Chapter 10
More Hope!
Ceremonial Media Events Are Still Powerful in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

In a journal article entitled ‘No More Peace!’: How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events (2007), Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes offered a substantial revision of Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History (Dayan & Katz, 1992). Katz and Liebes included “dark” events in the “media events” concept, distinguishing unexpected, disruptive events from the carefully scripted, integrative events that had been the sole focus of Media Events. They also claimed that disruptive events – like disaster, terror and war – have in fact upstaged more classical media events. In contrast, in this chapter I argue that ceremonial media events - as originally conceptualized by Dayan and Katz in the nineties - are still essential and powerful features of our social lives. First, I present an overview of the “pessimistic turn” of media events research and provide my criticism of it. Second, I discuss three contemporary case studies from three national contexts: the Obama inauguration (2009), the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011) and the most recent World Cup (2014). These three events represent the three basic scripts introduced by Dayan and Katz: “conquest,” “coronation” and “contest.” I argue that the selected case studies (and many other events) still bring societies and nations together in our “disillusioned” media environment, providing momentary hope for local and cosmopolitan citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz’s canonic Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History (1992) spoke of exceptional, “sparkling” occasions in social life that attract large audiences, receive live television coverage and change the rhythm of regular broadcasting. These events, according to Dayan and Katz, “hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience” (p. 1): they are “high holidays”
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of communication. Interestingly, the *Media Events* volume itself became something similar to media research: a unique intellectual achievement that interrupted the regular flow of communications research and captures our imagination in a lasting way. Among its many charms, *Media Events* communicated hope for momentary social unity through a common viewing experience of a magical event. Building on Emile Durkheim’s notion of “collective effervescence” and Victor Turner’s concept of “social drama,” Dayan and Katz presented media events as exceptional moments that help us renew our loyalty to society. This hopeful tone of the book of course reflected the spirit of the time in which it was written in 1992: after the end of the Cold War and well before 9/11.

A global hope in a bright new future, however, did not last for long. In the early twenty-first century a series of disrupting events shattered beliefs in an optimistic narrative of progress. Wars, natural disasters, terrorist attacks and fears of a financial meltdown shook the world. The hope and optimism of *Media Events* suddenly seemed outdated for many. Reflecting on this shifting worldview, fifteen years after the publication of *Media Events*, both Elihu Katz and Daniel Dayan offered updates of their original concept. They both claimed that media events as presented in 1992 are no longer as powerful and integrative as they used to be.

In this chapter I first discuss this “critical turn” in media events research. While many scholars have attempted to rethink *Media Events*, here I will focus on the changing views of Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz. I then briefly discuss three contemporary case studies from three national contexts: the Obama inauguration (2009), the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton (2011) and the most recent World Cup (2014). These three events represent the three basic scripts introduced by Dayan and Katz: “conquest,” “coronation” and “contest.” The selected case studies and many other events as well, still bring societies and nations together in our “disillusioned” media environment, providing momentary hope for local and cosmopolitan citizens. With the help of the three case studies, I thus argue that ceremonial media events are still essential and powerful in what many scholars describe as a “fragmented” and “disillusioned” new media environment. They still provide moments of solidarity in a way that gives rise to hope, joy, or renewal.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE “CRITICAL TURN” IN MEDIA EVENTS RESEARCH

In order to understand the recent theoretical reformulations of Dayan and Katz, we first need to recall their original concept of “media events.” In *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992), an event had to fulfill a strict list of requirements in order to qualify as a media event: it had to constitute an interruption of everyday life and everyday broadcasting, receive live coverage, be preplanned and scripted, and be viewed by a large audience. There had to be a normative expectation that viewing was obligatory and a reverent, awe-filled narration. The event also had to be integrative of society and (mostly) conciliatory (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Katz & Liebes, 2007). Dayan and Katz also divided media events into three basic scripts: contests (for instance the Olympic Games) conquests (such as the landing on the Moon) and coronations (for example the royal wedding of Charles and Diana). The worldview of *Media Events* was equally clear and organized: a neo-Durkheimian belief in media events’ ability to contribute to social cohesion based on shared values and common experiences.
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