

Comptes rendus de média

CBC and BBC, *Dawn of the Eye*

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Dawn of the Eye. Produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Creator and Executive Producer, Mark Starowicz. Originally broadcast 19 January – 16 February 1997

Dawn of the Eye is the title of an ambitious, six-hour documentary series that recounts one hundred years of history filtered through the lens of the film and television camera. Telecast in early 1997, it was a co-production of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the British Broadcasting Corporation. American viewers saw a version of the series on the History Channel, and later on A&E. This was to be a history of the "news camera," which the producers call "the most powerful information medium in human history." In the course of its six hours, however, the viewer might arrive at different conclusions.

Being television, *Dawn of the Eye* is above all a rich stew of compelling images. These include the earliest surviving motion picture films from Edison and Lumière cameras, and rare footage shot in Canada after the turn of the century. Much of this material appears to have been enhanced for modern eyes and ears: sound tracks were added, and exposures and timing seem to have been adjusted to eliminate flicker and jump. In successive episodes we see scenes from the World Wars, from the Depression, from the civil rights battles of the American south, from the McCarthy and Watergate hearings, from Vietnam, Berlin, Beijing and the Persian Gulf, from the Reagan and Mulroney years, and from the trials (in all senses) of Amy Fisher, Loreena Bobbit, O. J. Simpson, and Tonya Harding. The early episodes are worth watching for no other reason than to see all that film. The later programs are handy for anyone who may have slept through three decades of the evening news.

In every episode, the producers return to the dominant theme of *Dawn of the Eye*. Despite the news camera's power to capture and reflect reality, its power has been thwarted, blunted or usurped for purposes of commercial or political gain. Entrepreneurs in New Jersey restage the Spanish American War in cornfields and bathtubs. D. W. Griffiths applies his cinematographic genius to tarting up the mundane horror of Flanders. Fox and Paramount newsreel producers ignore the Depression in favour of fashion shows and the Dionne Quintuplets. Occasionally, heroes appear to lead the camera back from Babylon. Edward R. Murrow brings a literary and reformist sensibility to television news, turning the camera on racism in the American south and the cynical patriotism of Joseph McCarthy. Laurier LaPierre and Patrick Watson challenge a compromised government in Ottawa. News camera operators capture moments of historic change, like the Tet offensive, the fall of Saigon, the breach of the Berlin Wall.

But the appetites of profit and power are insistent. We witness the crude machinations of Richard Nixon, the smug recollections of Michael Deaver, the sweet confections of Brian Mulroney's re-election campaign, the military theatre of Kuwait, the squalid melodrama of Bobbit, Simpson and Harding. Through it all, we hear the sometimes proud, sometimes rueful recollections of the news reporters and announcers. All the American and Canadian news stars of the last forty years get their say: Walter Cronkite, Morley Safer, and Sam Donaldson, Connie Chung, Robert MacNeil, and Barbara Walters, Lloyd Robertson, Knowlton Nash and Wendy Mesley. In the end, the producers would have us believe that the camera cannot be permanently co-opted, that in the end truth and justice will be served, that those who ride the tiger must one day be its dinner. To me, this conclusion is uttered with more hope than conviction.

Dawn of the Eye is certainly worth watching, for all the reasons I have just stated. But it is not without serious flaws. First, it suffers from all the weaknesses of a Canadian-British co-production designed also to appeal to an American television audience. As the reader might gather from the preponderance of American examples in the above paragraphs, *Dawn of the Eye* is primarily a story of American television news stories. The creaking is almost audible as the Canadian and British content is wheeled in after commercial breaks. In some ways this situation is not surprising, at least to a Canadian. The U.S. networks have been so powerful and so extensive in their reach that, in news as in entertainment, they have defined the norm against which other nations' stories are appraised as exceptions or echoes. If we look for history in television news reports, then we will see a history deemed important by American television news executives.

Watching *Dawn of the Eye* in Canada, it is easy to imagine how the non-American content could be excised for the History Channel or A&E without injuring the main narrative. It is also possible to imagine the British version with Canadian references replaced by equivalent British examples. Apart from purely nationalistic concerns, I find this unsettling for two reasons. First, it patronizes viewers because it assumes they are incapable of appreciating a story about anyone but themselves. Second, it embodies the false unity in point of view that is inherent to television as we know it. Watching *Dawn of the Eye* is like watching television news: the camera is all-seeing and invisible, the narrator is omniscient. The viewer identifies with the camera lens, without the mediation of camera operator, sound recordist, reporter, producer, editor, executive, and sponsor. By tailoring *Dawn of the Eye* to distinct national audiences, the producers hope that this illusive identity between viewer and image is not disturbed.

To repeat: in this history of the "news camera," the camera is virtually invisible. Even though the producers of *Dawn of the Eye* argue that there is something inherent in the motion picture and television camera that makes it so powerful, the technology itself is largely taken for granted. In Episode 1, we learn that Lumière's Cinématographe weighed only eight pounds. The only other substantive reference to hardware comes in Episode 4, when we are told that lightweight video cameras and satellite transmission allowed news organizations to flood the screen with up-to-the-minute images. In between, we see no references

to important developments in fast film stocks and hand-held movie cameras, which allowed shooting in the field under low light conditions with minimal set-up time. We see no references to the development of sound for motion pictures, and to the significant impact of tape recorders on the ability to capture sound in the field. Only by inference from the screened images do we learn that film and not video remained the dominant medium for television news gathering until the 1970s.

Invariably, when technology does appear on the screen, it is in a supporting role, as a prop to convey period ambience. We briefly see a restored Cinematograph from Eastman House operating in projection mode. We see a beautiful close-up of a limelight being lit. We see numerous shots of television pictures displayed on vintage televisions. Significantly, these televisions are isolated icons, studio-lit, without the surrounding hubbub of living room or corner bar. Occasionally, the attempt at period feel goes awry. A report from the Korean War, for example, is displayed on a visually arresting Philco Predicta, which did not appear on the market until 1958.

This inattention to the material history of film and television betrays a more fundamental problem with *Dawn of the Eye*. The producers were actually far more interested in the history of the news business than of the news camera. Because of this, they undermine their repeatedly and boldly asserted argument, that the news camera is "the most powerful information medium in human history." The process of undermining begins in the first minutes of Episode 1, when the producers note Edison's failure to design a projector that would show his moving pictures to a mass audience. By drawing attention to the display and distribution of images, rather than their creation, the producers acknowledge what their real story is. This story is very interesting. It demonstrates, however, that the news camera alone is not a very powerful thing, nor is any information medium on its own. The real power is not in the camera but behind it, far behind, in the offices of network executives and political operatives.

By Episode 4 of *Dawn of the Eye*, as we witness the failure of respected television journalists to resist co-option by the handlers of Ronald Reagan and Brian Mulroney, we are entitled to feel exasperated by the obstinate failure of the series' producers to draw an obvious conclusion. In view of the litany of ignoble events in the 1980s and 1990s, how powerful is this medium? How powerful is a medium that, in its commercial form, must be fed a

constant diet of compelling images, no matter how inane, how false or how odious? How powerful is a videotape that could not ensure justice for Rodney King (whose story is not told in this series) before an all-white jury and a clever lawyer's use of slow-motion replay (not to mention mere spoken words)? How powerful is a technology that failed to protect the students in Tiananmen Square when the Chinese government shut down the satellite uplinks?¹

By the final hour of *Dawn of the Eye*, its opening sequence (blonde muse in diaphanous gown gazing toward divine light) feels more than pretentious. Even the series' title rings false. This is

not a dawn; we could see (and had news) before we had cameras. This is not about the eye. An eye is attached to a sentient being capable of moral judgment. By comparison to this being, a camera is a pretty crude device, a passive receptor of reflected light. Only the work of many minds can shape its images into assertions of truth. Next to the skill and unscrupulous ambition of a Michael Deaver, the mere ability of a camera to scan the scene placed before it is puny indeed. Next to the pressing commercial requirements of the news business, even this power is up for grabs.

Come to think of it, in spite of itself, *Dawn of the Eye* gets the point across.

NOTES

1. CNN was the only television news organization in Beijing not dependent on the government for its satellite links. At the request of a Chinese official, and after consultation with their corporate office in

Atlanta, CNN staff turned off their own transmitter. Both CNN and the Chinese government are still in business.