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Book Reviews


Cultural studies have become increasingly popular and diversified in recent years, constantly in danger of becoming too fashionable, too much for the liking of those promoting an 'anything-is-culture' theory. The editors of Cultural Studies and Communications are well aware of the difficulty of their self-imposed task of producing an interdisciplinary work reflecting the "open-endedness of work in the field" (p. 4), presenting most divergent viewpoints and at the same time avoiding becoming "overly populist and romanticized" (p. 3) like so many of the more recent models of (among others) media consumption which are criticized within the book.

The book is divided into three main sections, each representing a basic field of research within the wide range of cultural studies: 'Cultural Theory', 'Cultural Production' and 'Cultural Analysis and Consumption'. Communications — the important second half of the book's title — is the dimension to which all contributors recur (sometimes without explicitly mentioning it).

The first section 'Cultural Theory' consists of six contributions to the "contemporary debates for understanding the field of cultural theory and practice" (p. 9). For a start Stuart Hall, delineates the discussion of the role of the subject in theories of ideology in his essay on "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates." A similar subject is presented in a broader perspective by Paul Gilroy who focusses on the "British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity." In 'Postmodernism: The Rough Guide', David Morley presents four different approaches to postmodernism: we can either regard it as a period of social life, as a form of cultural sensibility characteristic of one period, as an aesthetic style or, finally, as a mode of thought. Pondering the phenomenon one way and the other, Morley reaches the conclusion that the postmodern world is essentially a world of TV events (no longer of events covered by TV) where communities are formed by electronic rather than geographical space. This slightly frustrated (and frustrating) outlook is balanced out by Dick Hebdige in his essay 'The Impossible Object: Towards a sociology of the sublime.' Focusing on a narrative description of "the car game" in his neighborhood, he shows us the value of the ethnographic perspective, old-fashioned as it may seem to many addicted to speculative theories, or, as Hebdige calls it, "certain currently fashionable kinds of crystal-ball gazing" (p. 92). The section on cultural theory is completed by Valerie Walkerdine's essay on psychology, postmodernity and the popular, and James Curran's reflections on mass communications. The latter are worth reading due to their solid outline of existing theories of mass communications as well as the
well balanced presentation of the different top-down and bottom-up pressures in mass communication processes.

The second – and shortest – section of the book, ‘Cultural production,’ deals with the more practical aspects of cultural studies, seeking “to rectify cultural studies’ relative neglect of the organizational processes of the media” (p. 169). Four essays focus on different perspectives of the production process: on women’s magazines (Angela McRobbie), on popular music (David Hesmondhalgh), on Hollywood cinema (Yvonne Tasker), and on ‘Feminism, Technology and Representation’ (Sarah Kember), a topic much neglected by the scientific community which leaves it to feminist circles. What is most striking in this section is the sudden realization of a seemingly unquestioned coexistence of change and mobility on the one hand (the reconceptualization of women’s magazines is one of its manifestations) and an untouched fortress of male-dominated science on the other (at least, when it comes to technology).

The last section, ‘Cultural Studies and Consumption,’ is dedicated mainly to the question of consumer sovereignty in the mass communication process. The section begins with a somewhat extensive three-chapter discussion between James Curran and David Morley, starting with reprints of two older essays from 1990 and 1992 respectively. To this, a retrospective ‘Media Dialogue’ is added, consisting of Curran and Morley’s replies to each other’s criticisms. The three last chapters of the section are more meritorious than this bringing up of an old debate. In ‘Feminism and Media Consumption’ Christine Geraghty focusses on two sides of the same coin: The product-oriented perspective on the one hand (e.g. feminist perspectives of media theory) and the recipient-oriented viewpoint on the other (e.g. gender specific reception modes). The essay is meant as a “framework for feminist work on female consumers of film and television fiction” (p. 306) using the concept of the mother as a basic example for the reflections to follow. ‘Popular Culture and the Erotization of Little Girls’ is the focus of another essay by Valerie Walkerdine – a path still seldom tread in cultural studies (the idea being already quite common in communication science proper). Walkerdine wants “to open up a set of issues [...] occluded” (p. 323) up to now, turning to the question of ‘Little Lolitas’ by examining “the case of a moral panic in the 1980s about the Channel 4 series Minipops” (p. 324), a less serious version of which case was repeated in Germany not too long ago, focusing on the ‘Mini Playback Show.’

The final essay by Gareth Stanton ‘Ethnography, Anthropology and Cultural Studies: Links and Connections’ leads the reader back to the roots of it all and reminds us of some old-fashioned but still quite useful knowledge and techniques essential for those who really wish to study cultures, not just to think about how to do it best. Stanton is well aware of the danger inherent to the develop-
ment of cultural studies as a discipline: "[...] it is often the case that such connections [to other disciplines] have been largely lost or ignored as cultural studies has come to take on an increasingly strong identity of its own" (p. 334). Thus, going back to Malinowski, Frazer and the whole lot of downright social anthropologists, he stands up for participant observation and, above all, for the application of ethno-graphic techniques in order to establish an "anthropology of ourselves." This contribution is perhaps the most valuable in the whole book, though there are some others which open up some unknown perspectives.

On the whole, because of its varying topics and divergent viewpoints and different levels of abstraction, the book is not always easy to read. It offers no final conclusion on the aims and perspectives of cultural studies, thus curiosity remains, but the profound bibliographies following each essay certainly provide more food for thought.

Dagmar Schütte

Broadcasting Regulatory Authority of Northrine-Westfalia, Düsseldorf

In the USA 100,000 children carry guns to school every day. Every five minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime and every three hours gun-related violence takes the life of an American child. Among the young (15–24 yr.) homicide is rated as the second cause of death. While media violence may not be the single most important contributor to such a culture of violence, this overall investigation emphasizes the fact that the effect of thousands of messages conveyed through the most powerful medium of mass communication cannot be underestimated.

The National Television Violence Study is a three-year effort to assess violence on television. The project is funded by the National Cable Television Association and involves the participation of media scholars at four universities. Scholars at the University of California, Santa Barbara, conducted a content analysis of violence in series, day time serials, movies, specials, children’s shows and music videos. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, the role of violence ratings and advisories used on television is analyzed, including their effect on the viewing decisions of parents and children. The Chapel Hill study (University of North Carolina) presents findings on the effectiveness of anti-violence public service announcements and educational initiatives by the television industry.

There are many ways that violence on television can be assessed. This investigation takes a public health approach, treating violence as a partially preventable social ill. The authors hope that the study will contribute to a larger societal strategy of violence prevention. These two volumes contain the preliminary reports of the first two years of the research program.

Volume 1 contains an overview of the objectives of the research program, excellent reviews of the existing literature regarding the impact of television violence, contextual features associated with violent depictions, systematic content analysis procedures for assessing television violence, and reports of the first year of investigations by the four research groups. On the basis of the research literature, three primary types of effects of viewing television violence can be defined: acquiring aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to acts of violence and the fear of being victimized. Relevant contextual features which heighten the probability that a given depiction of violence will generate one of these types of effects are the attractiveness of perpetrator or target, whether the violence is portrayed in a graphic manner, the extent to which violence appears to be realistic, the rewards or punishments received by the
perpetrators, and humor. When unjustified violence, punishment or pain/harm cues are depicted, the effects are less than when violence is portrayed in a more positive manner.

The Santa Barbara study describes the presence of media violence in a random sample of television fiction. A large sample of 3185 programs were selected in the period of October 1994-June 1995, and were used to create a composite week of television content for 23 television channels, of which 2653 programs were analyzed in this study. A group of 60 student coders were trained to use a codebook (included in the report) on the nature and context of television violence. The results point to the frequency and location (genres, networks) of violence, the nature and context of violence (who the perpetrators are, what kinds of weapons are used, etc.) and how often the consequences of violence are depicted (violence is often funny on television, serious consequences are usually ignored). The report ends with recommendations for television industry, public policy and parents.

The Austin study focuses on reality programs as previous research has demonstrated that programming perceived as real or realistic may have an increased impact on viewers and may be particularly significant in the cultivation of fear and desensitization. Some 384 reality programs from the above-mentioned week sample were content analyzed for visual violence and oral descriptions of violent acts and credible threats. Of the reality programs, 38% contained visual violence and an additional 18% of the programs show oral accounts of violence, but there are strong differences between genres. Only 10% of the reality programs with violence give any sort of advisory or warning of violent content to follow.

The Madison study explores how various types of ratings and advisories are used to indicate the presence of violence in programs and movies that appear on television. In addition, it investigated how children and their parents perceive, comprehend and respond to violence ratings and advisories. Some 300 children were asked to select a television program from a mock channel guide. The findings indicate that advisories and ratings strongly influenced children’s choices. Particularly older boys chose programs with ‘parental discretion advised’ or ‘PG-13’ or ‘R’ rating. In general, children who said their parents were more involved in their viewing and children who had been frightened by television in the past were more likely to avoid programs with restrictive advisories and ratings. Also parent-child pairs discussing which programs the child would watch were videotaped. Although almost all the parent’s comments about advisories and ratings were negative, half of the comments children make about them were favorable (e.g., “the cooler the movie, the higher the rating”).

The Chapel Hill study explores the effects of anti-violence public service announcements (PSA’s) on adolescent viewers. In experimental settings and through focus group interviews positive consequences in terms
of interest, understanding and remembrance of the message, and change of attitude or control of violence related behavior, or negative consequences such as increased anxiety, fear of being a victim of violence or a ‘mean world’ perspective, were investigated. The findings suggest that television may be only modestly effective in decreasing violent attitudes and behavior among youth. Although some celebrity endorsers stimulated interest, the lack of credibility of some other celebrities, especially those who were perceived as violent in real life or in their jobs (i.e., sports, acting) sometimes confused or undermined the anti-violence messages.

Volume 2 reports on the findings of the second year of the research program. The Santa Barbara group investigated another sample of 3000 programs. Overall the amount of violence is the same for the two years. The second year study concentrated on violence portrayals which pose a real threat to viewers in that they can teach viewers violent attitudes and behaviors. These programs present a context in which violence is depicted in a positive manner, i.e., an attractive perpetrator engaging in justified violence that does not get punished and that shows minimal consequences. Most of these dangerous portrayals are located in the genres and channels that are targeted to children under 7 years of age.

The Austin research group mentions a rise in reality programming in the 1995–1996 period. Substantial amounts of violent reality programs are scheduled between 6–8 p.m. As police shows and tabloid news shows are most likely to contain violence, the research group advises to schedule these shows in later evening time blocks.

The second year of research on ratings and advisories by the Madison group sought to extend the findings of the first year. The findings were replicated with a more ethnically diverse sample. Moreover, other program rating systems were tested on their effects on children’s interest in programs. The results provided support for the forbidden fruit hypothesis, i.e., ratings or advisories that urge parental control are the most likely to stimulate older boys to choose such a program. As the rating systems turn out to be uninformative for parents, it is likely that such a system makes the job of protecting children harder by making restricted programs more attractive.

The Chapel Hill research group identified seven possible anti-violence message target audiences through a secondary analysis of a national representative adolescent sample, based on the adolescent’s experiences with violent behavior. In addition, a content analysis of existing PSAs aired in 1994–1995 revealed the PSA primarily focused on adolescent gun use, but failed to address important causes, contexts, and consequences of gun use. A series of prototype PSAs on changing attitudes about “violence enabling behaviors” and consequences of gun use will be tested in the third year of the investigation.

The two volumes give a good picture of the perspective and logic of
the studies. Of course, the research program can only be evaluated when conclusions and recommendations are definitive. So far, it is clear that television programming confronts younger children with the 'dangerous' forms of television violence, and providing advice and program ratings for parents are rather problematic.

But, will better programming and good advice work? Other designs, such as panel studies, are needed to explore such questions.

Fred Wester

Department of Social Science
Research Methods
University of Nijmegen

Dan Schiller’s superb text ‘Theorizing Communication. A History,’ explores the social, economic, and political context surrounding the intellectual debate in the field, throughout the 20th century, and provides a remarkably comprehensive and readable survey of major theories of communication. This engaging, informative, and extremely well-researched study is a must read for communication scholars and students of the media alike.

Schiller begins by framing a critique of John Dewey’s instrumental notion of communication within a context of social concerns regarding the rise of corporate communication monopolies and debates regarding the role of mental and manual labor. Maintaining that Dewey’s instrumentalism displaces the notion of intellectual labor, and eliminates the direct association of production with labor, Schiller notes that for Dewey, and many media theorists who follow, communication becomes the avenue through which intelligence is transmitted and dispersed throughout a given society.

Succeeding chapters consider the relationship between consent and coercion in modern capitalism, specifically as it relates to the social relevance of propaganda. Drawing on the Frankfurt School’s understanding of domination in the guise of the liberty and affluence of the culture industry, as well as mass culture theorists’ fear, during the 1940s and 1950s, of its authoritarian potential, Schiller suggests that these anxieties continued to frame propaganda studies for decades. In addition, he provides excellent evidence to illustrate how decontextualized, scientific studies of the ‘effects’ of mass communication industries gain prominence among researchers who respond to concerns regarding the ‘gap’ between press and public opinion as well as fears over the totalitarian potential of mass culture, in a post-war industrial society.

Schiller illustrates how communication research attempts to redefine itself in the 1960s and 1970s in response to charges of cultural imperialism lobbed by intellectuals in ‘Third World’ countries who view media manipulation as a fundamental means of social control. In their critiques of cultural imperialism, communication scholars begin to move beyond mainstream administrative concerns regarding the effects of media properties, and attempt to reconsider concerns of history and political economy as well issues of race, class, and gender.

Within this context, British Cultural Studies and its emphasis on human agency, emerges as a welcome alternative to prevailing pluralist conceptions of communication. Schiller explores the emerging thought of Raymond Williams, particularly his understanding of culture as a way of life, and maintains that while his conception of culture remains incomplete, it offers a way to broaden social consciousness and provides a site at which both mental and manual human labor might be
reintroduced into communication studies. Schiller details British Cultural Studies short-lived entanglement with Althusserian Structural Marxism, particularly through the work of Stuart Hall. He also recounts recent poststructuralist conceptions of communication which, once again, separate intellectual and manual labor and disperse the role of human labor into considerations of mass culture and ideology.

In his final chapter, Schiller returns to the work of Williams, primarily his later concept of cultural materialism, in an effort to re-formulate intellectual labor as an integral part of 'human self-activity'. Noting the continued separation of labor from conceptualizations of communication, Schiller suggests that future understandings of communication must include a labor theory of culture which includes both physical and intellectual activity and addresses media production as well as audience consumption within the capitalist media system. Schiller, following Williams' lead, suggests that while the dominant social order may exert specific pressures and limits on the means of production, that there are also residual and emergent cultural forms and practices which provide alternative and oppositional voices within the social relationships of each specific society.

'Theorizing Communication. A History,' is much more than an intellectual history of communication theory. Ultimately, this valuable addition to the literature of communication provides an important corrective to the standard decontextualized treatments which posit the development of communication as a linear progression of ideas in search of a unified theory of communication.

Bonnie Brennen

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Ever since the introduction of the active audience concept in communication research, scholars in this tradition have urged producers of messages to listen to the audience in order to satisfy its needs and wants, and to make the message as gratifying as possible. However, precious little has been said about how to attain that goal. Schriver has written a volume on an emerging field of study, document design, that addresses the question of how to develop messages that are tailored to the needs of the audience. Perhaps unknowingly, Schriver puts herself in the tradition of audience centered approaches when she states that document designers are interested in "what readers do with texts."

The first part of the book is dedicated to situating document design. In chapter 1, she defines document design as "the field concerned with creating texts (broadly defined) that integrate words and pictures in ways to help people achieve their specific goals for using texts at home, school, or work" (p. 10). The importance she attaches to the audience becomes apparent in her statement that document design is characterized "by the way its practitioners envision the reader as an active participant and major stakeholder in the design and evaluation of documents" (p. 11). In chapter 2, she focuses on the evolution of document design in the twentieth century. Several factors are distinguished as playing an important role in this evolution. On the one hand, Schriver sketches developments that have led to an increasing need for better documents (e.g., the consumers' need for accurate and clear information on consumer goods they consider to buy, ultimately evolving into the 'plain language movement,' and the increasing complexity of products resulting in a need for information on how to use them). On the other hand, she discusses developments leading to professionalizing the education of writers and designers (e.g., the shift of focus from writing correct English to writing for readers).

The second and largest part of the book is called 'Observing readers in action.' In chapter 3, Schriver presents a vivid example of how readers can be caught in the act and what kind of results these observations yield. She presents a study in which she had students ranging in age from 11 to 21 evaluate drug education brochures that were developed to prevent them from using drugs. Although the students were perfectly able to comprehend the brochures, their interpretations differed widely from the ones intended by the writers. The students felt being patronized by someone who was "paid minimum wage and was completely shut off from the outside world with outdated books and encyclopedias to work from." Schriver shows that listening to representatives from the target audience respond to the document is an invaluable help in designing meaningful and effective documents. A
similar lesson can be learned from chapter 4, in which she describes the problems many people encounter when trying to install and use new technological products with the help of the accompanying manual.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to a topic usually absent in most communication research: the role of typography and space. Typography should be evaluated upon its legibility and rhetorical appropriateness. The relation between typography and legibility is well studied and appears to depend on the height of the type face, the amount of vertical space surrounding it, and the number of characters on a line. In a study on rhetorical appropriateness, Schriver shows that people prefer a sans serif typeface (e.g., Helvetica) for a manual, but a serif typeface (e.g., Times Roman) for a story. She also shows, using many real-life examples, how the careful positioning of text and illustrations on a page can help the readers deciphering the document’s structure. She uses principles derived from Gestalt Psychology to explain how readers are sensitive to the ways in which space is used in the document.

The last chapter in part 2 deals with the way in which the interplay between words and pictures guides the readers’ interpretation of the document. Using studies on the ways in which people try to solve computer program problems and the problems people encounter when navigating a World Wide Web site, Schriver shows how document design should be tailored to the audience’s needs and expectations. She also discusses the way in which verbal and visual elements can work together in helping the readers to attain their goals. Finally, she shows how the values and beliefs people have, may lead to an interpretation of the document that varies greatly from the interpretation intended by the document designer. Once again these examples underscore the importance of knowing your audience for designing effective documents.

In the last part of her book, responding to readers’ needs, Schriver shows how usability testing can be employed to increase the quality of documents dramatically. In a case study on the improvement of a VCR and a stereo equipment manual, she shows how repeatedly having members use the manual to install and operate the equipment while thinking aloud, led to a much better version of the manuals. In fact, the final revision enables users to employ the equipment almost error free. The results show that experienced document designers are not able to predict even most of the problems the readers encounter when using a document. Finally, she shows how the use of reader protocols can be helpful in training document designers to predict the type of problems readers may encounter when using a document. These reader protocols contain the transcript of the problems voiced by readers when reading a document. The protocols help people to form a model of the audience, which enables them to predict the kind of problems this audience may have when reading other documents.

Schriver takes the idea of an active audience seriously. Her book...
contains a host of real life examples of the way in which messages can be improved by listening carefully to their intended audience. One might criticize the book for disregarding much of the empirical research that has been done on the relation between comprehensibility and usability and specific characteristics of documents. Furthermore, it would have been nice had the book contained a coherent description of the psychological process operative during the reading and using process. Nevertheless, Schriver’s book is a valuable source of information for anyone who wants to know how to tailor documents to the needs of the audience. Needless to say, it is beautifully designed.

Hans Hoeken

Department of Communication

University of Nijmegen