
Media History in a 'Peripheral Modernity': Television in Argentina 1951-1969

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Abstract

Since the beginnings of television in Argentina – from the images of Peron and Evita in 1951– to the satellite transmission from the moon by the USA in 1969, we can establish a connection from the national sphere to the global one, from a public channel to a private system of television with economic investments by American groups. In this respect, we wonder what it means to make media history in a society where modernity has been characterized as 'peripheral.' In other words, modernity is decentered: technology comes from abroad, national groups cannot afford investments, and history becomes asynchronous, the result of the amalgamation of traditional and modern. In what sense can television be considered a national medium when it is marked by the coexistence of very local programmes and the growing presence of a global culture?

Introduction

On October 17th, 1951 the first public television broadcast in Argentina took place. It was characterized by the press as a 'late start', as a sort of national trauma. Although we may debate whether this start date actually constituted a delay – considering that Argentina was the eighth country in the world to boast a television broadcasting system – the fact that other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Cuba and Brazil had installed their first stations a year earlier was depicted as scandalous. I wonder how to interpret the media's reaction to this event in a context marked by the national-popular exaltation of Peronist discourse.¹ This is a discourse filled with implicit understandings. On the one hand, there is praise for the technical 'advance' and the cultural and educational possibilities opened up by television; with emphasis placed on how Perón – in this and other areas – had brought modernization and progress to Argentina. Press reports also made reference to the excellent quality of these first broadcasts (which were considered to be of a higher standard than in any other country). On the other hand, however, there are hints that allow readers to understand that Argentina was 'late': not only was it not among the countries that had invented television, it could not even produce its own equipment (which it imported from

the United States). The press portrayed this launch as great progress, but with arguments that questioned whether there was truly a reason for national pride.

I believe that this simultaneous discourse of celebration and deception – which we will examine more closely – can only be understood by analyzing the image that Argentina had built for itself during the first decades of the twentieth century: its ‘national destiny.’ In the 1920s, Argentina was the country with the highest literacy level in Latin America (higher than that of many European countries), boasting some of the top media sources and one of the leading publishing industries in the Spanish-speaking market. However, the fact that Argentine television did not start until the 1950s, evidences the break in the relationship between *technology, culture and nation* in the country. By analyzing the process in which television ‘from abroad’ was imported to confirm the ‘progress of the nation’, additional questions on the history of Argentinean culture arise. These questions also point to how the history of the media in peripheral countries can be assessed. In this respect, this article will attempt to present some thoughts regarding this last question.

In the following pages, I will start by discussing the notion of ‘peripheric modernity’ used in this article, which forms part of a long debate on the peculiarities of modernization in Latin America. Next, I will summarize the main points of the first two decades of television in Argentina from 1951 to 1969. The first public transmission of Canal 7 in Buenos Aires was broadcast on October 17th 1951 to celebrate the Day of Peronist Loyalty.² The Peronist government chose a ceremony held on Plaza de Mayo – the focal point for political demonstrations in Buenos Aires *par excellence* – where from the balcony of Government House Perón and Evita delivered speeches to the crowds below. The scope of events under review, beginning with Perón and Evita’s televised speeches and ending with the broadcasting of the moon landings by American television in 1969 – the broadcast that represented the largest mass simultaneous event in human history (Spigel and Curtin 1997) – allows us to trace the history of the mass media from the national to the global sphere while appreciating its countless nuances. In this respect, it is useful to ask whether a national history of television can be written (Bourdon 2003), as well as what place Latin America has in the processes of globalization – a process in which the transmissions from the moon were just one significant event.

A Peripheric Modernity

The development of media history in a country such as Argentina, cannot avoid the question of the role that the media play in a society whose modernity does not develop in the same way as that of central countries, especially when such a society cannot be considered ‘traditional’ either. The role of the press in European Modernity has been studied deeply, as have the processes leading to the

development of the mass media in the twentieth century. In Latin America, however, this history has some peculiarities. In the first place, the emergence of a political press is far removed from Habermas' theory about the conformation of a bourgeois public opinion sphere. Even if it is hard to generalize in a non homogeneous continent, in many cases the start of the press is coterminous with the continent's wars of independence and its emergence is usually linked with the construction of the state. On the other hand, Benedict Anderson's thesis with regard to the crucial participation of the press in the building of national communities, is also problematic when applied to Latin America. In societies where 90% of the population were illiterate, newspapers had an extremely low circulation until the second half of the nineteenth century. As Jorge Myers notes 'if this passage from a local identity to a broader and national one could take place in the 1820s (in Argentina), it had less to do with print capitalism or the Creole printers identified by Anderson, than with a state policy controlled by a fraction of the elite' (2003, 62). Therefore, the role of the press, its relationship with the state and the role of the writers (almost all of whom were politicians rather than journalists) must be interpreted in a context of political independence where economies had not completed their modernization and societies were almost completely illiterate.

Secondly, the appearance of readers of feuilletons, cheap books, illustrated magazines and popular papers, only took place in a few Latin American countries – Argentina being one of them – during the first decades of the twentieth century. Only at this time can we talk about the emergence of a relatively autonomous literary and intellectual field, which appeared almost in parallel with the growth in popularity of cinema, radio and illustrated magazines. In most Latin American countries the arrival and expansion of radio predated mass literacy. Modernity did not arrive by a society of writers, but by the orality of radio or the images of cinema and television.

Finally, both political and cultural movements (from Romanticism to the Avant-garde) and the technical instruments needed for the expansion of media (from the printing press to cameras) have been 'imported' to the region: from Europe during the nineteenth century and from the United States in the twentieth. The impulse of modernization did not come, therefore, from within Latin America, but from an external centre. However, far from being mere imitations or transplants of external processes, western modernity merged with the characteristics and distinctiveness of Latin American cultures. In Argentina the role played by the massive influx of European immigrants is part of the mix.

How can we, therefore, explain the logic of modernization in these kinds of society? Within the framework of development theories the persistence of traditional marks (indigenous or otherwise) were interpreted as a 'resistance to

change' in societies where the traditional component would not have been 'superseded'. American policies used the media as diffusers of the new, from agricultural technologies to health and literacy plans. However, during the 1960's the failures of these plans and of the media to promote them engendered other explanations. Most prominent amongst them was the emergence of Dependency theory, as articulated, for example, by the Brazilian Fernando Henrique Cardoso and the Chilean Enzo Faletto in *Dependency and development in Latin America*, published in 1969. Refuting the idea that development in 'peripheric' countries would necessarily arrive as a result of repeating the evolutionary phases of economies in the central countries, they suggested an integrated model of development, where development and underdevelopment were understood as both sides of the same coin, not as successive phases of a universal model. Dependency theory was based on Marxism, in a reinterpretation of Lenin and his concept of imperialism (Gilman 2003, 48-49). Indeed, from a symbolic point of view, the notion of 'cultural imperialism' was an attempt at developing categories to avoid the 'colonization' of thought.

However, as Renato Ortiz notes, 'it is not by chance that the notion has been developed, mainly, in communication studies,...Imperialism usually strengthened the economic level by monopoly companies, but now something similar is happening at the symbolic level: the arrival of multinational companies that operate on an international scale' (Ortiz 2002, 144). The inequality of information flows and the hegemony of American mass culture led to the McBride Report (1980) and the notion of a 'New World Information and Communication Order.'

In the 1980s the notion of cultural imperialism gave way to the theory of globalization and new hypothesis regarding the role of media were developed. They were based on a critical view of Latin American modernity and its enlightened components (also present in Marxism and dependency theory). In opposition to the interpretations which argued that mass culture destroyed high culture and were an anathema to an enlightened media culture, some Latin American authors –Jesús Martín Barbero in particular - noted that it was useful to think about how the media retrieved a previously suppressed oral popular culture.³ In this way far from being something external or imposed on the people, the mass media were very important in retrieving an oral 'cultural matrix' and popular subjects. This persistence of 'the popular' in the mass media in a different form from which people read or interpreted messages, could explain the media's popularity. Melodrama was the favoured subject: a genre which could really represent Latin America because 'the drama of recognition was at stake...a struggle for recognition' (Barbero 2003, 313). This is why for Barbero the *telenovela* is an appropriate 'mixing place' allowing people in the cities to appropriate Modernity, without leaving their oral culture.

Latin American modernity is therefore decentred and heteronymous (Brunner 1988, 197) This is why the experience of modernity in Latin America, exists only as pastiche, a collage that is ‘an heteroclitite configuration of elements taken virtually from anywhere, but always out of its original context’ (Ibid, 198). The idea of cultural heterogeneity refers to ‘a kind of cultural postmodernism *avant la lettre*’ (Ibid, 216). Therefore, instead of classifying ‘Latin American modernization as a strange and dominant force that operates by substitution of the traditional and own culture’, it is interpreted as ‘the diverse attempts of updating the multi-temporal heterogeneity of each nation’ (García Canclini 1989, 15). Hybridity, multi-temporalities, a bricolage and the mixing of cultures (Sarlo 1988, 9) are the ways in which modernity is experienced in Latin America, in a context that substitutes an occidental idea of the world with a polycentric one. However, ‘the identity of those peripheric zones is constructed in part, with the image of that Other, while culture is also developed with fragments of that other culture’ (Brunner, 235).

It is worth thinking about the meanings attributed to the history of the media in countries like these. Although no one would dare to say that the history of the media is similar throughout the world, it is unlikely that anyone would venture to focus on its development in Latin America or Africa when drawing up the ‘world history’ of the media. On the contrary, if this ‘world history’ existed, it would probably be dominated by the countries that ‘invented’ media technologies and first incorporated them into their societies (Flichy 1993). Paradoxically, these are the continents –or parts thereof– where the social weight of the media –in comparison to other forms of cultural consumer products – is hefty, perhaps even disproportionate. In contexts characterized by poverty and non-existent or weak cultural and educational policies, the media have taken on diverse roles filling the void left by political institutions. The media have served to standardize national language, to introduce urban habits in rural areas, to spread social models and different ways of marking social distinctions. However, it is worth wondering whether the importance of the mass media in Latin America can be evaluated exclusively based on their social significance. Through this interpretation, wouldn’t we be reproducing the old dichotomy between countries that produce messages and countries that receive them? What is the role of the local production of television images for these audiences?

I believe that the passionate nationalistic discourses pronounced on the occasion of the arrival of television equipment from the United States, as well as the devastating intellectual critiques of television in the 1960’s, can only be interpreted as part of this decentred character of Argentinean culture. A culture in the extreme south of the world, far removed from the centre, but in the imagination, closer to Europe rather than Latin America.

An Antenna in La Pampa.

The first public transmission by Canal 7 in Buenos Aires was carried out using Standard Electric equipment purchased in the United States. Jaime Yankelevich - director of the most popular radio station in Argentina at the time, Radio Belgrano - had travelled to America to purchase the equipment and to find specialized technicians who could train his Argentine radio engineers to work at the new television channel. Yankelevich purchased equipment that had been discarded by American television. This had long term repercussions with problems relating to the technology's technical compatibility persisting over the next few decades. In addition, somewhere between 400 and 5000 Standard Electric and Capehart television sets were imported, highlighting the infinitesimal number of televisions that had been set up in Buenos Aires homes. Store windows were the main place where televisions could be found, and this would continue for some time: during the first decade, television in Argentina had only a reduced audience with a high purchasing power.

The political decision that led to the new installation at the channel is still a relatively unknown chapter in the history of the media in Argentina. Jaime Yankelevich was a radio entrepreneur who – like many others during the first few years of Perón's administration – was forced to accept the censoring, then intervention, and finally expropriation by the administration of his radio interests, in their attempts to form a media monopoly. However this experience, similar to that of other privately owned radio stations and print media sources (Varela, 2007), ended in an odd compromise with Yankelevich appointed director of *Radio Belgrano*, which was now in the hands of the state. Thus somewhat paradoxically the man who had been put out of business by the Government began directing the most important radio station in the country as well as the incipient television system.

Publicly, television was presented as yet another achievement of the Peronist Government. However, when the first transmission was aired, newspapers and magazines barely made mention of the launch of this new medium. The historic event reported in the press on the day following this first transmission was the Loyalty Day ceremony marking the reappearance of Evita in public after a period of bed rest in an attempt to recover from ill health. The television broadcast simply contributed to this event: 'Tomorrow Television Joins Argentina's Magna Civic Celebration' read the headline of the newspaper *Crítica* on October 16th. However, at the same time this arrival was portrayed as part of an undefined series of advances that Argentina was undertaking. As the cinema newsreel *Sucesos argentinos* (Argentine events) commented whilst showing images of workmen engaged in the construction of the television antenna, often in risky positions:

Once again, Argentina shows the world its overwhelming potential and the way in which its government dares to keep pace with progress, while always keeping in mind the wellbeing of its people.

The prominence placed on the antenna was indicative of the important role played by the technicians who installed it, the men who were able to explain how it worked. The most cited figure during this initial phase was Max Koeble, the engineer responsible for installing the equipment and the technical aspects of the first broadcasts. Koeble had travelled to the United States with Yankelevich and both were responsible for the equipment that had been purchased. *Viajeros (Travellers)* was the title of the text accompanying the aforementioned cinema news reel in which showed them travelling to Europe in search of state-of-the-art broadcasting methods. Although national pride was absent in much of the surrounding discourse (due to the fact that the technical equipment had been imported), the construction of the antenna showed how the country was gearing up for the first broadcast:

Strength and Clarity Characterize Argentine Television

[The public] has witnessed the diligence of the Argentine workmen as they struggle to mount the transmission tower. [...] And, as we mentioned, the impression was favorable indeed. [...] Thus, the solid support of General Perón's administration, as well as the effort of the technicians and workmen, can be clearly seen in the installation of some of the most powerful equipment in the world. This equipment will begin operating on a date that many consider an unforgettable one in the memory of the Argentine people. (*Revista Antena* 18th September 1951).

Thus, in the very construction of the antenna the “effort of the criollo technicians and workmen” was apparent.⁴ However, newspapers and magazines reveal a problem right from the start: they insist on interpreting this as a sign of progress, when the delay in television's arrival cannot be ignored. Argentina, which had released its first film in 1896 and inaugurated its first radio station in 1920, was no longer ‘among the first.’ As a result, excuses are needed, and to give such excuses, a wide variety of arguments were made:

Exceptional Clarity

We should clarify that although our country has been late in television broadcasting, this delay has brought many benefits. We are beginning where others have ended. In other words, the equipment installed in Argentina is currently the most advanced equipment available in the world. The North American technicians that brought the equipment to Argentina have expressed that the clarity of the transmissions is actually better –they claim–

than that of television channels currently broadcasting in the United States. (*Revista Antena* 18th September 1951).

Argentina Owns the Most Advanced Television Equipment in the World
The fact that television has arrived a bit late is no problem: on the contrary, it works to our advantage because –now that the testing and improvement phases are complete– we can enjoy optimal results. Or perhaps we should say “almost optimal” because –as with all things related to science and technology– the final word hasn’t yet been spoken. And it so happens that those who have the final word are often not the same ones who first spoke. (*Diario Mundo Argentino* 17th October, 1951).

While in the cases above, simple optimism or hyperbole is used, the following quotes appeal to the national value *par excellence*: territory:

The geographical conditions have been critical in executing the first tests, since the fields outside the capital city of Buenos Aires and the low-rise buildings offer favorable conditions for the reception of [television] programs. (*Revista Antena* 16th October 1951).

Help from La Pampa

The endless Pampa meadows that surround our capital city and the low-level buildings allow us to conclude –after a few test transmissions– that the images reach the receptors more clearly than anywhere else in the world. (*Diario Crítica* 16th October 1951).

The reference to the mythical territory of the tales on the Argentine nation – the endless Pampa meadows - is the most eloquent example of the way in which the peripheral status of the country is denied. The exaltation of the telluric roots and the excellence of the human resources of the ‘Argentine workman’ constitute a national cliché that cannot only be explained by the political context in which these articles were written.⁵ Instead, these quotes must be examined with regard to the pending expectations.

Argentina Gets to Work

[...] The transmission tower should make our country proud. The level of our technicians, materials and workmen are proof of Argentina’s capabilities. [...] Although Brazilian television is quite advanced, ours is even more so, thanks to the fact that it was installed a bit later. This was enough time to allow for the construction of the state-of-the-art antenna that has been installed. (*Revista Antena* 9th November 1951).

When all these arguments do not suffice, journalists make use of the ultimate bastion of Argentina's history: glorious pioneering. On October 31st, *Mundo Argentino* ran the article 'Twenty Years Ago, Radio Images were Transmitted in Argentina' in which the writer asks, 'Was there television in Argentina 20 years ago?' While the fact itself (the transmission of radio images) is true, the experiment was not unlike many others conducted across the world during the same period.

The First Decade

This first state-owned channel would not, however, have the lofty aims or play the role expected of a public broadcasting service. Argentina had already defined its radio broadcasting model – at the beginning of the 1930s – and television was merely incorporated into this model. The difficulty in striking a balance between private and public interests led to hybrid programming: educational programmes followed by straight entertainment and commercial advertising. The first Artistic Director at Canal 7 was Enrique Susini –a 'pioneer' of Argentine radio who had chosen the opera *Parsifal* to inaugurate the first radio transmission in 1920. For television broadcasting Susini would respect these same cultural tenets, airing classic theatre, concerts and ballet. However, this idea of television as a way to promote culture was at odds with Yankelevich's belief of what a popular-commercial station should be. Yankelevich would prevail in this debate and Susini was quickly and definitively removed from the world of television.

In addition to the lack of an initial cultural framework for television's content, there were serious deficiencies in terms of material and no stable production methods. Given the state of this fledgling medium, radio and cinema professionals opted to remain in more profitable segments with more established audiences. Television, paradoxically, was becoming the most modern of the cultural industries but with very old-fangled production methods. At the same time, though, young authors from independent theatre and from a cultural political circuit with leftist tendencies started to move in. Television offered aesthetic appeal – experimentation with a new technique and a new language– and the promise of mass audiences. In some cases, the search was aimed at finding a large audience that had yet to be created – to be 'tuned in', according to the formula in use at the time. Here, I am referring to a brief period in which television was rapidly transformed when private stations were founded during the 1960s; by that time, professional guidelines were in place and a logic had been established that was diametrically opposed to any sort of aesthetic break.

Private Channels

Following the military coup d'état that overthrew Juan D. Perón in 1955, the system of radio was redesigned in order to eliminate any hint of Peronism in the mass media. In 1958, three days before the military was set to hand over power to the newly elected president, Arturo Frondizi – and three days after the General Broadcasting Department had been established – licenses were granted to install several radio and television channels over a 15-year period. This last-minute decision by a de facto government would have long-term consequences for the media system in Argentina.

The call for bids allowed North American groups that owned NBC, ABC and CBS-Time Life to divvy up the private channels in Buenos Aires (Canal 9, Canal 11 and Canal 13, respectively). It is important to note that Argentine legislation forbade foreign economic groups from owning media sources. To get around this restriction, foreign groups forged partnerships with local businessmen who served as a 'smoke screen', allowing these economic groups to do business in Argentina. For example, Cuban entrepreneur Goar Mestre –who had left Cuba in 1959 following the revolution – joined forces with the CBS-Time Life group. Together they founded television networks in different countries in Latin America (including Canal 13 in Buenos Aires) and Mestre went on to become a key figure in Latin American television. Married to an Argentine, was thus able to found his own local production company, PROARTEL.

Investments by North Americans in television enterprises – and the imposition of the imported business criteria to run these enterprises – signify a rupture with the existing management and production methods of the Argentine cultural industry. The way in which this modernization was presented as more efficacious and more polished – the further it was from the country's traditions and the better – can be seen by comparing the strategies of the different television channels and their varying levels of success. In this respect, the success of the formula employed by Goar Mester at Canal 13 was evident, as it managed to create an image of entrepreneurial immaculacy that made the other channels seem obsolete and enslaved by ideology.

Canal 9 constructed an image of continuity with cultural traditions that had a negative effect on its ranking in this dispute over modernization. The channel selected a 'gaucho' wearing a poncho as its symbol, and set up its studio headquarters in a traditional entertainment building in Buenos Aires, 'the old Armenonville.' The most important stars on this channel were figures from the world of cinema and radio whose arrival to television was based on their prestigious careers in other media.

In contrast to this strategy, based on continuity, Canal 13 started by breaking with all artistic and commercial traditions. Goar Mestre imposed television production concepts that were totally unheard of in Argentina –concepts based on an image of radical modernity in comparison to the way in which the media had previously worked in Argentina. On several occasion, Mestre pointed out that:

The first rule that I made was that no one who had worked in television in Argentina could work at Proartel (the production company at Canal 13.) (Mestre 1983)

Thus, he decided to found a school for cameramen, producers and lighting technicians. ‘We didn’t have lighting technicians, as we weren’t able to bring any good ones from Cuba. CBS lent us one guy and we started a lighting school that lasted five months’ (Ibid). The way in which the business operated would be associated with productivity, preciseness, reliability and efficacy. A production system was organized to allow the production company to take full advantage of the studios: two programmes were recorded each day in every studio. All of the programmes had the same number of sets (three), all of which were staged in exactly one-half the time assigned to the programme in studio; all production teams were comprised of eight people (two cameramen, two assistants, one lighting technician, one sound operator, one musical producer).

The channel’s initial investment capital allowed it to purchase equipment far superior to that of its competitors. This point is crucial, but the detailed criteria for business operations and organization were also critical to the channel’s success. The station directors announced that programmes would be aired on time, marking an important difference at the new channel, as late starts were quite a common occurrence. In 1961, PROARTEL announced that it would dub North American TV series in Argentina, and that to do so it was planning on bringing in some of the most capable technicians available. No matter how minor the detail, nothing was left to chance:

In terms of programming distribution, we believe that it is not a good idea to have two soap operas one right after another or two musical programs. In addition, we will use 50% previously recorded programs and 50% live tapings with exclusive artists. [...] The Río de la Plata channel has two video tapes that will be used for artistic programs and commercial advertising. We will bring in Argentine directors and technicians who are working in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia and Peru. [...] Sets are based on the modular system and consist of panels and walls of an equal height; staples, not nails, are used to put together sets, though pulley systems like that used in theater may also be used. This will allow sets to be changed even while the program is airing, thanks to the loose modules. We will use 8 to 10 microphones per

set to eliminate the famous shotgun mike so that, by distributing these microphones across the set, the boom will not have its classic “blind” spots and the sound will be balanced.⁶

This desire to present an image of the company as one that examines every detail and which creates its productions *ex nihilo* led the elements of continuity –which were in fact present– to be marginalized or concealed. The contracts announced by channel directors before broadcasting began did in fact include certain successful television starts from the 1950s. This image of overwhelming entrepreneurial will was only barely disguised by the stated cultural and artistic objectives, which were not, in this context, of particular interest.

By establishing a comparison with Canal 11, the last of the private channels founded in Buenos Aires during this phase, we can see how the ‘corporate’ discourse imposed by Canal 13 is presented as a ‘transparent’ discourse that returns, obscuring and outdated all other images. In this way, Canal 11 or ‘the priest channel’ as it quickly became known due to its association with groups from the Catholic Church, was trapped by the tension in which its commercial needs collided with its ideological objectives:

In New York, the commission from Dicon [the production company at Canal 11] expressed ‘... that this part of the western hemisphere was mainly Catholic and as a result, spiritual postulates would be the bastions of its programming, although the commercial aspects would not be neglected.’ All of this would take place under the auspices of the holy organization known in Catholicism as the Company of Jesus, and Canal 11 would thus be the family television station. In addition, this element of the negotiations was backed by the fact that for the first time in its history, the U.S. president was a Catholic.⁷

The timid attempts at innovation by certain authors, directors and actors during the 1950s would not be viable in 1960s television. The medium was no longer an emerging technique that encouraged experimentation; in fact, the two proposals for integration were nearly polar opposites. A few directors and authors tried to take advantage of the technical and economical advantages offered by Canal 13 through a few special programmes that included proposals related to ‘artistic quality’ and directed to the public at large. The second option is evidenced during one brief administration at Canal 7 (April 1964–June 1965), one of the few times in which Canal 7 presented itself as a ‘cultural channel’; however, this was so short-lived that it left no mark on the administrations that followed, all of which were subject to the continuous ups and downs of the station *directors du jour*.

1969: History in the Making – Live

During the first two decades of television in Argentina, it is possible to reconstruct the process of the social and cultural construction that allowed a mass audience to develop by the end of the 1960s. By then, television had imposed its hegemonic aesthetics on Argentina, after converting television technique into a language, an object of artistic interest devoid of ideological denunciation, and a state enterprise that was actually a company founded with multinational capital. The consolidation of continual broadcasting was achieved as programming hours were extended; in the 1960s, programmes were aired throughout the day, generating new habits in terms of television watching. Only then was television ready to take its cameras to contemporary historic events and even to become an active component in such events.

In 1969, there are two events –one in Argentina and another global one– that can be characterized as ‘television events.’ The first is *el Cordobazo*, a set of political protests in which unionized workers and university students took to the streets in the city of Córdoba (the second largest city in Argentina). *El Cordobazo* has been read as the beginning of the armed struggle that would have a major effect on Argentine politics during the 1970s; in addition, the protest brought down the dictatorship presided over by General Onganía, who had taken power in 1966. It was a violent event that took Argentine politics by surprise, and television played an important role by offering a national dimension to the events unfolding in a city deep within the country. This is particularly significant because the national territory of Argentina is quite extensive and large stretches are practically uninhabited; nearly one-third of the country’s inhabitants live in the city of Buenos Aires.

In the second place, the television broadcast of man walking on the moon was an event that had been carefully planned to be transmitted across the world. This event was presented as the finishing line of the space race – a race which was the chosen stage for presenting the Cold War at the symbolic level. Thus, the presence of Americans on the moon – with the iconography of the U.S. flag placed on the moon’s surface – made the United States the undisputed leader of the entire earth. This was quite significant for Argentine television, which had always been wrought with tension over the presence of North Americans on its screens although – unlike in the case of other Latin American countries– national programming always occupied a starring role and was the most successful with local audiences.

The Argentine broadcast of this event was also staged as an unprecedented historic event, as a Satellite Communications Station was inaugurated just for the occasion. The station was run by ENTEL (the National Telecommunications Corporation). Although the satellite had already been tested, the transmission of the Apollo XI mission was announced as the official inauguration of the satellite. Thus, the two

events were combined as yet another technical achievement of a decade in which satellites and outer space played pivotal roles. The satellites – which enabled the television images to be broadcast across Argentina and in Uruguay as well – had been constructed as part of an agreement with INTELSAT (the International Telecommunications Satellite Consortium), which grouped 68 countries. The transmissions were carried out by a U.S. government group, COMSAT (the Communication Satellite Corporation), which dictated satellite communications and made all decisions on transmissions worldwide. The releases for Latin America were transmitted via INTELSAT II, which required the shutting down of regular phone circuits, a detail practically ignored amidst press enthusiasm at the time.

This dependence on the North American satellite meant that Argentina was not able to view the Apollo XI launch on Wednesday, July 16th. This was the result of NASA's decision to use the satellite to control the lunar vehicle, thus postponing transmission of the images of the launch in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and other countries in Latin America. A few days earlier, something similar occurred when experimental transmissions in Argentina could not proceed because Spain and Italy had not released the phone channels from the INTELSAT II. In this case, Argentina had been left out of a spectacle viewed by 528 million people across the world, as reported by local print media sources the following day.

Finally, the first direct broadcast took place on July 17th at 7PM. The activities at the control room in Cape Kennedy were shown along with a blurry image of the earth that had been taken from the spacecraft. However, on July 20th, the Argentine phone company warned that not all the events would be aired because the company did not want to postpone the construction of the Argentine satellite station which, evidently, had begun operating too hastily. According to ENTEL, the construction firm had a deadline to deliver and work had to continue; as a result, after the moon broadcast, no other transmission would be received until July 24th, when the “splashdown” would take place.⁸

At the time, the media frequently compared the moon landing to Columbus's arrival in America. Astronauts were thus comparable to the Conquistadors, establishing a new frontier for humanity. While Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés had described the ‘new world’ in their travel journals, the astronauts wielded a television camera to document their expedition. Europe would no longer be the same after finding out that other lands –and other cultures– existed on the other side of the ocean. Likewise, the Earth acquired new proportions after being photographed and televised from outer space. Transmission via satellite created the possibility of simultaneous reception from this new viewpoint. In addition, however, the asymmetry between the broadcast and the reception reached a new level of tension in this transmission: only three astronauts were transmitting from the moon, while the rest of humanity was

watching them on television. It was, in fact, an event that could only be seen on television. If Apollo XI –and its satellite transmission– bore the unmistakable mark of the United States, in its reception everyone became the same: President Nixon in the United States, President Onganía in Argentina, the Smiths, the González – all were members of the great human family. In this respect, the moon landing was a watershed for the broadcasting system worldwide.

Intellectuals and Television

Towards the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the mass media became –for the first time since their introduction – a subject of criticism and debate for Argentine intellectuals and artists. The intellectual debates during this period and avant-garde artistic production incorporated a critical viewpoint on the media, one that flourished particularly during this period (Varela, 2005). Although this subject is too extensive to summarize in this article, I would like to briefly reflect on how the media came into play at the crossroads of the national vs. the international in this historical context.

Based on theoretical interpretations such as structuralism, the theory of ideology and semiotics –as well as militant political practices that required decisions on which media and what type of language should be used to address the masses– the mass media were viewed by a group of intellectuals as an ideological apparatus whose economic structure alone explained its market operations. The slip between economic structure and ideology was made frequently, and it was one of the most questioned aspects *a posteriori* when discussing the way in which the media operated during this period. Although the way in which these problems were presented did not differ from what was occurring in other parts of the world, in Latin America, the asymmetry of information was presented as a geopolitical issue and formulated through hypotheses of cultural colonialism. The term ‘neocolonialism’ was also used to differentiate this period of political independence (but of economic and cultural dependence) with respect to what Argentina’s situation had been as a Spanish colony (Argentine independence dates back to 1810) and the situation of other third-world countries on continents like Africa. In this way, the media were not only thought of as agents of cultural imperialism but they were critical to understanding the workings within the framework of Brazilian theorists H. Cardoso and E. Faletto’s dependency theory, as it was proposed in the first part of this article.

On the political horizon, it was necessary to start thinking about how to manage relations within the Cold War: the U.S.S.R. and the U.S.A. were presented as the horizon where the third world caught a glimpse of its chance to emerge. In the sphere of mass culture, advertising, television, pop singers and the record industry, however, intellectuals could do no more than list the ways in which North

American culture crisscrossed Latin America. Argentine television had ‘a low proportion of foreign programmes – even in the periods of active importation of series – and broadcast 70% national creations’ (Ford and Rivera 1985, 45). One of the first studies on Argentine television, published in 1974, pointed out that imported programmes were not very important for the ‘dependance of the channels with regard to the importation of film. Argentina is probably the country in Latin America with the lowest rate of foreign TV programmes. In fact in this market, the series had failed; the public prefers live national broadcasts over any foreign series’ (Muraro 1974, 235). However, this author concluded that the dependence on sources of information and advertising made Argentine television reliant on external forces. To this can be added the use of American models for a meaningful part of the programmes produced in the country. This was a permanent source of very particular hybrids. In any case it was symptomatic that even if national programmes took up an important part of television schedule in many cases they were still perceived as agents of imperialism. The fact that American companies were the owners of the channels may be a partial explanation, but I think that the tendency to ‘latinoamericanize’ the hypothesis during that period must be considered also. It must be also taken into account that television produced a ‘break’ with Argentina’s past media history, as I argued earlier in this text.

The McBride report, approved by UNESCO in 1980, denounced the inequality suffered by third-world countries with regards to information access; this could be considered the apex in terms of this way of viewing how the mass media operate in Latin America. However, the report can also be considered a turning point, since beginning in the 1980s, the cultural industry began to be reconceptualised and the parameters for interpretation changed completely. At the end of the 1970s, Latin America –as a geographical region– was presented as the principal victim of North American cultural imperialism. As a result, Latin American intellectuals were limited to denouncing this imperialism, making the masses aware and encouraging resistance in the media, or creating alternative instruments for popular communication. Since the 1980s, Latin America has been presented as the continent of unfinished modernity and as a result, it is also the region with the greatest capacity for criticizing triumphant Modernity.

Conclusions

The accounts of the beginning of Argentine television in 1951 show the way in which a relative delay affected the expectations of a country that had undergone cultural modernization during the first few decades of the 20th century: Argentina had fostered a national cultural industry that kept pace with the development of popular journalism, radio and cinema in more central countries. In other words, Argentina had been subject to a modernization that could be called ‘peripheral’ in comparison to that of other countries –but ultimately, it was modernization just

the same. In this respect, both the development of a cultural industry with its own personality –as well as the existence of a popular, modern audience– has its own unique history in Argentine society.

The period of expansion of Argentine television at the beginning of the 1960s –and the founding of private stations partnered with North American networks– signified rupture with respect to the country's previous history. Thus, the channel that would become most successful was the one that presented itself as the 'most modern' and the least connected to the 'modern traditions' of Argentina's cultural history.⁹ During this period, the relationship between 'endogenous modernization' and 'exogenous modernization' was critical in debates about Latin American culture.

The way in which the concept of a 'national' cultural industry related to the interests of Latin America (as a geopolitical, cultural unit) is fundamental when assessing this issue. At the beginning of the 20th century, Argentine intellectuals had pondered relations with Latin America from a position of leadership, while maintaining an autonomous relationship with regards to European intellectuals. By the end of the 1960s, the internationalization of culture and Argentina's relegation at the international level modify these relationships. The boom of Latin American literature and militant political cinema produced an impact at the international level, though this did not grant Argentina a leading position at the regional level.

In this context, television – and the mass media – suffered two different stigmas. In the first place they were condemned as 'agents of Yankee imperialism', to use the discourse of the time, perceived as 'imported' and not as the heirs of the previous cultural industries in the country. Secondly, at a time when utopian versions of the future became central for the political culture, television began to be considered an 'agent of the past.' This aspect, which has received much less attention, is essential to understanding the way in which television cannot be assessed by Argentine and Latin American intellectuals from this period. While the intellectuals at the turn of the last century almost totally embraced the technical and cultural modernization in Argentina, the panorama was much more complex at the end of the 1960s. The promise of a new beginning that accompanied the moon landing broadcast in 1969 –and the utopias that began circulating with the images of El Cordobazo (in many respects, the "May '68" of Argentina)– were, in retrospect, a closure before the start of a whole new chapter in history.

Notes

¹ Juan Domingo Perón was president of Argentina from 1946-1952 and 1952-1955; his second term was interrupted by a coup d'état in 1955. However, his influence and his sincere interest in the media were clear since his service as the Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare during the de facto government of General Farrell (1944-1946). During this time,

he helped to pass the Professional Journalist Statute in 1944. Perón's third period as President began in 1973 after nearly twenty years in exile, ending with his death a year later.

² Loyalty Day was a celebration started by Perón to commemorate the popular protest held on October 17, 1945 to liberate the then Colonel Perón from jail. According to popular myth, this was a spontaneous protest that took workers from the suburbs on a march to the downtown area of the capital city. During his Presidencies, Perón always summoned the workers *en masse* on this date to commemorate and reaffirm the people's "loyalty" to their leader.

³ The meaning of popular culture in Spanish is rather different from the meaning in English because it was not used for media or mass culture at all until this moment.

⁴ The term "*criollo*" was used in Argentina throughout the 20th century. Though it involved much debate on nationality and the 'Argentine being', it eventually became synonymous with 'national'.

⁵ The iconography of TV stations from other countries also involved nationalist association based on idiosyncratic elements. For example, in a newsreel of *Sucesos de las Américas* in 1950, the TV Tupi antenna is depicted atop Pan de Azúcar Hill in Rio de Janeiro along with a 'dance champion' dressed in a typical Brazilian costume. The TV Tupi logo was the 'little Tupi Indian.'

⁶ Massa, O. L. (1960) 'En agosto se inaugurará el canal 13 de TV' *La Nación*, May 3, p.16.

⁷ "Lo positivo: las tareas en Dicón S.A. TV" in: *La Nación*, April 1, 1961.

⁸ Press release by ENTEL, published in *Clarín*, July 20, 1969.

⁹ Renato Ortiz (1994) uses the paradoxical formula of 'modern tradition' in reference to this process in the case of Brazil.

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