

Interrogating an Anglo-American Context in Media Studies Santanu Chakrabarti

Splitting the Difference

First things first, which question are we really asking: Is it a) Why do issues of nation and regulation not dominate academic discourse about Western television? or is it b) Why don't issues of pleasure, fandom, representation, aesthetics etc. occur more in television studies of the non-West or is it c) Both (a) and (b)?

Tackling (a) is simpler: it is largely because cultural studies (especially in its intersections with postcolonial studies) is more or less convinced that the nation-state form is on its last legs. But tackling (b) is more difficult especially when we note that the bulk of the work done on television in the non-West is done by scholars located in the West and situated in Western academia. But naturally, given that an interest in the global flows of television grows ever stronger, one of the points of comparison remains how 'adaptations' behave in the adaptor vs. the source country. So, what do we choose to compare? For one, aesthetic codes that fall outside of the continuum between "Two And a Half Men" and "Mad Men" (to draw some kind of an arbitrary continuum) can be forbiddingly alien. And issues of representation offer traps of insensitivity for those having reached academic maturity immersed in American or British TV. Like it or not in this process, then, it becomes easier for issues of nation, censorship and regulation rear their head when dealing with television in the global South.

But the understanding of the processes of global televisual flows often tends to occlude the fact that the North and South are not located in specific geographies in the era of neo-liberal capital. As its mantra spreads to every corner of the globe, neo-liberal capitalism produces millions of "Northern" viewers in the South, just as it produces many "Southern" ones in the North. So, the very access to certain media forms and vehicles-- forget the Internet, even TV is a luxury for millions, still-- immediately marks certain audiences out as elites (at least in their own countries) while not so in the West. Yet, 'Idol' audiences in India, say, tend to be conceived as mainly 'middle class', even though as an analytical term it is hardly the model of rigor. The analytical problems are compounded even more in the context of TV studies in the South where studies of production (in the first instance) are rarely reconciled with studies of the audience. If the narrative of class is 'totalizing' (as current catechism would have it), how then does one deal with the *difference* between TV in the US and India, say, given that *difference* is the basis of any comparison, even one that arises subconsciously simply because Anglo-American academia has long been the default point of reference due to legacy and headstart reasons. One resorts then to trotting out nation and regulation in the Indian (or Argentinian or Brazilian or...) case, as loci of analysis that are still grounded in evident difference. (A twisted echo of Jameson's "all third-world literature functions as national allegory"...)

The only way of adopting less insular attitudes is to recognize that the forces of capitalism impinge even more strongly on TV as compared to the cinema, say, given the very nature of the beast. In fact, there can be no theory of global TV outside of a theory of capitalism as long as TV continues to be so strongly undergirded by advertising and consumer culture. In fact a theory of capitalism allows us to handle differences without

differential handling (i.e. nation and regulation vs. pleasure and representation). The understanding of the work of capitalism, especially as set out by Marx, incorporates into its very essence an understanding of the production of difference, providing us with a perfect set of tools to understand television globally.

Equally, given how strongly television is imbricated in the spread of 'modernity' one has to engage with what modernity is. Looked at it one way, the divide between pleasure-fandom-representation-identity and censorship-nation-regulation is also the (metaphorical?) divide between the modern and the not-quite-fully-but-kind-of-maybe modern. Only by understanding modernity as capitalist modernity can we move ahead of this divide and move forward into an era where the critical and theoretical context of television is not just Anglo-American but truly global, yet sensitive to nuances of local difference and context.