

H-Net Reviews

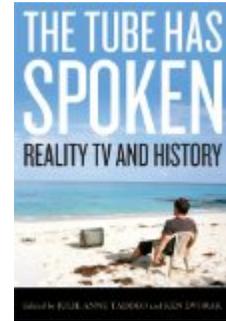
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Julie Anne Taddeo. *The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV and History*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 275 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-3388-1.

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The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV and History

In recent decades, reality television has become central to both network schedules and debates over definitions of quality entertainment. *The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV and History*, edited by Julie Anne Taddeo and Ken Dvorak, shows that what many assume to be a relatively new entertainment form is in fact nearly as old as popular television itself. The debates surrounding reality TV have their roots in the 1950s as well. Bringing together experts from both the humanities and media studies, this edited collection offers a multidisciplinary approach to explore how reality television programming has expanded our understanding of the potential for television entertainment, introduced new interpretations of the genre's place in and relationship to history, and raised questions about how "real" such programs truly are or should be. The essays clearly legitimize the study of reality television and demonstrate the genre's central importance throughout the history of television.

The essays are divided into three sections, each of which emphasizes a specific aspect of reality television and its relationship to history. Part 1, "Reality TV as Social Experiment," explores a variety of reality programs dating back to the 1950s, emphasizing the collaborative participation of producers, subjects, and viewers of reality programming. Fred Nadis discusses the early run of *Candid Camera* and the exploits of host Allen Funt. Created and produced during the heights of the Cold War, "Citizen Funt" used public concerns about uncontrolled paranoia and surveillance to raise questions about the American character and privacy. Nadis examines the

production goals as well as the reactions to this early reality program, which included questions about Funt's character. Nadis ably shows that the debates over acceptable television entertainment date back as far as television itself. The intersection of producer, subject, and audience continues today and Lee Barron shows how all of these groups contribute to the construction of celebrity in the *Big Brother* series. Finally in this section, James Leggott and Tobias Hochscherf discuss the political dimensions of reality television in an essay about *Jamie's School Dinners*. The program asks both the subjects as well as viewers to examine more closely the state of not just school lunches, but of class society in modern-day Britain. All of these essays emphasize reality television's ability to create an environment in which producers, subjects, and viewers can interact via the TV, making the genre a unique area of study for media scholars.

The second section, "Class, Gender, and Reimagining of Family Life," continues to look at the reality genre's early roots. These essays clearly connect reality television programs to the culture in which they were produced and consumed, highlighting the lack of "reality" in programs that were carefully designed to convey a specific message or theme. In "Disillusionment, Divorce, and the Destruction of the American Dream: *An American Family* and the Rise of Reality TV," Laurie Rupert and Sayanti Ganguly Puckett focus on the production aspect of the program. They argue that the producer manipulated the casting and editing processes to emphasize his belief that traditional family and marriage structures

were dying, leading to a loss of the American dream. An article by television historian Su Holmes reveals that the debates over early reality programming were not limited to the United States. Britain's counterpart to *An American Family*, simply titled *The Family*, experienced many of the same limitations of the original, with a carefully casted and edited final product that emphasized many of Britain's contemporary issues while giving each member of the family both social and individual identities. Interestingly, Holmes shows that like its American counterpart, *The Family* was not discussed as a work of nonfiction, but was instead likened to other genres like sitcoms or soap operas, which indicates that audiences remained unconvinced of the historical accuracy of such programs. The essays in this section, which also include a discussion of the links between consumption and women's programming in Canada as well as the implications for childhood in *Kid Nation*, show that many reality programs were carefully crafted to convey a specific message or feeling. However, audiences rarely even conceived of reality shows as "real" and played an equally important role in the construction of a genre that emphasized entertainment over accuracy.

Part 3 more closely examines the relationship between reality television and history, focusing specifically on the concept of "living history experiments" in programs that attempt to recreate history on television. Julie Anne Taddeo and Ken Dvorak examine the Channel 4/PBS *House* series to demonstrate the inherent difficulties in making "real" history onscreen. In programs like *1940s House*, *Frontier House*, *Texas Ranch House*, and *Regency House Party*, British and American participants and audiences "prefer a Fantasy Island version of the past: family togetherness, chandelier-lit drawing rooms,

and heroic endeavors," even though producers are careful to consult historians and provide detailed rule-books to those living in the house (p. 198). Michelle Arrow finds a similar trend in Australia, arguing that living-history programs like *The Colony* and *Outback House* avoid dealing with much of the violence linked to Australia's colonial past. In this way, reality television largely fails to accurately recreate the past, while simultaneously revealing contemporary attitudes about public history and memory.

An international group of contributors significantly strengthens the impact of *The Tube Has Spoken*. Detailed discussions of programs from Canada to Australia, combined with American and British studies, demonstrate both the popularity of, and variety of reactions to, reality television around the globe. Still, more work on similar programs outside the English-speaking world would offer a better basis for transnational and comparative scholarship. The collection of scholars from many different fields offers many approaches to the study of reality television, making the book essential to historians looking to incorporate new methodologies and source material into the existing historiography. Although the book at times strays from historical discussion in chapters on *The Biggest Loser* and *Jaime's School Dinners*, it remains a valuable source for a wide variety of scholars in media or cultural studies. At its core, the collection of essays reveals the confluence of producers and consumers in the development of television programs and how they shape, and in turn are shaped by, the societies and cultures in which they are produced. Further, the book introduces connections between reality television and history, legitimizing the genre as valuable source material for future scholars of the medium.

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