

# BOOKS

**TELEVISIONING TERRORISM:  
POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POPULAR CULTURE**  
by Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock, and Phillip Elliott  
(Charles Scribner's Sons; 181 pp.; \$15.00/\$8.95)

Martin Green

Last year NBC-TV showed a film in which a group of antinuclear protesters threatened to blow up Charleston, South Carolina, with a nuclear device unless all nuclear weapons were destroyed. Produced on videotape in documentary style, the film was framed as a network news program complete with male and female anchor team, remotes from the scene (for plot convenience, a TV reporter and camera crew were kidnapped by the terrorists), interviews with public officials and people on the street, and fictional commercial breaks.

As American TV movies go, *Special Bulletin* was an unusually strong portrayal of the problems raised by political terrorism, not just in the context of the nuclear age but also in an age of instant and widespread media coverage. The film raised disturbing questions about the role and responsibility of the media. Does acceding to terrorist demands for air time legitimize their activities? Does the presence of the media escalate political violence by providing a forum and a model for other terrorists and would-be terrorists? How do reporters and news executives balance the audience's "right to know" against the security claims of law enforcement officials?

These and other questions confronting real media people as well as those responsible for public order and safety and for state security are the focus of *Televising Terrorism*, a curiously dispassionate book on a very emotional subject. The lack of passion derives from the authors' academic style and approach, not from lack of a point of view. Focusing primarily on examples from British TV, Schlesinger et al. are clearly partisans of openness in the media and highly critical of attempts to control the flow of information and news. Their analysis shows that the issues raised by TV's coverage of political violence are complex and contentious; but their partisanship is often at odds with their scholarly objectivity.

Chief among the knotty problems addressed in *Televising Terrorism* is the dilemma faced by the media in Western de-

mocracies of giving access to the airwaves to violent political dissidents. In totalitarian and authoritarian societies—to use Jeane Kirkpatrick's infamous distinction—the battle for access is direct and straightforward: The state, by controlling the media outright, usually can keep unofficial views off the air, and dissidents attempt to wrest control by seizing transmitters and broadcasting facilities. In the so-called liberal democracies, the problem is more subtle, complex, and paradoxical because the media are at least nominally independent of the state, which adheres to certain traditions of civil liberties and openness. On the one hand, the state loses something of its legitimacy if it appears too heavy-handed in trying to muzzle unpopular and unofficial views; on the other hand, to maintain its legitimacy the state must delegitimize the efforts of dissidents by restricting press coverage of their activities.

Part of this effort to control the airways, as the authors point out, is the control of the language used to describe acts of political dissidence. In their view, "terrorism" itself is a term with no settled definition; it depends upon who does the defining. The "official" label for political violence is "terrorism" and its perpetrators are "thugs," "murderers," and "criminals"; violent political dissent is lumped with purse-snatching and mugging. The "oppositional" view labels political violence as the action of "freedom fighters" or of "members of the resistance" in the cause of "liberation" or "freedom for oppressed peoples." The "official" language attempts to make acts of political violence appear irrational, random, and isolated. The "oppositional" language attempts to create an image of purposefulness, organization, and popular support.

The dispute over terminology is no mere exercise in semantics. It is a life-and-death struggle on both sides. The degree to which the state can impose its view of the terrorist as criminal determines the degree to which violent political dissidence can be denied its own ends. If the public consensus ac-

cepts the "official" definition, then political terrorists have a harder time attaining legitimacy, even if they gain access to the media.

The government, of course, would prefer to deny terrorists all access, for the "official" view of terrorism implicitly assumes, the authors maintain, that the mere depiction of terrorist activity is enough to gain sympathy for these "outlaws." The media spread the virus of political violence to an audience whose resistance is weak. This "contagion" theory of media influence, according to the authors, is an outmoded concept based on a faulty and highly biased view of the audience's intelligence. Nonetheless, as the activities of the British Government described in this book make clear, both indirect and direct methods have been developed to control the contagion.

Thus, when a BBC news program interviews a member of the IRA, virulent criticism by government officials and threats of parliamentary investigation inevitably follow in a well-orchestrated pattern. Reporters and news producers are sure to be accused, at a minimum, of being unwitting dupes of the enemy or, more seriously, of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. In the slightly different context of the Falklands War—where the enemy was a foreign power and not domestic insurgents—the presentation of Argentine views on the BBC evoked charges of treason against the broadcasting authority. The result of this critical outpouring is, not surprisingly, caution on the part of media executives, especially the quasi-official BBC. Within the organization an elaborate system of approvals—known as "referencing upward"—is required before broadcasting a controversial report; and anything to do with Ireland, even historical studies like *Ireland: A Television History*, is, by definition, controversial.

Control by direct pressure, however, is seen by state officials as insufficient to insulate the public from contagion by radical ideas. In Britain, more direct measures of control have been developed—from the long-standing "D" Notice system, whereby press coverage of certain defense areas is proscribed, to informal agreements between the press and authorities to refrain from disclosing information that the police or army believe may be helpful to terrorists or may endanger public safety, to the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which makes it a crime for the press to withhold information about terrorist activity.

Correlative to the contagion theory in the official view is the assumption that reporters are particularly prone to sympathize with radicals and dissidents. Perhaps a legacy of

the Vietnam war, which some believe was "lost" on TV, this charge of left-wing bias continues to crop up. For example, when behind-the-lines reports on El Salvador rebel activity were published last year by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, administration officials and their supporters in such conservative journals as the *Wall Street Journal* denounced them as near treason. Paradoxically, as a sign of the complexity of the issues, political dissidents see the media as part of the state's apparatus of repression, accepting the state's definition of reality, keeping speakers for unpopular causes off the air, downplaying state-sponsored political violence, and generally failing to present any analysis of the underlying causes of political violence.

This diversity of views—both here and in Britain—stems from the fact, the authors argue, that the media are not monolithic. Even with the pressure to adhere to the official line and to support the government's war against terrorism, television does manage to present, if not outright "oppositional" views, at least "alternative" view to the official ones. In brief, the authors' analysis, based on an examination of examples drawn largely from British television over the last decade or so, argues that the "orthodoxies of right and left" are simplifications. The specific point of view presented depends on a number of variables: the type of program ("actuality," i.e., news vs. fiction; news bulletin vs. talk show vs. "authored" documentary); the time of broadcast (prime time vs. fringe time); the ratings; and the channel (BBC vs. ITV).

Thus, news bulletins tend to present "facts," but facts selected according to a set of unstated assumptions that adhere very closely to the official view, with a minimum of analysis. Talk shows often present conflicting points of view, either through the presence of "oppositional" figures (a rare occurrence) or their surrogates (journalists or "experts" who explain why certain incidents may have taken place) or through questioning of officials by program "presenters" who play devil's advocate. "Authored" documentaries have the greatest freedom to present oppositional points of view, since they are usually identified as the work of a single individual or group and can be distanced from the views of the station management. But the range of treatment is limited by the size of the audience reached by the various broadcasts. Talk shows are aired at fringe times and thus have smaller audiences and lower ratings than news bulletins, and documentaries have the lowest ratings of all, watched only by an elite.

Although fictional portrayals of terrorism have potentially wider latitude to treat the complex issues of terrorism, the same variables of time, audience, and ratings determine the exact nature of the point of view. At one extreme are the popular series like *The Avengers* and *The Professionals*, in which antiterrorist activity is the pretext for good old escapist violence. Terrorists are uniformly negative stereotypes: shadowy figures without clear motivation. They are thugs or psychological cripples, or often sexually maimed women (the level of antifeminism in these series is high). The heroes of these popular programs are uniformly noble, often upper-class gentlemen upholding the British way of life or else decent working-class chaps impelled by patriotism to protect their country. The police and army generally do whatever is necessary to wipe out the plague of political terror, liberal sympathies and sensibilities be damned. More limited-run serials and individual TV dramas present some of these same stereotypes but often give recognition to the ambiguities of state efforts to wipe out terrorism. Occasionally, a drama like *The Psywarriors* will take an outright oppositional stand.

One final factor in the complex picture of televised terrorism that Schlesinger et al. present is the variable of distance. The reporting or portrayal of IRA terrorism on British TV naturally inclines to the negative, but political dissidence, even violent dissidence, further afield is often treated more objectively, even sympathetically—e.g., the activities of antiapartheid South Africans or the PLO. A parallel example from U.S. television is the tendency toward sympathetic treatment of the IRA (or at least toward captured IRA members suffering under Britain's harsh detention laws), while local terrorists, like the FALN or the Weather Underground, are portrayed in negative stereotypes. Another analogous, although not quite equivalent, example was American television's sympathy for Poland's Solidarity movement while it gave labor unrest in this country a bad press.

As has been documented before—by Herbert Gans and Edward J. Epstein, among others—journalistic objectivity is imperfect. It is compromised, however, less by narrow ideological commitments than by an effort to present world events in light of the prevailing consensus. When it comes to televising terrorism, liberal democratic societies respond to immediate threats with negative stereotypes, all the while maintaining that they present a pluralistic view of the world.

To a certain extent, then, the conclusions

of *Televising Terrorism* are not very startling; but the book serves a useful purpose in restating what is well known among media scholars but generally overlooked by extremist critics at both ends of the ideological spectrum. Also useful from the point of view of the U.S. is the object lesson provided by Britain's struggle over the question of media "responsibility." The BBC, as a quasi-official broadcasting organization, is subject to more direct pressure and control than are its commercial counterparts in the United States. But the issue of responsibility has been raised in the U.S. in the past—in the days of the Nixon administration in relation to the coverage of Vietnam and the antiwar movement; in the heat of the Iranian hostage crisis, when American journalists were charged with serving as conduits for Iranian propaganda; and more recently in relation to the broadcasting of *The Day After*—and it is likely to be raised again. Terrorism, especially when its threat to the social order is proximate, calls into question the commitment of the media to independence and fairness. Does political violence directed here and now at the social order absolve the media from the responsibility for fairness and balance coverage? Or is there a higher good served by openness to those who are hostile to democratic values? The problem is a challenge to liberals; conservatives have made up their minds and answer these questions "yes" and "no" respectively.

The authors end their book with a plea for the continued openness of the BBC, which they see threatened not only by direct state action but by the growing commercialization of British television. Commercialization may turn out to be a bigger problem than direct political control, since the standard of what is broadcast will be set by what is saleable and popular. Just as effectively as government, the market can limit the attempt to widen the scope of public information and provide it with a range of opinion. This is already a problem for American TV, which steers clear of the controversial for commercial rather than ideological reasons.

But as crucial as is the need for openness for the future of pluralist media, the authors are disappointing in dealing with the question of how, if pluralist media continue, violent political activity can be dealt with. How does one distinguish among varieties of political dissent? When is violence in the service of political dissent acceptable? Clearly there are no easy answers. Most dangerous of all, however, is complacency on the part of the media and their public.

As the authors note in their characteristically bland way: "There are few signs [in Britain] of large-scale popular support in the fight to develop discussion of a highly contentious area [i.e., terrorism], which, by raising the question of state repression, brings to light the contradictions of liberal democratic politics. Much more effort is needed to ensure that further openings for rational debate and criticism are created in the future." *Televising Terrorism* is a flawed but needed opening statement of the debate.

**THE CONQUEST OF AMERICA**  
 by Tzvetan Todorov  
 translated from the French  
 by Richard Howard  
 (Harper and Row; 263 pp.; \$17.95)

Holly Myers

This fascinating book is a provocative meditation on human relations. Todorov, whose work in poetics consistently challenges that field, now turns to history, and his examination of the cultural dynamics of the conquest of the New World mines a deep vein that conventional historiography often overlooks. Todorov writes: "It is in fact the conquest of America that heralds and establishes our present identity....[No date] is more suitable, in order to mark the beginning of the modern era, than the year 1492."

The motive for conquest involves a desire both to exert power over and to extract wealth from a people and a land, but it also involves a systematic depreciation of the life and aspirations of the conquered culture. Todorov asks if these two factors are separable and suggests that an awareness of the ethnocentrism that drives the process of conquest might be instrumental in preventing its recurrence. His is an idealistic, deeply liberal premise, and it resounds with authentic force throughout this imaginative, scholarly, and very readable work. Using diaries and documents of men who shaped the conquest, Todorov's analysis permits us first to contrast the aggressive, "modern" mind of the cosmopolitan European with the less agile mind of the culturally isolated Aztec. He then traces the slow evolution from the conquistador's narrow vision to the first stirrings of an appreciation for the legitimate difference of the conquered, whom Todorov calls "the other."

Ironically, Columbus, the discoverer, did not himself possess so modern an outlook as to enter fully into the era his discoveries

inaugurated. Though his diaries attest to a constant delight and wonder at the physical world, Columbus was oblivious to the people and cultures he encountered. Medieval in his cast of mind, Columbus did not recognize foreignness, and he repeatedly interpreted the symbolic behavior of the Indians according to preconceived notions, hearing or seeing the familiar in every situation. From initial disinterest, due to his inability to comprehend the Indians as unique, worthy humans, Columbus gradually adopted an "ideology of enslavement, and hence [an] assertion of the Indian's inferiority." That is, once it was clear that the Indians would resist the imposition of European culture, it was possible to reject their humanity entirely.

Discovery soon gave way to the drama played out between Hernán Cortés and the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma in the city of Tenochtitlán. Todorov illuminates that fantastic encounter by contrasting the mentality of the Aztec ruler, who acted out of the prescribed conventions of his hierarchical, "overdetermined" world, with that of the modern man Cortés, who was able to manipulate the remarkable situation in which he found himself and thereby master it. For the Aztec, the "characteristic interrogation of this world [was] not, as among the Spanish conquistadors...of a praxeological type: 'What is to be done?,' but epistemological: 'How are we to know?' And the interpretation of the event occur[red] less in terms of its concrete, individual, and unique content than of the preestablished order of universal harmony, which is to be reestab-

lished." Moctezuma's reaction to reports of the conquistadors' approach was to withdraw into an almost total paralysis; faced with true foreigners, he was simply unable to respond. Prophecies of the coming of the Spaniards, contained within the myth of the return of the god Quetzalcoatl, abound in texts contemporary with the conquest, and Todorov suggests that these omens were, in fact, culturally necessary rationalizations invented after the fact: "The Aztecs perceive the conquest—i.e., the defeat—and at the same time mentally overcome it by inscribing it within a history conceived according to their requirements...."

Whereas the Aztecs were unable to react in the unprecedented situation posed by their confrontation with Cortés and his men, the Spaniards were quick to act. Cortés used what would now be called intelligence to his own advantage—as, for instance, in selecting an unexpected, more difficult route into Tenochtitlán and, in a masterly stroke, actually participating in and encouraging the association of his arrival with the myth of Quetzalcoatl's return. A vivid example of this difference in ability to improvise is the warrior Cuauhtemoc. He undermined his own chances for escape by fleeing in a boat emblazoned with royal emblems. For the Aztec, it was inconceivable that royalty could travel in any more anonymous conveyance.

The Spaniards rapidly asserted full control over Aztec possessions, unflinchingly devaluing Indian life in what Todorov terms a "massacre society." This violent exploitation was a harbinger of the modern era,

