

Worth a Second, or a First Look

Reviews by
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Lila Abu-Lughod, **Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt**, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 319 pp., \$22.00 (paperback).

This is the best study of television I have ever read. It suggests something about the impasse in contemporary television studies that the book was written by an outsider to the communications field. (Author Abu-Lughod is Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University.) Abu-Lughod has much to offer all scholars working on modernism, the cultural production of nationhood, and class divisions among audiences and producers. The book is based on extensive field research — not the thin stuff that passes for ethnography too often in media studies — on Egyptian serials in the lives of Cairo domestic workers and on the class, religious and gender politics of television producers in Egypt. Invaluable to scholars of transnational television, the book is beautifully written.

Mark Andrejevic, **iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era**, University of Kansas Press, 2007, 325 pp., \$29.95 (hardcover).

A powerful critique of the practices of data-mining across media platforms that challenges the optimism surrounding participatory Internet cultures. This book continues Andrejevic's original and methodologically diverse approach to new media that was begun in his book *Reality TV* by tackling the profound global and national consequences of digital convergence for democratic societies and the disturbing relationship between private enterprise and governmental surveillance. In topics ranging from the unremunerated labor of Television Without Pity writers to the tracking of GPS and iTunes, Andrejevic reframes the research focus to the shift of content provision from producers to uncompensated television viewers, contestants and amateurs. A witty, stimulating work that asks profound questions about cultural labor and exploitation that ought to inform the next decade of research on television and new media. Andrejevic thinks interactive media is a bad deal, and asks the tough questions about how we came willingly, even enthusiastically to accept this deal.

Charlotte Brunsdon, **The Feminist, The Housewife, and the Soap Opera**, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 253 pp., \$38.11 (paperback).

This brave book focuses on the projections, fantasies and identifications scholars make with the audiences and the genres they write about. It also provides a thoughtful intellectual history of media studies in Europe and the US and traces the profound influence of feminists on the field. Brunsdon indicates the blindspots in contemporary discourses of cultural studies, gender studies and media studies—especially as later practiced in the United States — that led to a disproportionate emphasis on consumer agency and resistive readings, and a frivolous disregard for media consolidation and policy changes. The book represents a self-reflexive collaboration with a group of Brunsdon's scholarly peers whose work has informed feminist media theory and was influential in placing soap opera on the research agenda. To a large extent, the attention to strategies of decoding texts in audience studies has been an excavation of forms of cultural capital unrecognized by prior forms of communications research—thus contributing to the sense of television as a complex, fascinating media form with its own codes, and critiquing the despised category of the female melodrama fan. Yet, too often, by validating the pleasures of television viewing, scholars failed to make any demands for different and better forms the audience might want.

David Buckingham, **Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television**, Manchester University Press, 1996, 360 pp., \$23.71 (paperback).

Buckingham is a prolific researcher whose work translates usefully into public policy debates and represents the best thinking on children and digital media. His work never romanticizes children's agency or youthful resistance to adult impositions of authority. Neither is he an apologist for the media industries. This book is my favorite of his many, simply because he gets a topic right that so many researchers get wrong: how children use violent media in the context of peer cultures and resistance to adults. Buckingham refutes media panics by carefully examining the role of genre, age and the "mastery" of violent media as a rite of passage. He usefully reminds us that the news is often the scariest thing of all for children. As in all his books, Buckingham helps to situate media panics in the history of childhood, the practices and prejudices of parents and adult media producers, and the everyday politics of children's worlds.

Ann Haas Dyson, **Writing Superheroes: Contemporary Popular Culture and Classroom Literacy**, Teachers College Press, 1997, 249 pp., \$21.95 (paperback)

"Children's imaginative play is all about their freedom from being powerless children," Dyson writes, in this ethnography of an Oakland, California classroom, that uses Bakhtin to evaluate the

possibilities and limitations of bringing popular culture such as X-Men into the classroom to foster student writing. Dyson's research is the best around on understanding children's identities as comprised of deeply social identifications crossed by race, class and gender allegiances. Her deep understanding of the politics of literacy can be useful to everyone working on schools, media pedagogy and qualitative research with children. Dyson is an immensely gifted ethnographer of children, and she understands how schools work, and what factors prevent teachers from teaching well. This book provides a tribute to those adults who are not afraid of children's worlds and children's concerns, who are interested in their ideas and also in challenging and extending those ideas.

Zachary Lockman, **Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 308 pp., \$20.60 (paperback).

It is easy to blame ignorance about the Middle East and Islam on the apathy and ethnocentrism of the U.S. public, but the causes are more complex — and more disturbing: involving not just bad journalism, but more crucially Cold War economic priorities, the marginalization of dissident voices, and the co-optation of academic freedom by government agencies. *Contending Visions* is essential reading for those trying to decipher what the politicians and pundits say about the Middle East and working to resist the endlessly repeated banality about the “clash of civilizations.” The book is especially helpful for tracing the effects of the long shadow of empire on scholars of religion, political science and policy studies. Lockman synthesizes centuries of Western Christian discourses on Islam, before outlining the obstacles to truthful research about the Middle East due to the pressures of U.S. foreign policy dictates and economic prerogatives in the region. A courageous book on a subject of urgent importance that permanently alters the reader's capacity for critical reading of cable and network news.

Roland Marchand, **Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940**, University of California Press, 1985, 448 pp., \$31.64 (paperback).

A brilliant history of advertising by a great feminist. This is a fascinating work of social history, especially in its exploration of the Depression and popular culture, and the professional ideologies of ad producers. Marchand's analyses of print ads are a model of compelling visual and textual explication. Marchand focuses on gender and class relations within the ads, but also investigates the gender politics of the ad agency professionals and the powerful anxieties they projected on the female consumer. The illustrations are gorgeous and the writing is lucid and entertaining.

Dan Schiller, **How to Think About Information**, University of Illinois Press, 2006, 267 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

Read this book and you will never look at media convergence the same way again. By tracking business trends across media and telecomm industries, Schiller demonstrates how much has been lost while citizens were lulled by the discourses of globalization, deregulation, and the technology boom. Thinking through all of the ramifications of industrial convergence and the repositioning of culture, communication and information as the fountainhead of economic transformation the author persuades us that communications research needs to refocus on the complexities, contradictions, and threats posed by transnational capital. Schiller's dazzling research, his broad perspective on communications as a field, and his cogent argument make this book unforgettable.

Angela Valenzuela, **Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring**, State University of New York Press, 1999, 288 pp., \$25.95 (paperback).

A must-read for anyone who teaches and cares about open access to education. This ethnography of a Texas community traces the devastating impact of school reform, the endless patronization of Latino/a students, and the paradoxical costs in social capital in one's peer group of academic achievement. Before doing any school-based communication research, consider Valenzuela's analysis of "subtractive schooling" and how race, power and language play out in the micropolitics of teacher-student relations. The book portrays teachers and students at a Houston high school, but the assimilationist demands for de-identification and de-Mexicanization are made of students at top universities, and Valenzuela's understanding of the differences between immigrant and first-generation U.S.-born students is highly relevant to colleges and universities.

Raymond Williams, **Television, Technology and Cultural Form**, Routledge, 2003 (3rd edition), 160 pp., \$14.00 (paperback).

Now is the time to re-read Williams' arguments against technological determinism as an antidote to new media utopianism in all its various forms. Williams' emphasis on the historical precedents of popular TV genres and the histories of theatre and radio as they apply to television are a goldmine of potential dissertation topics. Regrettably, so much has been made of the concept of "flow" that the book's many other strengths tend to be overlooked. Readers will notice that the author's reflections on U.S. television circa 1972, and his careful materialist history, are remarkably useful to critiquing new media idealism.
