Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* refers to “that particular psychology, in the name of which you can very well have your head cut off” and which serves as the ground for what in conventional histories of literature is called “the human document” – the careful description of experience that structure the narrative construct “human.” This paper looks at the intersection, foreshadowed by Barthes in his short text, of these representational structures (the documentary stuff of human presence) and the metaphors that currently grow out of common notions of biometrics on a global scale (the quantification of what it means to be human, cognitively and emotionally, in a networked world). In Barthes’ tale, a man is tried and put to death in light of an interpretive form of justice drawn from a supposedly fine-tuned understanding of a man’s character (a narrative event in itself). In this paper, the human as a composite narrative structure that anticipates the rise of global telepresence will be explored through an analysis of the affective presence of the celebrity host in the BBC documentaries *The Ascent of Man* (1973) and *Connections* (1978).

Thus this paper examines the ways in which these two documentaries construct Western culture and knowledge through the performances of Jacob Bronowski in *The Ascent of Man* and James Burke in *Connections*. Bronowski and Burke serve in the conventional role of onscreen personality, but what is of interest is not the “voice” that each of these “expert witnesses” gives to events ranging from the development of the Jacquard loom to the ash strewn swamps surrounding Auschwitz, rather it is the physical body, gestures, and mannerisms that become indicators of a virtual telepresence spanning the globe at a nascent moment for the networked world and transnational capitalism. While Bronowski offers forth a rather grim visage of the detached intellectual patriarch – leavened by many interludes of irony, pathos, and dry humor – Burke is light as air on his feet, punning as his body crisscrosses continents and nations to reveal the interconnections between a disparate set of inventions in a strictly teleological fashion.

Marbling the overall argument of the paper will be historical glances at the other televisual forms that were networking societies during the time that these documentaries aired in the UK and the US – global live telecasts (Parks), military networks of command and control (Mattelart), and Arpanet, the beginnings of the World Wide Web (Flichy). As the fantasies of global telepresence converge with the realization of technically mediated forms of presence, it seems crucial to examine the evocative (and gendered) figures of Western culture contributed by documentary discourse to the historical trajectory of expert knowledge on media screens. Thus, the “human document,” in Barthes’ sense, re-emerges with its dark yet illuminating history in tow.
Bibliography


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