responded by serious attempts to de-Westernize, internationalize and transnationalize. The number of recent book series, journals, conferences and various activities coordinated by international organizations such as the ICA are testament to a collective effort to revisit basic questions, assumptions and knowledges and develop comparative methodologies demanded by an increasingly converging global media. Yet, the profile of television studies as an academic enterprise remains resolutely English-speaking, almost entirely US and UK-based.

Those of us who find a great deal of value in the theoretical and political approaches developed within television studies and wish to spread the benefits of those approaches across a wider geographical reach of entertainment television often feel stuck in the position of having to translate between incommensurable realities. My comments derive from two classroom experiences that brought to the surface the difficulties of translating television studies between the English-speaking West and a particular version of the Rest.

A few years ago, I set out to globalize the syllabus of my department's loosely conceived television studies course, which had generally been taught as a history of American television. I was immediately confronted with the scarcity of models for building a syllabus like this and had to rely on the few available books and other writing on television from global perspectives. Gathering audiovisual texts proved to be even more of a challenge, not the least for obvious reasons of actual translation between languages. I had to settle for English-language, mostly American, programming, with an emphasis on shows that made their way around the world and inspired reception studies (*Dallas*, *The Cosby Show*) or whose national variations on the format are recognizable with minimal translation (*In Treatment*, *Ugly Betty*). Interestingly, the students themselves, a mix of 40-70 production and critical studies graduates, quickly recognized the relevance of a global television curriculum each time I taught it. One of the reasons for this must have been that almost half of them came from foreign or mixed ethnic/national backgrounds, as if fairly typical in large American cities. Much like me, these students did not take American TV for granted as universal fare and their memory archives contained much international material that they eagerly shared. In the lack of an international television theory, these individual archives became crucial raw material for generating theory on a collective, comparative basis.

This experience contrasted instructively with teaching an intensive summer

seminar on media globalization at the Central European University in Budapest to a group of graduate students and media professionals who came mostly from Eastern Europe. In my sessions I focused on bringing together television studies' reevaluation of popular culture, ideology and identities with (post)socialist popular television, long neglected by critical studies of media in the New Europe. Even though the students did share with each other a great deal of popular television memory and eagerly engaged in discussion, they were reluctant to see any such discussion of television entertainment as a serious academic activity and preferred more traditional sociological approaches focused on national high culture, the public sphere and issues of media regulation.

These two attempts at globalizing television studies evoke the metaphorical experience of falling on the floor between two chairs – a mirror translation from another language that itself embodies the difficulties of translation by its very awkwardness in English. Globalizing television studies in order to do justice to the expansion of television forces scholars to choose between different audiences or risk reaching no one but other translators. One can choose to address critics and viewers from a peripheral, non-English-speaking, often minor nation or region, for whom the Anglo-American history of TV studies and its regular concerns are foreign and often even threatening. As existing studies of Latin American, Arab and European television have shown, recurring obstacles of communication include different reference points of modernity, long histories of non-commercial, state-controlled television, a different sense of individuality, different gendered, classed, racialized and religious regimes, and different neoliberal socio-economic formations. Or should the translator address those entrenched within television studies, for whom national and other differences need to be rendered familiar and palatable first, risking to lose precisely the specificity that makes them valuable theoretical starting points for a global television studies? It is an uneasy negotiation also complicated by the different sub-fields and geographical locations in which one is translating. It requires the translator to be sensitive and knowledgeable enough to be able to straddle both, and even more than two, chairs.