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John Hartley, **Television Truths: Forms of Knowledge in Popular Culture***,* Malden, MA, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, 304 pp., $34.95 (paperback).

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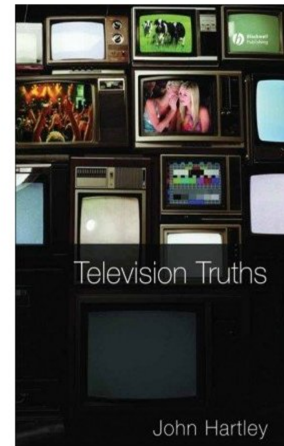

John Hartley's *Television Truths* is a complex and engaging work, inspired by an ambitious project of knowledge — a distinctive characteristic of this original and farsighted scholar. Somewhat out of ritual, I will begin my review with an apparent digression through a fresh success story of an entertainment program on Italian TV. Taking my cue from a localized case of reality format, I wish to give a (very selective) account of Hartley's book, beginning from the interconnected definitions of "democratainment" and "plebiscitary television" (or formats). These are integral parts of the theoretical discourse the author has developed and unfolded in many writings over recent years with intellectual resourcefulness, terminological inventiveness, and a comprehensive vision of the present-day mediasphere. These concepts intersect or underpin various parts of *Television Truths* and are elaborated in more detail and supported by numerous case studies halfway through the book in the wide-ranging Chapter 7, titled "Reality and the Plebiscite."

The case to which I refer is the broadcast of the fifth season finale of the talent show *Dancing with the Stars*,,which aired March 21, 2009, on Rai Uno, the first channel of Italian public television. As is widely known, since we are dealing with a hugely popular format on a global scale, the show is based on a competition between dancing couples, each consisting of a professional dancer paired with an amateur (the latter being the star). The fate of the contestants is decided on a week-by-week, two-fold scoring system: the score awarded by a panel of experts present in the studio, and the votes of viewers at home, conveyed by landline or mobile telephone.

The 2009 final aroused unusually intense and lasting interest in the mainstream media and the blogosphere. The historical and political slant in numerous headlines, press reports, comments, and postings on the Internet was unusual (indeed, exceptional) for one of the most light-hearted and uncommitted programs in today's televisual panoramas. A crucial event in the history of the Italian nation — the transition from a monarchy to a republic — was brought to the fore. It happened that the winner of the 2009 competition was Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy, a direct descendant of the dynasty that reigned over Italy until 1946. In that year, the popular vote, exercised for the first time by universal suffrage and supported by a majority, ended the monarchy and established the Italian republic. The latest of the Savoy family is far from a newcomer to the television limelight, and his status as an aristocratic celebrity makes his lifestyle a constant topic for the gossip columns. Yet his numerous media appearances and mentions had hitherto not provoked the sort of "political reverberation" generated by the plebiscitary consensus that brought him to victory (75% of viewers voted for him). "He succeeded where his ancestors failed" was the

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letter or spirit of much comment. However little comparison there might be between the two "expressions of the popular vote" (separated by more than 60 years) that decided the fate of the house of Savoy, parallels were drawn between the two.. In 1946, the Republic had won with a majority that was reduced, uncertain, and contested until the last minute, yet *Dancing with the Stars* 2009's plebiscitary result seemed to indicate a symbolic reparation, if not a form of revenge — a very unwelcome result to those who still harbor resentment toward the former royal family, compromised by fascism, but one that was acclaimed by supporters of reconciliation with the past, especially toward a young man who is guiltless of the sins of his fathers.

An episode of this kind constitutes neither the regularity nor the rule (to introduce a distinction that was dear to Pierre Bourdieu) of the reality shows that nowadays crowd the Italian networks' schedules. But even in its relative rarity, it fully supports Hartley's firm assertions, in this book and elsewhere, of the porosity and fluidization of frontiers, and of "the con-fusion of politics and entertainment," (p. 129) of which reality television is simultaneously the manifestation and the catalyst.

Having spent 10 years of my academic career in a Faculty of Political Sciences, I welcome and agree, in particular, with the author's reiterated criticism of the political scientists' skeptical and contemptuous attitude toward televisual entertainment (and in general, I would add, toward any appeal to take seriously the political potential of the media and popular genres, even as an hypothesis).

Furthermore, it is plausible that, on the occasion of the finale of *Dancing with the Stars* and its aftermath, television could, to some extent, have played the role of an "informal teacher" of good citizenship, as Hartley cogently states, in contrast to the pathologizing narratives of the medium (see Chapter 6). Like their contemporaries in other parts of the world, many young Italians have a very sketchy knowledge of even the recent history of their nation; the descendant of the house of Savoy's participation and his subsequent victory in a television talent show created the conditions for information and discussion in the mainstream media, including television itself, through talk shows and infotainment magazines, as well as the digital media. If nothing else, the information and discussions have made young people aware (I do not venture to speak of comprehension and contextualised knowledge) of the founding event of Italian democracy.

This brings us to the peoples' vote. "At the root of democratic politics is the vote" (p. 126). Many, if not all, of the present-day reality shows incorporate the vote into their concepts (plebiscitary formats). Plebiscitary shows are a form of democratic entertainment, or as Hartley terms them, democratainment. This neologism, a hybrid generic category constituted and inflated by plebiscitary formats, seems to be based on a similar syllogism. These very formats are, in turn, generated by the plebiscitary industries, which, by embodying the vote into light entertainment, have learned how to capture and encourage the desire for, and pleasure in, public participation.

The notion of democratainment is already known in the field of television studies. Hartley coined the term 10 years ago, making it the title for a chapter in *Uses of Television* (1999), and he advanced it again in various places before reviving it in *Television Truths*, with a meaning apparently more specific

(that is to say, referring to plebiscitary formats) than the broader original definition as "the means by which popular participation in public issues is conducted in the mediasphere" (1999, p. 209).

The idea that a whole series of remarkable transmogrifications in television production, supply, and consumption — for example, the increase in the visibility, protagonism, and "celebrification" of ordinary people — marks and brings about an advancing process of democratization in both the television industry and culture has not failed to generate perplexity, criticism, and counter-claims, which the author mentions only slightly, distancing himself from them. My impression is that the issue of the peoples' vote, as a democratic practice that, by turning the viewers into an "electorate," makes them the arbiters of the final results of the show, does not help to smooth the path to the democratainment thesis. This view is open to the objection that it appeals to a model of direct or participatory democracy, thus avoiding appraisal of the risks of populist drift that are inherent in this controversial articulation of the democratic ideal. In any case, even a direct democracy is based on the egalitarian foundation of "one person, one vote," whereas viewers of reality shows are allowed multiple votes. Despite this, although the absolute numbers can be impressive, the proportion of voters in relation to the number of viewers is generally a minority; in a real election, this would be regarded as a worrying sign of voter apathy. More importantly, just as democracy in the political sphere cannot be reduced to the ballot (which is a necessary, but hardly sufficient, condition), you cannot talk about democracy in the mediasphere being made relevant simply because television viewers are invited to express (even compulsively) their choices and preferences by means of a vote.

However, these reasonable objections end up being seemingly pointless and redundant when there is evidence that Hartley is fully aware of (and challenges) them. He does not hesitate to acknowledge this: "In some of these formats 'democratic' progress is minimal. Viewers do little more than vote, and the vote is rigged…This process has not yet reached maturity by any means" (p. 127). Consequently, I am inclined to interpret democratainment as the stipulative definition, not of a democratic media world already in place, but of an imaginable world, a possible democratic television republic whose prefiguration rests on the still weak and immature premises and promises of emancipation that are contained in the plebiscitary formats (and not only in them). Unlike others, Hartley does not take the future for granted, but he forcefully calls to mind the importance, "in the meantime," as he likes to say, of not letting slip the potential and signs of democratic progress that are unfolding before our eyes.

The future, in truth, is the ever-present horizon of the entire discourse developed in and through the book's 12 chapters. It is structured according to a philosophical framework and sub-divided into four sections, each of which refers to a different branch of philosophy: epistemology (the paradigms of knowledge of television); ethics and politics (issues of audiences, citizenship, and democracy); aesthetics (televisual content); and metaphysics (television's conditions of being). The ambitious intellectual endeavour to reassess the epistemic principles of television studies cannot be said to now have been accomplished, but this book is a welcome and timely undertaking by an authoritative and influential scholar to fill the crucial need to critically engage with the conditions of knowledge in a time of television transformation.

Actually, the book is permeated with issues of evolution and innovation, and it is interwoven with concerns for the future, not only of television but more importantly, of knowledge; this is a dilemma that

directly involves television studies and tests their capacity to shift paradigms and perspectives in order to understand and explain change. Hartley warns against the "parallax error," occurring "where the object of analysis is in a different position from the point of observation" (p. 33). The attention to the relationship between television and television studies is a well-known and fruitful feature of his scholarship.

As a scholar who has always served, figuratively, on the front line of active viewers, Hartley is especially interested in developments at the receiving end of televisual communication, where the audience is, or perhaps it would be better to say, "the people formerly known as the audience." The contemporary times testify to a major shift in what Hartley, going back to a notion of business analysis, calls "the value chain of meaning." The shift has to do with a long-lasting, macro-historical process, one during which the source of meanings related to artistic and cultural activities has undergone progressive extensions and repositionings along the links of the value chain (production, distribution, and consumption). In the pre-modern age, the origin of meanings was identified with the creator or author; then, in modern times, it was extended to text and performance. Today, this origin is acknowledged to spring from the experience of the reader or audience, as Hartley notes: "Readers, audiences and consumers, within a situated context of experience, decide what texts mean" (p. 25). In reality, they do much more than make sense of a pre-packaged product. Thanks to new technologies, the users literally take part in the action. They participate, choose, create, vote, and cross the divide between maker and viewer, between producer and consumer; they become co-authors and co-producers of cultural texts and artifacts. The expert paradigm is challenged, if not replaced, by the consumer paradigm.

Again, there is no need to guard against the risks of excessive celebrations and generalizations. Issues of ownership and control, inequality of power and opportunities, and manipulatory corporate embraces are not necessarily dismissed or undermined if one advocates, as does Hartley, an observation perspective that is based on the consumer paradigm. This perspective is at least equally interesting as but less worn out than, the interpretative model of the "malevolent mogul pulling the strings so that 'we' all believe and do what 'they' dictate" (p. 35). Living in a country where, because of Prime Minister and media mogul Silvio Berlusconi, that model still takes precedence in many areas of public writing and public debate, I find Hartley's vigorously propounded alternative refreshing.

More than one chapter offers us historical visions and historiographical considerations (see, for example, Chapter 11 on the historiography of television), and the author rightly claims that the long-term approach is a special consideration of the book. In this connection, I particularly enjoyed the excellent Chapter 3 on changing frequencies of public communication in history. However, something was missing here and there in the book. I wish Hartley had alluded to the fact that long before the present-day technologically-boosted shift of the value chain of meaning toward consumer activity, many forms of popular culture and popular storytelling in pre-modern and modern epochs featured interactivity as a key element — often in ways that we would presently define as creative co-authoring or co-production. We should also note the oral traditions of the itinerant storytellers, improvised theatre performances, and the active role played by 19th century European audiences in suggesting the plots and driving the narrative developments of the hugely popular novels by installments (*feuilletons*), which were not infrequently stagnated by a lack of ideas on the parts of their uninspired authors.

Nowadays, the scale of this phenomenon has increased enormously, as has the range of opportunities for action and participation made available to consumers. Along with Hartley, I welcome these changes. In the densely textured and far-ranging narrative of *Television Truths*, they are accounted for in a vibrant, sometimes impassioned style in which wisdom and vision (a somewhat rare occurrence in contemporary scholarly writings) converge. The reader doesn't necessarily need to agree with the author to appreciate and enjoy the engaging and challenging ways in which this book strives to expand the borders of our understanding and imagination about the evolution of television, and the human experience of it.

Translated by Jennifer Radice.

Also, read John Hartley's review of Milly Buonanno's book, *The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories*, in the *International Journal of Communication* at:
http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/479/317