

Television Flows: A Regional Alternative? **Hatim El Hibri**

The Regions of Television

The concept of the region has the potential to clarify the historical geography of television. It also has the potential to continue to obscure a critical understanding of regions more generally. Regions, like other spaces, are not just different epistemological levels or scales which one can switch between in increasing order of size, as in local, sub-national, national, regional, and finally global. As the history of media studies has shown, it is easy for there to be a slippage between the phenomena we try to understand, and the terms we use to describe and understand them. The regional alternative to national or global frames of analysis can be a productive one, but only if accompanied by a working conceptualization of the term that emphasizes how they are performed and co-produced. Otherwise, we risk reproducing the assumptions that take the existence of regions for granted.

Space is the condition of possibility for any knowledge of television. If regions are both real spaces and a spatial concept, what is needed is a robust understanding of space. Following David Harvey, I think space needs to be understood on three levels. The first is absolute space, epitomized by the Newtonian understanding of location. It asks ‘where are objects x and y?’ The second is relative space, which asks where object x is in relation to object y. The third is relational space, which asks “what is the process that makes object x (and y, and z, etc) relate to one another? All three ways of thinking of space are equally important to understanding the politics of how regions are produced.

In raising the question of the regions or spaces of television, we are also asking what role television plays in the production *of* regions and space. This means that a full treatment of television as a spatial phenomenon may require us to include technologies and social processes that at first may seem only distantly related. The study of television’s regions may require active alliances with fields like urban studies and science and technology studies. I have actor-network theory in mind, with its insistence on including non-human phenomena in the make up of the social.

Regions, televisual or otherwise, are artifacts. Like all artifacts, they have politics. They are not self-evident, coherent phenomena, with essential qualities waiting to be discovered. At the same time, they aren’t mere fictions or fantasies. One of the uses of the concept of region is to a historical project that examines how regions express and have been expressed by the technologies, aesthetics, organizations, and institutions of television. What might it mean to consider how the spaces of ‘Europe’ or ‘the Middle East’ are mediated by televisual flows and disjunctures? What happens when you introduce connections usually marginalized in the scholarship, such as the Indian subcontinent and or in the Arab Mid-east, and vice versa?

The regional concept also needs to include the possibility of sub-regions. Thus “North America” may be a region, but only if LA can also be a region, as well as the different

regions that it constitutes and is constituted by. As evidenced by diasporic television, regions need not be understood as geographically contingent, even if they are geographical in nature. One region does not exclude the other, just as no region can be reduced to any other. The real challenge is to understand the politics of how regions are made to relate.

Finally, the concept of region is useful because it can lend itself to moving beyond the trap of simple notions of causality, and opens onto a rethinking of the culture/economy, or social/material divides. It is impossible to understand regions and still think of their interrelationships in binary terms. There are simply too many different connections and disconnects to do so. The necessary self-reflexive moment here is not just to understand how we each are all of a region or series of regions, but also to critically showing how assuming the regional is always a political act, even when left unacknowledged.