

The multiple layers of memory of/on television

As múltiplas camadas da memória da/na televisão

Las múltiples capas de la memoria de/en la televisión

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Abstract

Critical review of the book “Television, Memory and Nostalgia” (2011), by British researcher Amy Holdsworth.

Keywords: Memory; Nostalgia; Television.

Resumo

Resenha crítica do livro “Television, Memory and Nostalgia” (2011), da pesquisadora britânica Amy Holdsworth.

Palavras-chave: Memória; Nostalgia; Televisão.

Resumen

Reseña crítica del libro “Televisión, Memoria y Nostalgia” (2011), de la investigadora británica Amy Holdsworth.

Palabras clave: Memoria; Nostalgia; Televisión.

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Television holds a prominent position in the daily life of the mediatized individual. In "Television, Memory and Nostalgia", Amy Holdsworth, British researcher affiliated with the School of Culture & Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow, critically examines the specific forms and modes of television in its profound relationship with memory and nostalgia. The aforementioned book expands upon the author's discussions on television and memory conducted in recent years, offering intriguing perspectives to (re)consider the impact of television under various frameworks as instruments for memory resonance across multiple layers.

In this review, we provide a critical examination of the topics addressed by the researcher in an attempt to understand the interrelationship between television and memory in everyday life. Published in 2011, her writings still lack answers today, given that this is a field of research and reflection that is still consolidating within Brazilian research on memory and nostalgia studies. Therefore, in this space, we aim to broaden the discussions regarding the concepts raised by the researcher throughout the five chapters.

In the very first chapter, titled "Half the World Away: Television, Space, Time, and Memory", Holdsworth (2011) contemplates television, its place in the popular imagination, and its role in shaping individual and collective memories. Drawing on the notions of memory discussed by Huyssen (2000), the researcher takes a deep dive into television and the ways made possible by techniques and aesthetics in triggering memories, by situating television itself as a unique system for memory production.

The author's perspective reinforces the idea that television should not be understood merely as a mediating device for images. Television also functions as a device capable of provoking sensory stimuli in the viewer, from which many memories are activated and shaped by the media. This observation by the author regarding memories forged by the media has been discussed by numerous authors and remains an extremely contemporary issue to be debated.

Analysing different television productions in which self-referentiality to the television device is mobilized in these audiovisual narratives, Holdsworth (2011) explains how television seeks to expand memories about the imaginary that individuals construct regarding their consumption relationships with television. In a



hypermediatic scenario dominated by the proliferation of screens and televisual devices³, we see how television itself reminds the viewer of how the medium, the television apparatus, is an integral part of our daily practices and the sensory effects stimulated and made possible by this support. It is as if television is understood here as a "black mirror," as Holdsworth (2011) describes it – a mirror in which the memory of television emerges in this context of contemplation and reflection on television itself as a catalyst of memories and affective experiences made possible by the viewer's contact with this medium.

Chapter 2, "Haunting the Memory: Moments of Return in Television Drama", encompasses the different forms of television's relationship with memory in serialized audiovisual productions within the television drama genre. The issue of memory here is approached from the perspective of "flashes" of memories that return in the present within these narratives and, above all, how these framings are reconstructed through the aesthetics of audiovisual language. Within audiovisual narratives, these "flashes" help us understand the character's memory and how their developments are shaped by this confrontation between the past and the present. As Sarlo (2007, p. 9) would put it, "the return of the past is not always a liberating moment of remembrance, but an advent, a capture of the present".⁴

Holdsworth (2011) thus highlights different ways of instrumentalizing memories and how the audiovisual aesthetics, within its theoretical and methodological frameworks and other aspects related to narrative semiotics, attempt to channel these memories activated for the character. In these circumstances, while analysing certain television productions, Holdsworth (2011) discusses how the return of the past can manifest itself in commemorative, contemplative, reflective levels, among other possible ways of understanding memory. The aesthetics of audiovisual production aim to reconstruct these memories with a certain sensitivity that television itself possesses in understanding its power in the process of evoking memories. In reference to Huyssen's (2000) studies, the author describes these movements of

³ Reading of the authors based on Lipovetsky and Serroy (2009).

⁴ Original quote: *o retorno do passado nem sempre é um momento libertador da lembrança, mas um advento, uma captura do presente*



returning to/from the past as a representation of our loss of memory – or this imminent possibility of forgetting.

It is worth noting that, while in this topic Holdsworth (2011) does not problematize the return of memory from the perspective of the viewer, it seems feasible to also consider these "flashes of memories" as an effort of language to make the narrative more "consumable" for the viewer. This can assist the viewer in the process of forming their memories about the characters, the narrative, and, above all, their relationships beyond the screens. As discussed in the field of memory studies (POLLAK, 1992), memories are not stable and are continually constituted and reconstituted in the present through confrontation with the past. The present moment is the driving force that enables the formation and reformation of memories from the reminiscences presented to us by television. Hence, the need for this return to the past as a way to engage the viewer. This might be an interesting topic deserving more attention in future approaches.

Moving on to Chapter 3, "Who Do You Think You Are? Memory and Identity in the Family History Documentary", the issue of individual and collective memories is problematized, as well as how the media interferes in the process of subjectivation for the viewer. The author is concerned with the formulation of identities, as these audiovisual productions are, in advance, snippets of a subjective reality that play crucial roles in triggering memories, which must be reworked in contemporary times. This is also a highly relevant topic in memory studies, as argued by Pollak (1992), in understanding the influence that memory has on identity construction projects for a nation, for example. For the researcher, television becomes responsible for opening and closing memories, creating patterns, and directing the viewer's gaze toward memories that must be confronted and others that must be silenced. According to Pollak's (1992) readings, this opening and closing of memories can have impacts and promote substantial changes in various fields of society, politics, and culture.

The observations posited by Holdsworth (2011) reinforce that these dynamics of television, by framing memories in the present time, corroborate Huysen's (2000) arguments regarding this syndrome of memory that haunts contemporary societies. There is a paradox in these revisitations of the past. As while there is a fear of



forgetting, television itself works to make certain memories more memorable at the expense of others that should be neglected, silenced. For television, there are evidently specific interests and premises that make these memories an attractive subject, altering the logics of audiovisual product circulation within the realm of mediations.

To address these issues of memory and mediations, Holdsworth (2011) focuses her discussion on the British documentary genre series titled "Who Do You Think You Are?" (2004-present), in which family stories and memories are seen as essential strategies for the composition of the audiovisual production. In this television series, each episode features a guest participant, and the idea unfolds from the genealogical reconstruction of the participants and the submerged stories in this context. Originally produced by the British Broadcasting Company Television (BBC), the program became a success in the UK and was subsequently expanded to other parts of the world. Through this subject, Holdsworth (2011) highlights how the program's television format often changes according to the cultural contexts of each region and how television grapples with the weight of these images when deciding which memories should be remembered and forgotten, as these pasts can, as argued by Pollak (1992) and Huyssen (2000), destabilize memory and national, local, and regional identity.

To prevent the activation of certain memories that, from the perspective of national identity could be considered sensitive and crucial to the "stability" of memory, Holdsworth (2011) observes how the program's format had to be readjusted for American television as part of television's own policy when considering its cultural impact on societies. Emotional appeal, camera movements, narration, and other elements constituting audiovisual narrative are trimmed and reconsidered by American television in order to turn this return to the past "less dark" and, consequently, more pleasing to the viewer. Considering that this is a complex approach to memory in television, the researcher suggests new inquiries regarding this topic from other transnational contexts. This would allow us to understand how past mediations are reconfigured according to the interests of the media organization itself and its confrontations with issues outside its domain.

What emerges from the multifaceted perspective of the researcher is an attempt to indicate to researchers the power of the choices made by media instances in the



constitution and evocation of memories, and, above all, the need to contemplate about specific criteria to be adopted in the realm of audiovisual narratives regarding the return to the past – especially when considering the fluctuation of memory, which can vary according to transnational contexts. It is precisely this analytical journey by Holdsworth (2011) that reinforces the need for critical awareness when engaging with media products as potential memory evokers and the need to assess the risks and challenges in this return to the past.

Huysen (2014) discusses that memories are constant targets of political, cultural, and social disputes. In paraphrasing the author, this seduction by memory carries risks that, depending on the context, are crucial for the cohesion of a culture and can trigger new debates over the consecration of an identity memory, for example. This is a topic that requires precise analyses, especially when considering new forms of global-scale audiovisual product circulation in the context of streaming.

In Chapter 4, titled "Safe Returns: Nostalgia and Television", the author discusses the practices of instrumentalizing nostalgia through the returns of television products and their interfaces – revivals, reboots, remakes, and other particularities. Holdsworth (2011) explores the relationship between the past and the present as a complex web of meanings that can provide interesting insights into the use and reuse of the past on television. This concept has gained prominence in the context of Brazilian studies, thanks to authors such as Goulart Ribeiro (2018) and Castellano and Meimaridis (2017).

Among the strategies mobilized by television industries, situated within the context of the nostalgia market (GOULART RIBEIRO, 2018), there is for Holdsworth (2011) a certain emotional economy in the audiovisual archives produced and subsequently retrieved by television. According to the author, television is privileged in its capacity to stimulate nostalgia. However, from a more sociological perspective, the author extends the question of nostalgia in television beyond its commercial value. Within these revisitations of the past, in this safe return to the past as well articulated, there are fundamental and constitutive elements in how memory is evoked and reconstructed. According to the author, "the televisual forms are once again involved



in the process of ‘taming’ more difficult histories and memories, couching the past in the safety of the anodyne" (HOLDSWORTH, 2011, p. 101).

Based on the author's appointments, media industries assume that recycling the past, as a marketing strategy, is a relatively cheap procedure for television industries, considering the low investment costs and the high profits obtained from the emotional value that engages the audience. In this direction, the author suggests that there are other symptoms in this remembrance of the past that should be observed by researchers. Just as Huysen (2000, p. 32) discussed at the beginning of the millennium, the researcher here reiterates the idea of a memory culture in which there is a cultural obsession with the past, as "we are pushed towards a global future that does not inspire confidence."⁵

Through television, Holdsworth (2011) argues that the strategies of instrumentalizing nostalgia, a concept explored in research by Brazilian authors such as Castellano and Meimaridis (2017), considerably offer new possibilities for understanding the past. They also establish new memories within this process of subjectivation and recollection of the viewer, enabling the creation of so-called imagined memories, fabricated by the media.

In this sense, the nostalgia, understood as an affective sentiment triggered and stimulated by television, is linked to how television reframes itself, looks at itself, and questions its own past, and especially the viewer's expectations in this process of selecting memories to be activated by audiovisual media. They are primarily seen as a memory policy of the organization itself when adopting certain strategies for instrumentalizing nostalgia.

Recent studies reinforce this relationship between television and memory. In Brazil, this movement can be seen in the strength of the return of old titles from Grupo Globo on Globoplay, the organization's streaming platform. Despite its predominantly commercial character, Santos Neto and Bressan Júnior (2023) demonstrate how the return of the organization's old titles on the platform serves multiple functions of

⁵ Original quote: *somos empurrados para o futuro global que não nos inspira confiança.*



various orders, such as the affective and market function, which subordinates and ensures the existence of the television archive.

Within this paradox of the culture of memory between remembering and forgetting, Holdsworth (2011) refers to Huyssen (2000) at various points to highlight how media instances act as both a device capable of triggering memories and recollections and as a system for maintaining and regulating our memories within their own premises, logics, and particular interests.

Finally, Holdsworth (2011) goes further and discusses, in the last chapter titled "Television's Afterlife: Memory, the Museum and Material Culture", the museumification of television and television artifacts as objects of television's own memory. For the researcher, museums function as spaces for the memories of television, serving as a very particular form of reflection on how television resonates in our lives, in our everyday practices. As Huyssen (2000) argues, museums are spaces of memory; their existence conditions and allows memories not to be forgotten, erased.

Amidst the advancement of technology and platforms that significantly reconfigure the *modus operandi* of television, the researcher emphasizes the importance of museums in maintaining television in contemporary society by ensuring that this television memory remains alive in our individual and collective memories. It is as if this activation of television memory shows that what we witness is not the death of television, but rather new means of achieving aesthetics through new technological tools and devices. It is television itself harnessing its strength and its symbolic identity memory, from the symbolic point of view of what it represents for society.

However, the issue of television preservation does not only concern physical objects but also discusses the archiving of audiovisual content produced by television. With the boom in memory, as Huyssen (2000) discusses, television witnesses its own museumification as media convergence expands the notions of museums in contemporary times. We are not only talking about museums as physical spaces but also, and especially, from a perspective where digitization practices enable this archiving of television. Beyond this archiving, how can these archives provide us with new ways of relating to television's past?



The path outlined by the researcher frames the most common practices used in the audiovisual industry, not only in the context of British television. While Holdsworth (2011) points out certain practices within the context of media mediations, even considering the premises by which they were designated, the author warns of the effects provoked in the viewer by this return to the past. We cannot solely address the commercial nature and the affective value attributed to these practices. It is necessary for studies to consider other perspectives regarding this "nostalgia market" and the forms of recycling the past.

"Television, Memory and Nostalgia" presents researchers in memory and nostalgia, especially those focusing on television studies, with new perspectives for thinking about the practices of instrumentalizing television's past and the power of television in evoking memories. It is evident that the researcher engages in dialogue with Huyssen (2000), one of the pioneers in memory studies. The fear of forgetting, the museumification of the past, the effects of media on the maintenance of memories and identities are some of the layers that envelop memory and run through the five chapters. Many of the points presented were previously highlighted by Huyssen (2000). However, Holdsworth's (2011) research efforts allow us to see the complexity of contemporary memory and nostalgia in the context of television and its impact on daily life.

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