

UC Merced

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

Title

Rivero, Yeidy M. Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960. Duke University Press, 2015. Print. 252 pp.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/21g7p9vz>

Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 6(2)

ISSN

2154-1353

Author

Gómez, Adriana Alcina

Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.5070/T462033566

Copyright Information

Copyright 2016 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Rivero, Yeidy M. *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960*. Duke University Press, 2015. Print. 252 pp.

ADRIANA ALCINA GÓMEZ
UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

In her book *Broadcasting Modernity*, historian Yeidy M. Rivero examines the birth of Cuban Commercial Television, its prominent position as an international reference for Latin America and its transformative role during the 1950s, which mirrored the significant political, social and economic changes that were then taking place on the island. Her work brilliantly unfolds the construction and shape of Cuban culture and modern identity throughout television discourse during this transitional period in Cuba's history. Supported with detailed and historical data, the author convincingly argues that Cuban TV served as a commercial, ideological and pedagogical vehicle for those in power; in other words, Cuban television was used to convey their idea of modernity.

The author's thorough analysis encompasses the main actors and ruling figures who exerted substantial influence of Cuban television in the 1950s: from state officials, media owners, business entrepreneurs and the Ministers of Communication to television critics and journalists, intellectuals, major soap opera scriptwriters, and even audience members and the non-governmental Commission on Radio Ethics (CRE). Divided into six chapters, the book distinguishes between three major historical periods that defined the view of modernity on Cuban television: the spectacles of progress (1950-1952), the spectacles of decency (1952-1958) and the spectacles of democracy and revolution (1959-1960). Hence, it takes readers on a chronological journey that begins with the promising emergence of Cuban commercial TV in 1950 and culminates with its transformation into a state-controlled system with the triumph of the Revolution.

In the introduction Rivero acknowledges that the strong U.S. influence on Cuba's concept of modernity came from the foundation and development of broadcasting radio in 1923. Prior to the launching of TV, the radio was seen as a public service that needed to be protected by the state to ensure it promoted Cuban values and cultural enrichment. Thus, since Cuban TV was born in 1950, it was envisioned as a democratic means to improve Cuba's education that welcomed everybody (even though reception and coverage were very restricted at the time, because TV, unlike radio, was

mostly available to the middle and upper classes). For the next three years, its exponential growth and innovative, technical superiority (it was the first Latin American country to have color television, only behind the U.S.) turned Cuban TV into a powerful symbol of economical, cultural and social progress as well as an international success. During that period, television became the ideal platform to advertise such progress and attract international financial support.

It was until dictator Fulgencio Batista's coup d'état altered the political sphere and released a new broadcasting law in 1953 which, among other significant changes, eliminated restrictions on advertising, ended the need to broadcast local programs and filled Cuban television with U.S. content instead. Meanwhile, a new morality based on Catholic values and a strong sense of decency dominated Cuban TV. Thus, Afro-Cuban cultural elements associated with religion, race, gender and sexuality (such as Santería, men in drag, or female mambo dancers) were immediately censored from Cuban television, since they questioned or threatened the Eurocentric, colonial view of modernity of Batista's regime. In 1957 and 1958, technological advances and commercialization of Cuban TV persisted, and so did severe censorship, although the Minister of Communications tried to sell "spectacles of democracy" for U.S. and Cuban spectators. The state regulated TV programs and was in control of the political discourse, so it used the medium to portray an image of a progressive, free nation in contrast to the Cold's War menacing image of the Soviet Union. However, the fragile economic situation and the social tensions and ideological shift that emerged to combat social justice and political oppression laid the ground for Castro's Revolution in 1959.

When Fidel Castro came to power, the "spectacles of revolution" suppressed the previous kinds of spectacles, and TV content focused on the victory of the Revolution. Castro nationalized all television stations and nationalism and radicalization became the norm in Cuban television. Cuban TV ceased to be at the service of advertisers, media owners and corporations, and became a monopoly regulated and run by the state, which underlined socialist values and anti-imperialistic and anti-capitalist views. At the same time, it is worth noting how the Revolution brought the exaltation of Cuban culture on TV; with the new broadcasting law in 1962, TV's pedagogical function to educate audiences was restored, Afro-Cubanness was reincorporated, and a new concept of Cuban identity was forged. The state's expropriation of television led many media professionals to flee to other Latin American countries, and the impact of such human capital drain was devastating for Cuban television, which led to its losing its leadership along with its international recognition.

In order to avoid possible ideological biases, Rivero decided to exclude personal interviews in her book. She conducted extensive research at the archives of the Research Center of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television and José Martí National Library in Havana, as well as at the Cuban Heritage Collection of the University of Miami Libraries. She also investigated TV regulations, the Cuban press and videos about Cuban television in the 1950s.

Broadcasting Modernity delivers a comprehensive and historically accurate picture of the roots and expansion of Cuban television in the 1950s. The narrative is well-structured and organized, and provides a neutral, comprehensive vision of the importance of Cuban television as a political and ideological tool that reflected Cuban society and popular culture. *Broadcasting Modernity's* meaningful contribution sheds light on the creation and transformation of Cuban TV during an acute historical period and its significant influence not only in Latin America but also worldwide. The author masterfully tackles fascinating topics such as freedom of expression and censorship, a balance between advertising and didactic contents and media control. It would be interesting to find further research that would pursue the personal stories of the media protagonists who actively participated in the construction of Cuban television in the 1950s.