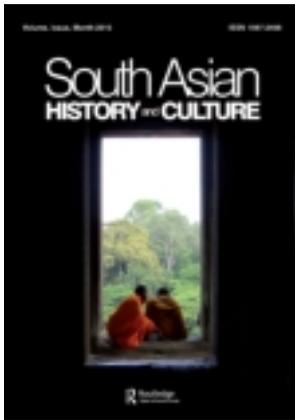


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Beyond television studies

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ROUNDTABLE ESSAY

Beyond television studies

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That a new media studies is needed is clear; that a rapid, inspiration-seeking survey can find this from South Asia in an international frame, after 10 years of the War of Terror, comes as no surprise. The obsessions and ideologies of television globally are still there to be critiqued, and this can be done with some of the authors considered here. That these readings are contingent only means that reviewing contemporary events through a distorting lens is also a part of the game and a wider remit of media studies is now urgent. From the anti-Muslim ultra-racist attacks by Breivik in Norway to the photographed-but-not-televised scenes in the White House situation room in May 2011, through the grainy aesthetic of green night vision combat patrol videos, there is a need to deploy critical ideas gleaned from the work of authors such as Ravi Sundaram, Arvind Rajagopal, M. Mhadava Prasad and Ashish Rajadhyaksha. The contemporary has a political purchase that was once national, but is now both wider and more specific, and more urgent. *For* a new media studies.

Keywords: television; terror; media; Osama bin Laden; war

The kitchen debate

The whole world is twitching and the study of television is in the final throes of a long generic isolation, becoming a fully integrated weapon of global war. Or rather, the impossibly naïve view of television as entertainment and television news as mere reportage has reached the endgame of a national–cultural isolation which has been careening towards crisis ever since Krishna hitched his chariot to the Doordarshan platform and Murdoch entered the star-filled firmament to parade as colossus astride a rampant deregulation. Media studies can never be the same now that death by television prevails (I will explain). New, and varied, work by scholars such as Arvind Rajagopal, Ravi Sundaram, Nalin Mehta, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and M. Madhava Prasad make the old media studies obsolete and the urgency of a fresh look at television, and screen cultures in general, imperative. Today, television is a fully articulated geo-political medium, reporting instantly upon world events, flitting from news flash to product placement, ticker tape stock report across the bottom of the screen, station ident in the top corner. Cultural contours, of course, remain, but now wholly in the service of an all-conquering apparatus, an extended machine, accessing all areas. We should not be surprised that television becomes battle media – we watch 1000-yard stare reporters feeding on other media feeds, and we long ago got used to actors as presidents or god-politician, such that the staged press opportunity is now no more unusual than Amitabh Bachchan fronting a game show.

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At last, the old national organizational architecture of television and consequently television studies is necessarily put under review. Of course, television has long been a global industry with a global logistics, and every 'international incident' involves battalions of workers laying cables, assembling cameras, grooming presenters, building sound stages, driving celeb vehicles and rushing here and there. In general, the globalization of television has meant a massive new participation in the production of images, from the somewhat romanticized 'citizen journalism' of 'tele-democracy',¹ to the live-cam combat footage and embedded reportage of the military and security services, all deploying the latest buzzwords as codex for wider techno-social shifts. We can consider the cable guy, VCR copy shop, dodgy wiring and knock-off brand sets of the parallel second-hand economy of reconditioned media gear – so eloquently described by Ravi Sundaram at Delhi's Nehru Place, Lajput Rai and Palika Bazaar, where the 'shops, markets, cable, wiring, cassettes [and] distributors' – as only the constitutive pirate end of a mass commercial accumulation that begins much earlier and reaches much further.² It begins perhaps when Nixon and Khrushchev debate the merits of colour television in the famous Moscow 'kitchen' debate in 1959. It ends, or rather never ends, with television in every room of every house, every office and mall and beamed constantly everywhere – the 24 × 7 rule.

An academic industry of course follows in the wake of television, like some sort of camp hanger-on modelled by Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* who sells her children into prostitution and slavery, running after the marching army of the 30 Years War.³ Academic studies are in danger of becoming a similar sort of campaign support and the logistical supply troop for a comprehensive cultural takeover – media courses, conferences and journals with critique, scholarship even, when this suits the operatives of commercial advance and technological aggression. No longer a diminutive fuzzy furniture item in the corner of the room – if it ever was, always trying to take over like it did, with aspirations to be the centre of attention – television is now ubiquitous, as a mobile in your pocket, an iPad platform, an airplane seat, taxi cab, station concourse, large public screen, festival feature, cricket stadium scoreboard and plasma proliferation. Reassessment of the volatile political place of television and the complicity of television studies as market support is well overdue. The whole world is flicker and pixels, coming to get you, already invading.

The context of television's market saturation is the neoliberal compact of the past 40 years: deregulation, commercialization, privatization on the one side, intervention, penetration and diffusion on the other. For example, Ashish Rajadhyaksha contests an 'isolationist' view of Indian television, noting the Doordarshan state monopoly was accused of a narrow 'Delhentric' view of India and he argues for refocused attention to Indian cinemas in a global frame.⁴ M. Madhava Prasad seemingly starts at the other end and takes political, economic and historical factors as key to understanding Indian media and its relation to capital.⁵ Both reconfigure the focus of media studies away from the media alone, and away from the old national allegory paradigm. The illusion that the political somehow escapes television was always merely televised, and the economy seems now to perform for television, while socio-cultural change runs interference for a technological escalation that only sells us *more* television. It does not matter that we are all always on screen and under scrutiny check in the garrison society. Or rather, it matters only insofar as the global economy is performed *as* television, designed, like war, with all of us *as screens*. A co-constitution of camera and capital, such that the fiction of a single point of view – the camera, or the screen you are looking at now, even when it cuts from angle to angle – is the portal of a total commodification, and condenses the multiple social input of a vast productive geo-political apparatus into the disguised and singular presenter speaking directly to you, telling you your news, encouraging you to laugh or cry and living your life right there, before your eyes, everywhere.

The hanging channel

If we do still want to look at a specific regional television, as the scholars mentioned above have been doing, the process does not gain in focus. Rather, the suggested direction to look is outwards, towards 'geo-capital'. Across Asia, we find many commentators able to point out how the local game has taken on reality talk show formats just as fast and furiously and just as reified, as anywhere else.⁶ Not only the curios of Star and NDTV pan-commercialism, but also the idiosyncrasies of flip channel goddery and the ready access of a global identification, for example, of Shilpa Shetty and Jane Goody, or of Osama bin Laden and Barack Hussein Obama. Note already the pairings of television stars are geopolitical, and the alienation effect that such staged pairings should have still does not mean we understand that things are staged: this is *not* a Brechtian *entfremdungseffekt*.

The nationalist televisual project become global also fosters an orientalist television which prevails outside Asia, where Asia itself is vicariously and phantasmagorically screened. Indeed, it is this synchronization of national and geopolitical that has most quickly expanded with the proliferation of screen culture large and small – culture televised, and no longer under pundit control. I am particularly interested in the ways a refocusing of Asia as a theatre of war is performed on television and, as theatre, is a consequence of a massive labour of commentary, the efforts of publicists and copywriters, advertisers and agents, spin doctors, image makers and propagandists. Entire teams work behind the screens/scenes to bring us all versionings of 'Asia' in real time. Yet, the work here, the network, the convolutions of the apparatus and its wiring, infrastructure, logistics and co-ordination, its structure of production and transmission, is rendered transparent in a way that is not different to game show staging, in that even when shown, it remains invisible. Arvind Rajagopal says as much when he notes that 'Viewers may *know* that they are gathered and sold to advertisers, but they remain capable of acting *as if* they did not know this, and *as if* they thought they were free in their viewing behaviour'.⁷ What I mean here is that the television interface presents itself as direct connection, an inter-fascism, and its alienation effect is erased.

A case in point might be the way we approach the controversy around the images that stage the death of Osama bin Laden. The new geo-political reach of television was never more evident than the photogenic scene of 1 May 2011 showing Hilary Clinton and President Obama watching the televised (remote-closed circuit) Seal Team 6 raid on bin Laden's Pakistan compound. In the (cramped) comfort of the White House situation room, with a large group of advisors and aides, they seem to express both astonishment and concern. However, we do not see the television. We do not hear the television. We do not even see this *as* television – the picture is a still, and mute: no static, no radio camera, no shouting, no pop pop pop shots. The still image is more suitable for the printed press than for television news, and yet this moment is global television in its new guise. Watching television as propaganda in this Situation Room is perhaps not your usual viewing platform, but it is connections like these, in this case a secure Ethernet network with remotely connected helmet-mounted camera feed,⁸ that makes television a cross-border, live-beam, everywhere and anywhere, medium of the political.

If we set aside conspiracy theory doubts about the faking of the killing and the 'found footage' that was also presented of Osama watching television, what we see of 'Asia' here on the officially sanctioned publicity release is basically the leaders of the 'free world', Presidents, advisors, aides and now us all, gathered around a screen to view a snuff film assassination video. We can be sure that, in some sense, this *is* watching 'Asia', however perverse. With all the contradictions it implies, this view of Asia says it all – we can even read the hand over mouth gesture of Hilary as muted reference to the guilty contradiction

of razing Afghanistan to dust, or not (technically, from already war-ravaged rubble to dust) and invading a sovereign, and paranoid, country uninvited, to kill an old man, himself pictured watching telly in Abbottabad . . . The double play of this scene, a snapshot slice of a much wider and wilder scenario, is our changed television world.

The images *are* indeed revealing – Hilary and Obama are paired in silence, as are the bloodied Osama we do not see (despite the photoshopped image that circulates on some websites)⁹ and the impotent Osama in a blanket watching television that we do (much questioned, see below). An alternate pairing would show the situation room crowd with Obama and Hilary, and the images they have seen but which we cannot – the raid itself, the assassination and presumably the burial-at-sea. Why do we not see all the images? Surely, there is actual film of Hilary and Obama watching, of the body of Osama, or of the Islamic funeral ceremony, all chronicled as evidentiary record by the public relations and historical-archive conscious administration? It is hard to imagine that the White House was unable to record every minute of the attack on some form of in-house VCR, possibly a Watergate-style recording device, and that they do not have documentary footage of the situation room itself, or from the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson (Nimitz class), and so on. There is, of course, the inevitable plethora of conspiracy theories: was it really Osama we see sitting wrapped in an old blanket? He was left-handed but has the remote control in his right; he has himself filmed watching himself but does not look at the camera; the sound has been stripped from the video – although this last is a strangely silent coincidence also replicated with regard to the situation room. Perhaps understandably, there was concern about release of the bloodied body shot, but in the absence of all these possible images, theories thrive, and indeed a vast number of spoof YouTube videos can be seen recreating the events, as well as a graphic novel,¹⁰ animated game-show cartoon and slapstick Saturday Night Live-like comedy routines, all beaming stereotypes of ‘Asia’ abroad in a parallel universe with fan-fiction proportions, deeply implicated in dramatic events.

The snuff film *mise-en-scène* in the situation room and its spin-off press and video images offer us a new genre identification for deregulated global television. This requires a more urgent aesthetic and socio-critical appreciation of the integrated media spectacle. Innovations in the forms of political television can also be seen in the cockpit-cam of the drone bombers zeroing in on insurgents in the Kush, or the shaky phone mp4 that records Saddam Hussein’s New Year 2006 execution and shown on what surely must eventually become the ultimate satellite offer – the Hanging Channel. I have argued something similar in relation to NDTV 24 × 7s mobile phone-in poll around the trial and sentencing of Afzal Guru, but there are many candidates for round the clock horror ready to be screened.¹¹ There are the beheadings, torture snaps, and attack drone reels, but also strange sub genres such as the spoof Osama kill vids and what I would call grunt videos – a particular grotesque consequence of sending US teens out on patrol in Afghanistan or Iraq and leaving them later confined to barracks with free time and computer kits to produce music videos with their own night vision footage and soundtracks from AC/DC’s ‘Highway to Hell’ or, remixed with even more chilling effect, Marilyn Manson’s version of the same.¹²

Reality, cinema, diaspora

The reality television franchise that is the War on Terror in Asia has shown so much more for less than *Big Brother’s* or *Crorepati’s* star-studded (Bachchan, Shahrukh Khan) staged scenario production ever could. Cheap to embed, easy to download, the military journalist is a controlled, edited, and carefully screened ideological imaging. The camera is already on the weapon, the footage already beamed back to transmission HQ. Only sports and

parliamentary debate offers such easy access to the action – the camera knows in advance where the game will be played, how many bowls will be bowled, and who has the hits. War footage is similar – we only see the highlights, and the camera was already set up in the kit. The image of global television is not Neil Armstrong setting out on the surface of the moon, but rather the stain of screen erasure when the missile-mounted camera is destroyed à la some glorified stump-cam moment writ large. The ideal view of war television, like a bowled wicket in the IPL, is the destabilization of the viewers perspective. The wicket is smashed, the camera askew – all the work that contrived to produce this scene, the training, the technology, the calculation of wages, Duckworth, averages and back room deals is obscured in the thrill of that singular close-up. This is the metaphor for television today, unashamed alienation in a distraction regime high profile, big bucks, product placement spectacle. Only on the Hanging Channel we would not have cheer squads, unless it be those outside the White House chanting ‘USA USA’ the evening Osama was snuffed.

We are dealing here with something that is not only a war scene, but is also the war itself, and the multivariant versions of Asia have always been screened in such narrowcast terms – a double-play of the good guys – temples, Bollywood songs and Sanjay Dutt – and the bad guys – terrorists, gangsters, Ravanna, Gabbar Singh (Amjad Kahn), and Sanjay Dutt. Today its moderate Muslims and unknown terror, the double play at work again. *Heat and Dust* (dir. James Ivory 1983) was the cinematic version, or Art Malik coming to grief in *The Jewell and the Crown* (ITV 1984), or more grotesquely, with Schwarzenegger in *True Lies* (dir. James Cameron 1994). There does not seem to be any reduction in this even with the proliferation of vernacular views of the global, of home movies and camera phone newscasts uploaded directly to the satellite international in the Sky™. There is no sense in which the syncopation of local and global escapes the play of mere colour illustration – and subject citizens from remote to metropole are gathered together to work the scene. At what point would a television studies grapple with the stakes of this and be able to relate the isolated and peculiar details – Osama dying, Obama watching – to the whole? It is possibly useful to remember what Adorno says apropos of Hegel, ‘Nothing can be understood in isolation, everything is to be understood only in the context of the whole, with the awkward qualification that the whole in turn lives only in the individual moments. In actuality, however, this kind of doubleness of the dialectic eludes literary presentation’.¹³

To be specific is to locate the televisual in the local as global force. This was never more clear when popular sentiment about Asians ‘in the diaspora’ was made *more* political at the start of the twenty-first century. There was always some politics in diaspora of course, though it is perhaps generous to suggest the US tongue-in-cheek abbreviation ‘ABCD’ for American Born Confused Desi inversely notes a greater diasporic awareness of such issues and has parallels in the ironic use of ‘second generation’ in the UK. Having to distinguish between Hindu and Pakistani, Arab and Bengali, Muslim and NRI, Bhangra and Hip-Hop, cricket and corruption . . . all this relating of the isolated to the whole became a classificatory blur after 2001, at least for non-Asians. Heavy rotation Asian cinema on late night British television, for example, was insufficient to disabuse the rest of the British public of its stereotypes of the subcontinent and the threat of otherness. Even the by now standardized choices of ‘contemporary’ British Asian film did little to clarify – *Bend it like Beckham* (dir Gurinder Chadha 2002) but not *My Beautiful Laundrette* (dir Stephen Frears 1985), *East is East* (dir. Damien O’Donnell 1999) not *Wild West* (dir. David Attwood 1992), *Four Lions* (dir. Christopher Morris 2010) but no critical analysis of the ways an anti-Muslim pogrom had taken hold in the wake of 11 September 2001 or 7 July 2005. That the less safe films were on late night rotation, while telly plays of security service-foiled plots against airlines or sci-fi scenarios with suicide jihadists (see, e.g.

US space operas like *Battlestar Galactica* and *Carprica*¹⁴ screened in prime time is duly noted.

The televisual rendering of Asians in the diaspora works largely through condensation of the global. The big screen is reduced to the no-go area of the late night small screen of 'community'. Asian character roles in long-running classic UK soaps (*Coronation Street* ITV, *EastEnders* BBC) barely hide their big-ticket clichés; documentary current affairs arranged marriage honour killing exposés appear more often than any other item of interest at home. Abroad, we have suicide bombings and the Hanging Channel, as discussed above. The camera spotlight on Asians is so often documentary, even when it is comedy it is more often a documentary about Asian comedy, so much so that we need to recognize television as ideological apparatus again. This fabricated and staged documentary moment is a point-of-view illusion, a machine for obscuring the social and collective, and politically charged, character of this cultural production – a cultural effort that necessarily accompanies the war on terror.¹⁵ A film, or White House photograph, that hides its edits – cut, pan, zoom, montage, time, audio, narrative – develops a symbiotic relationship with the alienated but global commodity circuit, enforced by commercial and military means. Music television suggested another register for a time, but only to confirm the reductions: 'Paper Planes' wins an Oscar, Asha Bosle as a ring tone, 'Tridev's 'Oi Oi' still more inappropriate. Asian identity is conflated in two directions – a specificity that acknowledges a motivation marked by terror in 'explanations' of musician Mathangi Arulpragasam's (MIA) 'political' stance 'reduced' to the situated trauma of the Sri Lankan Tamil predicament. On the other hand, a proclivity for generalizations such as that reporting on UK musician and filmmaker Aki Nawaz's engagement with Gaza, Bosnia and Tunisia is taken as evidence of a suspect pan-Islamist tendency. Both are ways of undermining legitimate commentary with equally unobvious questions of motive and context in a wider racist imperialist coding that never reveals its white supremacist undercarriage. Even the 22 July 2011 deaths in Norway at the hands of the killer Anders Behring Breivik merge into this commodification via industrial news production. We watch rolling 24-hour cycle coverage which evokes no compassion, only staged 'compassion' – behind which you know there are technicians, crew, director and sound operator all just doing their jobs. No contrition from the media for its knee-jerk first reaction assuming the attacks were Al Qaeda or enraged Muslims responding to anti-Mohammed cartoons, and not much more than a contrived apology and business-as-usual as Breivik is identified as a self-declared 'anti-Muslim crusader' with a 1500-page manifesto and links to the English Defense League.¹⁶

That the terrorist self-styles as crusader is no surprise, but again media attention focuses upon the lone-wolf, rogue element and individuation so as to engender control, in the same way that the manufacturing process divides items for management on the assembly line and market.¹⁷ This trinketization ignores, even as we see it on screen, the intimate connections and overall tendential movement that should be diagnosed as a new and vicious military-informational complex, modelled and sold with glossy brochure News Corp and 'dot.gov' publicity campaign. It starts with so-called humanitarian bombing, moves through years of attritional combat, and extortion, assassination, murder–death–kill, and at best ends up with construction contracts and ongoing client state dependency. At worst, dissolution, despair and destructive neo-fascist entropy. A form of privatization over scorched earth – the policy choice of the crusades, colonialism and now fully global as World War III. This blowback only begins to show as breaking news if you are not actually watching. If our media studies would only learn not to flinch from the implications, we could see this differently.

If television is a weapon of war by other means, what might be required for an extended critical television studies in this all-seeing but blinkered world? What means are available

to take the proliferation of screens and capital seriously? Is it of use to see television as an extension of the neoliberal military-commercial agenda and can we turn this into a transformatory research project that would disarm such codings? Can television be redeemed, or must it be always exaggerated to be everywhere and so nothing special at all – merely the fabric of a politics and economy that lies, not so much elsewhere, but upon every surface? The Hanging Channel would offer a 24×7 war, just as it already is, with product placement. Is another television possible? If we tune in another way, is there another possible world to see? What would televise differently? Which screen/scene must we see behind and beyond? Let us turn to that vision – for example, variously in Rajagopal, Sundaram, Mehta, Rajadhyaksha and Prasad – offering a reconfigured mediation of media studies that does not start so much with the screen as with the place where the screen starts – so that we can reinvent television studies in the widest sense. In this way, a television studies that takes seriously the injunction to break with alienation, exploitation and death. If we can, as we must.

Notes

1. Nalin Mehta's study of satellite television remains closely tied to the medium of television itself, however much transformed by new modes of delivery. The 'citizen journalist' (p. 248) and 'tele-democracy' (p. 257) are terms that have insider network currency. Mehta, *India on Television*.
2. For a closely argued study of how media must now be seen inextricably bound up with the staple themes of urbanism, modernity, technological change, aspirations, dreams and desires, see Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*.
3. Brecht, *Mother Courage and Her Children*.
4. See Rajadhyaksha, *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid*.
5. See Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film*.
6. In this paper I refer to Asia and Asian as a wide specificity that could include Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the diasporic South Asians discussed as 'Br-Asian' in the volumes Sayyid et al., eds. *Postcolonial People*, and Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma, eds., *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*. This is problematic, as it leaves out many other Asias, East, South-East, Austral- and Middle – this is best discussed by Gayatri Spivak in her 2008 book *Other Asias*.
7. Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 335.
8. For an interesting survey of White House information, telecommunications and computing security protocols, see the PhD thesis of John Paul Laprise 2009 'White House Computer Adoption and Information Policy', Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.
9. See, for example, the comparison of a 2008 image and the 2011 image here: Today's NEWS NJ, <http://todaysnewsnj.blogspot.com/2011/05/osama-bin-laden-corpse-photo-is-fake.html>.
10. Dye and Dale, *Code Word*. The authors call this text 'an American celebration' – interview with The Associated Press reported in *The Guardian*, June 24, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9710347>.
11. Hutnyk 'NDTV 24x7'.
12. See <http://youtu.be/ctepAW35O9Q> for AC/DC and <http://youtu.be/bOWmTyrz1RA> for Manson.
13. Adorno, *Hegel*, 91.
14. King and Hutnyk, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Gaius Balthar', 237–50.
15. Bhattacharyya, *Dangerous Brown Men*.
16. See reports on MSNBC and MSNBC staff.
17. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 39.

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