

War and Television, by Bruce Cumings. New York: Verso, 1992). Pp. viii + 309. \$24.95

Best known as one of the foremost historians of the Korean War, Bruce Cumings has combined theoretical musings about the nature of television with a description of his own involvement in the making of a television documentary on the Korean War to create a stimulating book. Cumings first discusses the way that television performs. This discussion forms a necessary part of his work, but also, unfortunately, the least inspired. Clearly, in a book treating war and television, Cumings is correct to elaborate how the latter functions, and for those who haven't thought or read much about this dominant presence in American culture, Cumings' description of television as a medium and institution may well prove useful. However, I would guess that for most of Cumings' readership to hear that television is not an objective or unmediated medium, for example, will come as no surprise. Simply put, most of what Cumings has to say on this topic, even though sometimes provocative, has been said before by others, as he openly acknowledges in his thorough footnotes.

Once Cumings begins to talk about television's treatment of specific wars, he is much more interesting. He follows the lead of Daniel C. Hallin (*The "Uncensored War"* 1989) in arguing against the cliché that Vietnam was "lost in the living room." Instead, as Hallin and others have demonstrated, pre-TET coverage of the Vietnam War did not regularly show graphic combat violence, nor was its stance critical of U.S. policy. Even after TET television mainly called U.S. policy into question through its coverage of domestic protests against the war. And Cumings is quick to point out that this division of opinion in the American citizenry had its own very real political parallel in "a breach among the American elite," including "the wise men" and other policy shapers (88).

Cummings also critiques PBS's *Vietnam: A Television History* and Stanley Karnow's tie-in book. He finds both blandly absent of a point of view, and the television history epistemologically naive in its self-imposed exclusive dependence upon first-hand accounts. Cummings rightly points out that "history ought to be done by measuring the accounts of those who were [there] against varying interpretations about the meaning of the event, illuminated by broader conceptions and by logic" (91). Cummings finishes his chapter on Vietnam by praising the documentary film *In the Year of the Pig*, which he sees as well-executed post-modern history, "done according to . . . a skeptical, querulous epistemology of juxtaposed image, with no narration, no 'moral,' thus requiring the viewer to supply meaning to images that could not all be 'true'" (96). This sort of trendily phrased praise, bordering as it does on post-modernist cant, is actually rendered sincere through Cummings' detailed description of the film.

In his chapter on television and the Gulf War ("Was that last season's hit show?" he asks [103]), Cummings details the levels of censorship created by the military and adhered to so very passively by television. He is not the first to point out that although CNN announced that Peter Arnett's inside-Iraq reports were subject to Iraqi censorship, no networks began reports saying that they had been subjected to U.S. censorship: "Unlike Peter Arnett, the free press outside Iraq was free to go anywhere: so long as it was between their hotel swimming pool and the Riyadh press pool" (110). Discussions of U.S. military and governmental censorship during the Gulf War came mostly from small-circulation print media, came mostly after-the-fact, and came seldom (Cummings says never) from the television networks. He also argues against television's reliance on "inside-the beltway" experts, against the sort of conformity and false sense of "balance" created during panel discussions and interviews, and against the heavy and spurious use of opinion polls during coverage of the war. He also points to television's lack of interest in exploring the broader and deeper cultural and historical contexts of the Gulf War (though this particular complaint may be exaggerated—there were some attempts to

do this, however poorly done they may have been). Of course, none of these denunciations is original within the discourse of television criticism; however, their value here lies in discovering precisely how television failed and fooled the public during the Gulf War.

The final half of the book is given to Cumings' account of making the Thames/WGBH documentary *Korea: The Unknown War*, for which he and Jon Halliday served as primary historians. Although this shift to a predominantly narrative strain does give the book the appearance of hodge-podge ("unscholarly" this last half, thanks be), it is, ironically enough, in this least analytical section that one really does see how television works. Although the story becomes overdrawn at times, the narrative is just as often witty and lively—and, above all, illuminating. One learns that history-by-committee is the inevitable rule in television documentary and sees the homogenizing, sanitizing effects this consensus approach can have on the final product. Cumings' complaint about PBS's treatment of the Vietnam War exclusively through the eyes of "those who were there" comes to haunt him in his own project, as those in charge seem too willing to accept eyewitness accounts as the ultimate authority. Finally, one comes to realize exactly what Cumings means when he asserts that the editor—certainly not the project historian—is the closest thing to an author that television documentary has.

His account is also part travelogue to North Korea, where Cumings and his compatriots search for ways to circumvent the bureaucratic run-arounds and eventual guided-tour which the government forces them to accept. Here Cumings, who is avowedly leftist in politics, does not try to whitewash the shabby treatment he received at the hands of the North Koreans, nor does he try to hide their blatant attempts to induce him to write history according to their own needs. (One notes, however, that the weapons of sarcasm, irony, and anger Cumings uses to describe U.S. transgressions against truth and morality are softened into a lightly humorous, boys-will-be-boys tone when he talks about North Korea.) Finally, the reader is privy to a full array of political pressures and behind-the-scenes maneuvering to influence the content of the American version

of Cumings' documentary. The tenacity of Cumings' opponents and the apparent cravenness of certain Public Television producers will prove surprising to all but the most jaded reader or Machiavellian of the political right. So this is how televisual history is decided upon!

I was instructed by Cumings' insights and gratified by his willingness to write a lively, witty book. His recurrent gratuitous swipes at the American public should have been edited out, and I found myself tiring of his insistent and sometimes unreasonable politics (Saddam Hussein's greatest sin according to this book seems to be that he was so terribly uncool on television). But his recuperation of Vietnam's portrayal on television and his intelligent cataloguing of the medium's sins of omission and commission during the Gulf War must be applauded. He had (as I freely admit that I did not) the patience to watch hours of television's cheerleading "coverage" of that war, the forbearance to listen to all the reporters who were so obviously being led by the nose, the endurance to watch the video games fed to us in lieu of more complete reporting, and he has had the intelligence to organize a scathing inventory of these sins. Perhaps most importantly, he has provided a detailed account of how history, specifically the history of wars, is made on, by, and for television.

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