

Television as a Site, Place, and Space

Gabriella Lukács, **Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 267 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

Chris Berry, Soyoung Kim, and Lynn Spigel (Eds.), **Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology, and the Experience of Social Space**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 280 pp., \$25 (paperback).

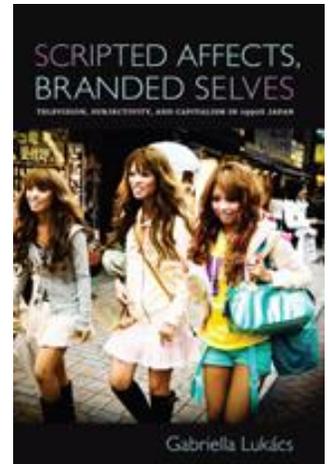
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Newcomb wrote that television is not an entity, but a site: “the point at which numerous questions and approaches interact and inflect one another” (2005, p. 25). As a site, the study of television—be it the economy, the technology, the audience, or the text—forces scholars from different disciplines to acknowledge the shortcomings of different approaches and theories. Gabriella Lukács, an anthropologist and Japanese studies scholar by training, studied Japanese television as a site of production and consumption during an economic slowdown. Chris Berry, Soyoung Kim, and Lynn Spigel’s edited volume examines how media technologies, including those of television, allow for a new experience of place and a rearrangement of space.

Scripted Affects, Branded Selves

Japanese popular media and culture is an understudied area. When it is studied, scholars (comprised of academics and journalists) focus on some quintessential Japanese genres, such as anime, manga, and samurai film, rather than media, such as television and magazines. An illustrative case is the “100 books for understanding contemporary Japan” program sponsored by the Nippon Foundation. The 100 books include those on anime (Napier, 2005), manga (Gravett, 2004; Schodt, 1996), and film (Mes & Sharp, 2004; Schilling, 1999); none of them is on television or magazines. Given the proliferation of Japanese popular media, its influence on youth culture in other Asian countries, and its cult following in Western countries, it is puzzling why scholars do not pay much attention to Japanese television and magazines.

Scripted Affects, Branded Selves is thus a welcome volume to fill the void in Japanese popular media scholarship. However, this book’s contribution to media studies is rather limited: It neither offers a complex picture of contemporary Japanese society, nor challenges existing theories through an examination of Japanese television. What is problematic about this book is that the author has overlooked a number of key media studies theories, and as such, she is unable to build her analysis upon well-trodden ground.



Lukács argues that the television market in Japan has become more fragmented since the 1990s. This fragmentation is a result of economic slowdown. In the introduction, it is explained that the 1990s is labelled the lost decade because of the fading economic "miracle" of Japan's post-war reconstruction period. In 1996, Prime Minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō brought sweeping changes to the relation between government and industry. In the past, the government had minimized local competition by regulating industrial and labor relations. In a free market economy, in order to stay competitive, companies no longer offered lifelong employment to workers.

This change in the employment system has adversely affected the younger generation, particularly young women. Because gender conventions promote the ideal woman being a housewife, many women enter the workforce as OLs (office ladies) with the aspiration of marrying men of comfortable means. This white collar job does not open up a career path. Because most of the OLs live with their parents, they do not have to do housework or contribute financially to a household. With plenty of disposable time and money, they become the new fashionistas. Trendy Japanese TV drama, according to Lukács, responded to this segment of population.

Trendy drama emphasizes the lifestyle of the characters (what to wear and buy; where to eat and vacation) rather than the story. Central to trendy drama is the use of *tarento* (derived from the English word talent). The closest translation of *tarento* is "artist"—someone who acts, sings, and appears in advertisements. According to Lukács, most *tarentos* lack talent; they are "discovered" by agents who are more interested in moulding the images of *tarentos* than investing in their acting and singing skills.

Lukács is interested in the interplay between production, text, and consumption in television. In Chapter 1, "Intimate Televisuality," she gives a brief overview of the market of broadcast television and the history of television programs in the post-war era. In Chapter 2, "Imaged Away," she explains that the majority of scriptwriters of trendy dramas are women freelancers; they have less power than the male television producers who are full-time employees of television stations. Although the scriptwriters attempt to criticize patriarchy, the female viewers are more interested in discussing the *tarentos'* private lives and screen images than the plot. Chapter 3 "Dream Labor in the Dream Factory" examines the scriptwriting industry. The rise of freelance female scriptwriters has helped bridged the gap between the female viewers and the male producers. Yet freelance female scriptwriters are seen as second-tier media professionals: They have less control over the scripts than the male producers; they lose market value once they pass 40, and the competition to enter the business is keen. In Chapter 4, "What's Love Got to Do With It," and Chapter 5, "Labor Fantasies," the author discusses two sub-genres—love drama targeting women and workplace drama targeting men, respectively. In the last chapter, "Private Globalization," Lukács discusses the online piracy of Japanese trendy dramas and how fans disapprove of illegal dubbing by exposing law-breaking sellers.

As suggested earlier, although this book fills in a void in Japanese media studies, its contribution to the field is limited because it overlooks key studies and occasionally makes erroneous assumptions of media studies scholarship. As a result, it leaves more questions than answers. Granted, authors should not be accountable for topics that they do not intend to cover, but the readers—particularly those who

already have an interest in the area—should expect a substantial discussion of contemporary Japanese television in a 260-page book. Here, I name five areas that could have been expanded.

1) Lukács has effectively argued that both economic depression and gender conventions have created a social group of young, unmarried women with high consumption power. It remains unanswered why the economic slowdown has not ushered more women into the workforce and popularized the two-income family model so common in Western countries and the developing world. With their ready acceptance of low pay and little expectation for long-term prospects, women workers may be more instrumental to flexible accumulation. Similarly, Lukács argues that market fragmentation of television is parallel to flexible accumulation, in the way that mass media is to Fordist production. However, the structure of the Japanese television industry reflects an inflexible accumulation. For example, producers are full-time employees of television stations, stations both produce and broadcast their own shows, and stations are not too interested in expanding to the overseas market. If flexible accumulation were the dominant economic ideology, then the Japanese television industry would perhaps adopt the U.S. model, in which the producers are independent of the broadcasters.

2) Lukács suggests that the dominant approach to television studies is to “understand[s] viewers’ agency in terms of accepting, negotiating or resisting the proposed meanings” (p. 78). She proceeds to argue that this dominant approach assumes television is a mass medium, akin to a Fordist system of production. Lukács suggests that the dominant approach assumes that “production and reception did not have a formative impact on each other” (p. 79). This claim has several problems: First, it is questionable if audience studies is (or has ever been) the dominant approach, given the legacy of a social scientific approach to study the effect of mass media. Second, the audience studies cited are foundational pieces, such as Hall’s “Encoding/decoding” (1980) and Morley’s *The Nationwide Audience* (1980). Although media studies scholars still acknowledge and admire these classic pieces, most have since moved on from assuming there is an object called the “mass media.” In fact, many college courses have been renamed from “mass communication” to “media.” Lastly, D’Acci’s *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (1994), a monumental work that looks at the linkage between the production, consumption, and the text of a television show, is not mentioned.

3) Although Lukács aims to link the production of television programs to their reception, the majority of her data of consumption is gathered from online fan sites. These fans may not publicly share how they watch television as much as what they think about the tarentos. In order to examine the phenomenon of trendy dramas and their popularity, it is important to understand viewers’ practices of watching television. For example, do they watch the shows alone and on their own television sets? The practice of watching contextualises the programs (a point on which I will further elaborate). For example, Yoshimi (2005) states that, when television was first broadcast in Japan, television sets were placed in public places, such as railway stations and street corners. The most popular show was wrestling matches. Later, shops and restaurants acquired television sets to attract customers. In the viewing of trendy dramas, consumer identity may be reinforced if viewers watch the same show repeatedly and closely study the brands mentioned in the show.

4) Lukács differentiates trendy dramas from those targeting an older generation by emphasizing the former's attention to trends in fashion and lifestyle. This observation could have been built on Kellner's 1995 discussion of the subordination of style to story plot in the American TV show *Miami Vice*. The argument that exchange value is privileged over use value—" [Commodity fetishism] brings forth a fundamental split between reality and phantasm, as the use value is not completely eradicated but remains buried under exchange value. The image, however, is a type of commodity that does not have use value" (p. 54)—could have been built on Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), in which he highlights the subordination of use value to exchange value in postmodernity. Likewise, Lukács' suggestion that tarento has become an image that sells products has also been advanced by Williamson in *Decoding Advertisements* (1994).

5) In the discussion of the piracy of Japanese television programmes, Lukács has a rather simplified view of the (supposedly) opposing stances of the localization of Japanese programs in the United States: One stance (called "the global Hollywood paradigm") insists that localization reinforces U.S. media economy because "discourses of localization translate into an understanding of cultural globalization as the global hegemony of Hollywood" (p. 192); another argues that localization occurs at the level of consumption. This book proposes a third way: Transnational media corporations are unable to satisfy the diversified tastes of the fragmented audience. The issue of exporting Japanese television programs overseas is seen as a mere matter of cultural tastes, not of international trade agreements. While there is a brief mention that Japanese television stations are reluctant to distribute their programs overseas, there is no mention of the global trade of television shows between producers and distributors, or of national regulation of media imports.

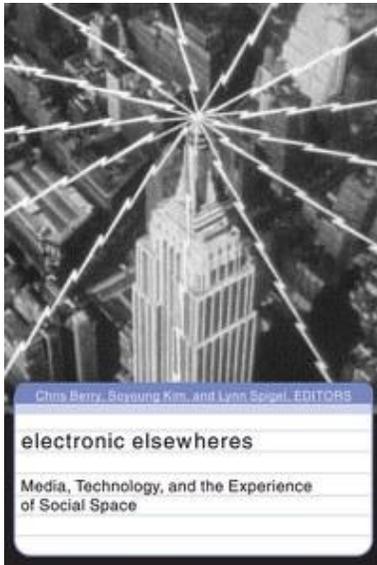
As mentioned, I am left with more questions than answers after reading this book. Television certainly can be a site where Japanese cultural practices, traditions, and economic interests can be examined, but it does not have to be the only one. It appears that the tarento system, which is fairly unique to Japan, but is influential in other Asian countries, can also be a site where an understanding of contemporary Japanese society can be advanced. Lukács repeatedly emphasizes that female viewers are keener to discuss the private lives and public images of tarentos. She also stresses the image commodity of the tarento economy. Television, in this sense, is nothing but a platform for fans to "read" the texts of their favorite tarentos, nothing but an advertising-supported commercial medium. The book reviewed next is excellent at pointing out the limitations of centralizing television in media studies.

Electronic Elsewheres

The media do not reflect an already existing place; rather, they produce space and construct how this space should be experienced. This idea, according to *Electronic Elsewheres: Media, Technology, and the Experience of Social Space* editors Berry, Kim, and Spigel, is called an "electronic elsewhere." The intersection between media and space "serves as a compelling way to conceptualize the emergent interdisciplinary field of scholarship on media and the production of space" (p. xviii). Several chapters offer examples of electronic elsewheres, such as media technologies creating homelike spaces in the public (David Morley's "Domesticating Dislocation in a World of "New" Technology), pregnant women building their cyber "womb" online (Lisa Nakamura's "Avatars and the Visual Culture of Reproduction on

the Web”), and representations casting the London “Tube” as a cultural icon and a worksite (Charlotte Brunsdon’s “The Elsewhere of the London Underground”).

For the purpose of the review, the three chapters on television and public space are discussed: Chris Berry’s “New Documentary in China: *Public Space*, Public Television,” Ratiba Hadj-Moussa’s “The Undecidable and the Irreversible: Satellite Television in the Algerian Public Arena,” and Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins’ “Turkish Satellite Television: Toward the Demystification of Elsewhere.” Television—as a technology, an object, and content—is only one of the sites that is examined; other sites are physical place (home, neighborhood, film festival), and mental space (the cyberspace, the “homeland”). In fact, all three chapters de-centralize media by not assuming television as the primary force that changes the perception of place and space. For example, Aksoy and Robins mention that immigration nowadays is different from how it was in the past because of cheaper transportation costs. Very often, immigrants see themselves having two homes, not a “host” country and a “home” country. In addition, all three chapters do not assume an absolute relation between the dominant actor and type of media system. For example, a state-dominated society is usually correlated with totalitarian, propaganda television; corporation with commercial television; and civil society with independent television.



Berry begins his essay by pointing out the inadequacy of the now-overly-used term “public sphere” in the Chinese context. This term not only neglects the range of publics and public spaces, but it also fosters an “orientalist” notion that China (and other non-Western countries) will catch up with the West. Instead he prefers the term “public space,” which is multiple and varied, but also “positively produced and shaped externally and internally by configuration of power” (p. 97). Berry examines independent video documentary in China, which differs from the type broadcast on television in the way that it rejects the “lecture tone” by eschewing all narration. Without an obvious “message,” this type of documentary opens up a space for the audience to interpret the meanings while avoiding charges from state censors.

Hadj-Moussa’s “The Undecidable and the Irreversible” looks at how the arrival of satellite television transforms public and domestic lives in Algeria. She particularly emphasizes the role that the *houma* (neighborhood) plays in mediating between the public and private, as well as between the two genders. She adopts the term “minimal public space” to denote the necessity for a public space to be reconfigured every time actors perform collective practices. The acquisition of a satellite dish probes for grassroots organizing in a *houma* because residents have to collectively decide which channels to add. Residents also evaluate how gender conventions will be transformed by “bringing in the dish”—a phrase that refers to the social consequences that lead to “the reformulation and the adjustment of family viewing and normative practices” (p. 126). For example, television viewing invites men into the female domestic space. This activity also dictates who can watch what, and with whom. For example, men would refuse to stay in the room with young siblings if immodest behaviors (such as kissing) were being shown on French television.

In Aksoy and Robins' study of television viewing among immigrants in Britain ("Turkish Satellite Television"), they reject the "diasporic paradigm." This paradigm assumes that television, especially state-produced programming, is a tool to connect the immigrants with the homeland, and that migration is about loss and estrangement. The interviews with Turkish immigrants show that "homeland" is a myth; immigrants understand that the idealizations of Turkey are rooted in a bygone past. What satellite TV offers that appeals to them is the banality of the everyday life, and the synchronized events that happen elsewhere in real life. For example, they compare the British and Turkish coverage of the same pieces of news. In this sense, satellite television plays the role of "cultural demythologizer" by freeing immigrants from clinging to the past.

These three chapters point out the importance of studying the practice of watching television in a non-Western setting. The phrase "watching television," in a Western context, often means the activity of an individual consuming televised content through a personal television set (or, increasingly, through a computer device). Because of this naturalized assumption, studying television is narrowly seen as studying content and audience reception (including the use of technology). By seeing television as a site that actively interacts with a physical place and a mental space, the book *Electronic Elsewheres* has challenged readers to think about television, along with other media, in a new way.

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