It is without question that the advent of television in the mid-twentieth century drastically altered the sociocultural fabric of Western societies where the technology first proliferated. The utility of television as a tool for constructing new ideas about social and political issues and creating new national identities that could unite disparate social groups under a single banner was not lost on the entrepreneurs who first invested in the fledgling industry or on governments that regulated its access. Sure, entertainment may have been the primary purpose of television for its growing legions of viewers in the first few decades of its existence, but for those in positions of power this purpose was secondary to television’s usefulness as an arbiter of social consciousness and the dissemination of propaganda. In *Broadcasting Modernity: Cuban Commercial Television, 1950-1960*, television historian and University of Michigan professor Yeidy M. Rivero examines this phenomenon as it manifested in Cuba in the decade of television’s rise to prominence. Rivero broadcasts her thesis in the title of the book, as she argues consistently throughout that Cuban television’s primary purpose in Cuban society of the 1950s was to foster the concept, both internally and abroad, that Cuba was a modern and progressive nation a step above most of its Latin American neighbors and on par with the rest of the Western world.

At the dawn of the 1950s, Cuba was perhaps the most “modern” Latin American nation, thanks in no small part to its close economic and political ties to the United States. North American businessmen provided much of the capital for Cuban business and industry and the island served as the tropical playground for the rich and famous. The elites and the rising middle class in Cuba were immensely proud of Cuba’s progress, especially after the passage of the very progressive constitution of 1940, which mandated such forward-thinking policies as public education and a minimum wage. Yet, this façade of modernity belied a deep undercurrent of poverty and exploitation, especially in the rural areas of the island, which prevented most of its citizens from fully participating in modernity, a fact that was discomfiting to many of the middle and upper classes in Cuban society. Rivero argues that to prevent this discomfiture from becoming discontent, and to ensure continued support for the status quo, the Cuban government, first through legislation and eventually by more direct intervention, manipulated the medium to maintain a constant vision of Cuba as a beacon of progress and as a shining example to the rest of Latin America of a “modern” nation. Every image and sound broadcast over the airwaves had to, in one shape or fashion, portray this message. Those that failed to do so were eventually culled or adjusted until they did.

Rivero develops some very interesting theories that supply a framework for the process by which the vision of modernity was broadcast through Cuban television and internalized by the Cuban public. She develops four interconnected paradigms that are centered on the concept of the “spectacle.” These are dubbed “Spectacles of Progress,” “Spectacles of Decency,” “Spectacles of Democracy,” and “Spectacles of Revolution.” Her concept of the “spectacle” is loosely derived from the work of the French Marxist philosopher Guy Debord as outlined in his trea-
tise, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Debord posits that a “spectacle” is “not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (quoted, p. 7). Its power “resides in its representation and its capacity to convey positive outcomes for citizens and society at large” (p. 7). It was precisely the conveyance of positive outcomes, in the present and the future that became the penultimate goal of television broadcasting in Cuba, no matter to what degree the representations of outcomes differed from the reality for most Cubans. As much as television helped to shape what came to be defined as the “American Dream” in the United States, it did much the same for the “Cuban Dream”—and the two differed only in degree, not kind.

Each of the spectacles that Rivero outlines focuses on an aspect of “modern” society that was the most immediate and relevant to the construction of modernity. The first, “Spectacles of Progress,” were embodied first in the very technology itself. The origins of Cuban television mirrored those of the United States. Both evolved from previously established radio networks and debuted at roughly the same time. Access to such “modern” technology in Cuba, concurrently with its development in that most modern of Western societies—the United States—was in itself proof that Cuba was on the path of progress. The shining modern building constructed in Havana to house the earliest Cuban television network was seen as a symbol of Cuba’s place in the evolving modern world. The signals of progress were also communicated, both overtly and covertly, in a variety of other ways. Both early Cuban television networks and its critics encouraged a sense of heightened professionalism among television producers, directors, technicians, and actors. This communicated that Cuba was on the cutting edge of the medium. Television’s utility as a vehicle for advertising, and the culture of consumption that accompanied such commercialization, drew Cuba into the expanding web of global commercialism and consumption that was a prerequisite for joining the train of modernity. Since access to the new technology was limited by wealth, programming and advertising were geared toward the elite and the upwardly mobile, who viewed themselves as modern progressives, a view that television served to reinforce. For the less economically prosperous, many who gathered in groups in homes, store windows, restaurants, and bars to catch a glimpse of the flickering screens, the vision of progress communicated to them dreams of potential futures when they too could join the train of modernity.

The vision of progress broadcast in Cuba was not the exact same as in the United States or other Western nations. It was tweaked to speak to a specifically Cuban audience. These tweaks were caused by the combined effects of public opinion, published criticism, and the efforts of the Cuban government to insert what it deemed to be national interests into the message of the medium. Since Cuba obtained its independence in 1898, social and political reformers in Cuba had articulated a vision of a homogeneous Cuba, where racial and cultural mixing had transformed its diverse peoples into something specifically Cuban. This concept of *cubanidad* was seen as essential to forging a cohesive nation. Through legislation in the early 1950s, the Cuban government sought to reinforce the essence of *cubanidad* and associate it with high culture. The government mandated that all stations have a certain percentage of their programming reserved for cultural and educational programming and a certain percentage had to be produced in Cuba itself. However, this did not go unchallenged as moneyed interests pushed back against restrictions and mandates, which led to various changes to legislation that at times lessened regulations.

“Spectacles of Decency” was another way that Rivero argues the idea of modernity was communicated through Cuban television. The concept of “decency” was deeply tied to the conservative nature of the upper classes, the very people who epitomized the social goals of modernity. Communicating a high moral standard was seen as paramount to the further development of a modern society in the model of the upper and upwardly mobile classes. Through public pressure in the form of media criticism and government intervention, every program that appeared on Cuban television had to pass the test of decency so as not to offend a conservative social morality. This was particularly true for what Rivero terms “racialized sexuality” (p. 79). Despite the phenomenon of *cubanidad*, morality and decency was still closely tied with the ideals of “whiteness.” Thus, Cuba’s rich African heritage and its cultural manifestations had to be sanitized for public broadcasting. The hypersexualized nature of Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations like the rumba was not merely deemed vulgar, but was seen as a direct threat to white racial homogeneity in that it encouraged sex outside of racialized boundaries. The drive for “decency” on television created a culture of censorship, articulated somewhat independently through the Commission of Radio Ethics (a holdover from the radio era) and through government oversight via the Ministry of Communication.

“Spectacles of Democracy” came to the fore in the ar-
ticulation of Cuban modernity in the mid-50s, precisely at the time when the illusion of democracy was crumbling in Cuba under Fulgencio Batista’s increasingly authoritarian regime. Democracy was intimately tied to the concept of modernity and, at the bare minimum, a semblance of democratic participation and the concomitant freedoms associated with it had to be maintained in order for Cuba to maintain its position as a modern society and avoid the condemnation of other modern societies. With an irony not lost on many contemporaries, the illusion of democracy could only be maintained in Cuba in the later years of Batista’s rule through direct government intervention and censorship.

The “Spectacles of Democracy” were the last gasp of the first phase of Cuban television and were quickly subverted by the very medium through which they was communicated to the Cuban people and abroad—television. The CBS documentary Rebels in the Sierra Madre aired in May of 1957, introduced the world to Fidel Castro, and revealed the cracks in the façade of democracy that the Batista regime wanted so badly to maintain. His experience with North American media also served to fully inform Castro of the potential of the medium in articulating and disseminating his revolutionary views. From the very moment that Castro achieved success and rode into Havana triumphant, his revolution was televised and ratings were through the roof. Revealing in many ways the failure of Batista’s government to successfully utilize Cuban television to shape public opinion, Cuban television networks initially embraced Castro and his message of a Cuba free from foreign influence. Castro articulated the essence of cubanidad and reshaped it to remove the class and caste distinctions that long prevented the full realization of the ideal. Castro’s modernity eschewed a reliance on the United States and Europe as models to follow blindly, which relegated Cuba to what could be seen as a second-class modernity. Castro fully embraced a new sense of modernity that stripped down the best elements of the West and dressed them up in Cuban packaging while articulating a revolutionary message that was characterized as even more advanced and “modern” than its contemporaries.

In spite of this early support from the existing media apparatus, the Cuban revolutionary government quickly nationalized Cuban television, as it did all of Cuba’s major industries. Castro transformed Cuban television into not only the premiere propaganda platform for the revolutionary zeitgeist, but his own personal connection with the Cuban people. Rivero details at length the way that Castro quickly became the most watched and most influential television personality in Cuba—the face and the voice of the Cuban Revolution. Castro would often speak for hours at a time on Cuban television, inserting himself into the public sphere unlike any political leader before him. It was through television that Castro cultivated his popularity, which evolved naturally into a cult of personality that became a huge factor in sustaining the revolution through the decades of Castro’s rule. Castro understood implicitly the vitality of television as a tool to not only transmit his message, but also to galvanize a population behind the movement and quell dissent. His government internalized all three of the paradigms of “spectacle” that Rivero identifies during the Batista era and merged them into the “Spectacle of Revolution.” For Castro, the revolution was everything and the ideals of progress, decency, and democracy were translated into a new revolutionary language.

Rivero’s work is a bold and penetrating examination of the phenomenon of television and its transformative social and political role in Cuba. The study is all the more impressive considering the methodological hurdles that Rivero had to overcome in researching and writing this book. Sadly, few Cuban television shows or broadcasts survive today. This prevented Rivero from examining these critical primary sources for herself. Instead, she was forced to rely mostly on published criticism and essays in the Cuban print media on the topic as the basis for her investigation. Thankfully, this proved to be a rich source of information as Cuban critics were very vocal about what they perceived as right and wrong about Cuban television. Rivero also closely examined the substantial legislation that was passed by the government at various points in the decade to investigate the ways the Cuban government reacted to and attempted to manipulate the media. Even without access to the products of Cuban television production, Rivero managed to produce a work of considerable profundity.

If any critique is to be leveled at Rivero, it is the relative absence of a comparative analysis of the status of television and its uses as a creator and transmitter of culture in other Latin American countries at the time. Particularly in the more advanced countries of Latin America such as Mexico and Argentina, television was also introduced in the early 1950s. It existence there coincided and developed concurrently with Cuban television. Rivero argues consistently that Cuba was a trailblazer in Latin American in television production, but only cursorily mentions television’s role in other Latin American countries. Without this comparison, it is still unclear whether Cuba was truly as unique in the Latin American
world as Rivero posits during the early years of television’s genesis. Perhaps that critique is slightly unfair as the broader Latin American situation is beyond the scope of the work, but such a context is critical for a full understanding of Cuban television’s place in the development of the medium in Latin America. It certainly leaves ample room for future scholarship to expand upon Rivero’s work.

Despite this small critique, *Broadcasting Modernity* fills a hole in not only the historiography of the role of television in Latin America and the world, but in the historical analysis of the Cuban Revolution itself. Only through understanding the role that television played in fostering and sustaining the Cuban Revolution can the success and long life of that revolution be fully understood. Rivero’s work also reveals that despite the best efforts of the media industry and government in Cuba to shape public opinion and mold morality and identity, these efforts largely failed to mask the underlying problems in society, and many of those efforts ultimately served more to alienate the masses and fuel discontent as the ideals portrayed on the screen more often than not belied the realities on the ground. Although Rivero does not articulate this exact point, it can easily be extrapolated from her arguments and provides much food for thought as to the effectiveness of similar attempts to use the medium of television for purposes of social construction in other nations. Perhaps the best signifier of a successful academic endeavor is not necessarily the significance of the conclusions, but the new questions it raises and the avenues of new exploration it reveals. Rivero scores high on both counts.

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