

Structures of Ambivalence: The Converging Horizons of Cultural Studies and Sociology

Sarah Banet-Weiser, **Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture**, New York, New York University Press, 2012, 279 pp., \$21.16 (paperback).

Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood, **Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value**, Routledge, 2012, 264 pp., \$34.80 (paperback).

Katherine Sender, **The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences**. New York: New York University Press, 2012, 259 pp., \$20.70 (paperback).

Also discussed: David Beer, **Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation**, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 200 pp., \$71.47 (hardcover).

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A third of a century ago, the academic significance of researching media and popular culture was transformed by a study of the audiences for the prime time UK current affairs program *Nationwide* (Morley, 1980). This now-renowned study took the flux of everyday talk about media culture and turned it through the prism of how interpretations of popular culture texts are structured by underlying social dynamics.

Today the supersaturation of social life by media practices undermines the attempt to treat particular acts of interpreting *this* text in *this* place as symptoms of a wider culture, even a whole society. And yet, the search for a different analytic prism through which to grasp the meaning and direction of popular media continues—and across an expanded terrain. In this new terrain, the relationship between popular cultural forms and norms—not of interpretation but of self-formation—have become crucial. All four books under discussion here add something important to our understanding of that relationship, while recalling in various ways the moves of earlier cultural studies.

Katherine Sender treats U.S. makeover shows (particularly shows about physical transformation: weight loss, dressing better) through a classic communications research approach, combining a large survey and more than 100 interviews. Her sample was strongly skewed, as she acknowledges, toward a white, female, and college-educated

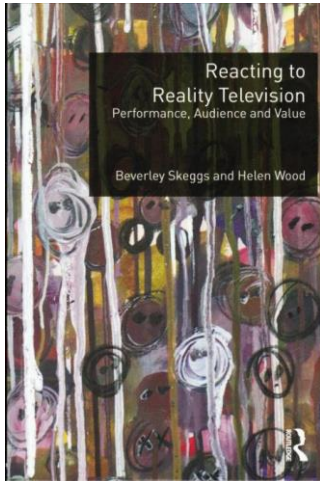


audience who generally invested strongly in these shows. ***The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences*** is written with great clarity and presents an argument of great cumulative force.

Confirming the work of earlier researchers such as Annette Hill, Sender demonstrates without difficulty that the audiences of these shows are aware of how these programs construct "reality"; indeed, they take pleasure in the shows' dramaturgical artifice while being critical of their occasional cruelty, of the lameness of some of the advice they provide, and of their rampant commercialism (p. 73). This complicates the straightforward claim, to which Sender admits she was tempted, that the shows acts as simple vehicles for inculcating neoliberal governmentality in Foucault's sense (the position classically argued by Ouellette and Hay, 2008). While as texts, these shows fit well with such a reading, the high degree of reflexivity with which audiences deal with them as texts undermines such an approach.

But Sender goes further. Examining *Starting Over*, she finds that the same audiences are strongly invested in what she calls the "emotional realism" (p. 20) of the show, and have embedded its lessons in their own lives: When a viewer of *Starting Over* talks critically of those who will not go on the show because they "are just so afraid to be real, to be heard, to be vulnerable" (p. 105), we realize this is a different kind of "reality" that is being talked about. Such audiences do *not* question the types of expertise that the shows rely upon, nor the desirability and meaning of the transformations which the shows' norms are designed to enact: Rather they reproduce, *through* the way they reflect, often critically, upon it, those shows' "common sense" (a view of how ideology works that recalls Stuart Hall's work in the 1970s). This leads Sender, in an original move, to question how positive the reflexivity so long celebrated by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens actually is. Drawing in particular on Lauren Berlant, Sender shows forcibly that the audiences' reflexivity is a machine for working out exactly the psychic *interiority* that neoliberalism must inculcate in individuals if it is to be effective. Sender does not need grand Deleuzian theories of "the fold" to demonstrate that this is an interiority precisely calibrated, on the "inside," to the types of transformation that neoliberal governmentality requires of the individual on the outside: its "inside" validates that exteriority *as real, as authentic*, in what must be called "ideological work" (p. 21). The "eyes of the camera" (p. 102), as one audience members puts it, become an always available reference point to judge one's appearance in "reality," while the *requirement* to externalize one's pain and emotional struggle through speech is reinforced and validated (p. 118). One reality TV viewer talks to Sender about the need to "listen to your gut" (p. 141), a phrase that oddly recalls how Homer's distinctly premodern poetry heroes addressed their internal organs.

Critiques of the shows as being constructed and celebrations of audiences' deconstruction of the shows' artifice therefore both miss the more interesting point that these programs provide models of a reality on a different level—certainly ritualized, perhaps also one might say normative. Strikingly, however, Sender avoids talking about "norms" as such, rendering the conclusion of her "reveal" of what audiences' reflexivity achieves a little weak: She can merely say that it "legitimizes the expression of . . . feelings within the conditions institutions impose" while making "utopian aspirations workable" (p. 203). Sender means "media, consumer and educational institutions" (p. 193), but gives little sense of what drives these conditions, or what economic or other imperatives drive them and the implications of those drives for wider questions of power. In what sense, indeed, are the related aspirations "workable," and with what consequences?



Two British sociologists, Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood, both deeply informed by media and cultural studies, are, like Sender, attracted to Foucauldian readings of the pedagogic forms of reality TV, but feel compelled to reject them in what they style “not a complete re-writing of the scripts of audience research but . . . a distinct re-emphasis’ that is more adequate to the more performative and interactive ‘form of reality television’” (p. 6). Rather than focusing on reflexivity as Sender does, they fix on ambivalence as their entry-point: This fits their emphasis (quite different from Sender’s) on the political economy that underlies the shows and that grounds their interest in how “the economic works through the moral and the cultural” (p. 7). Their fieldwork with four focus groups of women reality television viewers in London (two working class, one middle class, and one South Asian) makes ***Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*** a book of unusual methodological richness.

Far from the audience routinely internalizing hegemonic discourses as models of individual action, Skeggs and Wood complicate our understanding of what the audience does, drawing on recent theories of affect and, most specifically, cultural studies’ readings of ambivalence (again Lauren Berlant). Their analyses are complicated in two further ways: First, by an appreciation of how audiences are always split in advance by the histories of recognition, exclusion, and countervalidation that position women and men, and middle class and working class subjects, very differently: In spite of the South Asian focus group, this book’s emphasis is very definitely on the differentiating politics of class so distinctive of Britain, as the authors note. Second, by an innovative methodology (explained in chapter 4) that separates out *three levels* of reaction to a text (initial affective response, not necessarily verbal; initial verbal responses and interpretations; later rationalizations and adjustments of that initial response). Their method of elaborately transcribing “live” focus group reactions and interactions in parallel to an equally rich affective transcription of the program being watched puts more emphasis than usual on the first two levels. The result is to heighten our awareness of the affective *rejection* of neoliberal norms by most of their focus groups: among their middle class group, because the norms are not seen as relevant to them, and among their two working-class groups, because the expertise through which such norms are proposed is itself not accepted. In the latter case, *rejection* of neoliberal governmentality (*and*, unlike in Sender’s study, the forms of middle-class “expertise” on which the shows rely) is accompanied by a complex identification with the participants who undergo transformation on the shows.

The result is a very complex reading of neoliberal culture, the result of a cultural-studies informed *sociology* talking back, through its fieldwork, to contemporary forms of cultural studies and communications research. Although sometimes obscured by overelaborate language, Skeggs and Wood’s main conclusion is important: that subjects, as well as being subjected to governmental practices, may also “define, defend, and perform value-practices outside of the traditional fields of exchange” (p. 9), holding *contradictory* positions that cannot be theorized from the perspective of general frameworks such as governmentality. While fully sensitive to the violent truncations of personal history played out in the

contemporary reality show, and the way those dislocations fit with the dynamics of neoliberalism more generally, Skeggs and Wood also insist that, while neoliberal culture must be lived, *it is not simply lived out*. There is friction: The “as if” of the show can be inhabited by values *not* anticipated by its discourse, values that directly reject the show’s pedagogic intent. Here we are back to the basic move of early audience studies, and its sensitivity to class politics, but refracted through a new acknowledgment of the irreducible normative pluralism of complex societies (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006, a book that surprisingly is not mentioned by Skeggs and Wood).

Yet Skeggs and Wood do not give up on social reproduction and social structure; they insist that their workings are “re-invested through discourses of selfhood and self-responsibility” (p. 28), discourses produced not merely in individual but in *social* resources whose uneven distribution bears the history of class differentiation. They see in their working-class groups a defensive but ultimately self-defeating reaction, that, in opposition to the neoliberal norms of self-improvement on display, celebrates “the cramped spaces [of self-development] by which the working class are already positioned” (p. 232). These groups, they write, strongly recalling Paul Willis’ (1978) early classic *Learning to Labor*, “put themselves in their place” (p. 232). But this move is not entirely convincing, for two reasons. First, the authors downplay neoliberal self-improvement discourses’ saturation of *wider* spaces beyond television (including those of potential employment and interaction with government). Here Sarah Banet-Weiser’s broader cultural diagnosis discussed next carries more weight. Second, they elide the special nature of the evidence their methodology generated: By pooling social resources of interpretation and resistance in their focus groups, Skeggs and Wood arguably created situations *untypical* of those in which reality television normally gets absorbed, with uncertain consequences for their analysis (from this perspective, Sender is more circumspect about what her audience studies actually show).

Nonetheless Skeggs and Wood’s offer a remarkably rich interrogation of the significance of reality-based media in one closely observed context. No less striking, though across a wider canvas, is Sarah Banet-Weiser’s exploration of contemporary forms of “brand culture.” In one of the sharpest recent works of cultural studies, Banet-Weiser positions a wide range of popular media and style within “brand culture” in ***Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture***. Convincingly, she reads this as a “structure of feeling” (in Raymond Williams’ term) distinctive of a neoliberal age and strong enough to reroute entirely our intuitions about authenticity. In a chapter about the commercial appropriation of street art, she analyses how authentic art from the margins acquires economic value, while risking its authenticity: so far, so familiar. But in the book’s most original chapters, she takes on more provocative domains: the saturation by neoliberal culture of “our politics, our [individual] creativity, our religious practices—indeed our very selves” (p. 3). Her aim is to show how these crucial sites of cultural meaning “are organised by economic exchange” (p. 7)—and not from the outside, but through our own labor, as selves seeking to gain recognition and voice in the world.

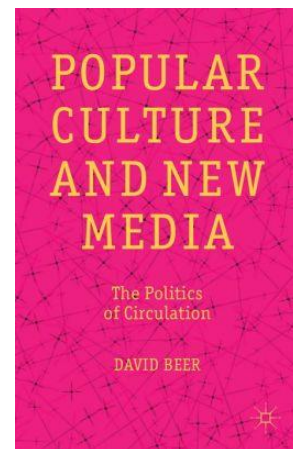


Banet-Weiser's understanding of the resulting communicative double bind is sometimes startlingly direct, as with this comment on girls' culture of online display: "She 'finds' a self and broadcasts that self, through those spaces that authorize and encourage user activity" (p. 56). The mutual dependencies on which this culture relies are not comforting, since they involve "other people rank[ing] your product, which in this case is yourself," with "each user . . . given the ability to reconstitute someone as something" (p. 87). In Banet-Weiser's dark but not unsympathetic reading, opportunities to reify each other are offered to us as freedom.

Underlying these insights is Banet-Weiser's deep understanding of how certain cultural productions work to legitimate whole new framings of the space of social and individual action, changing what is "legible" (p. 135) as significant action. Some tensions, however, remain. It seems clear that Banet-Weiser wants to reframe the processes she describes from the point of view of a different notion of authenticity: What else could ground the "grave concerns" she voices on page 164? Yet, elsewhere the new notion of authenticity, fully replicated in the constitutive and differentiating strategies of brands, is interpreted as the inevitable adaption by religious producers to the demands of retaining profile in a highly competitive attention economy. But if inevitable, how can this apparent reduction of a fundamental area of human expression be challenged? Meanwhile, Banet-Weiser's concern to recognize the untamable productivity of the user and consumer so important to the tradition of audience studies pulls her back from asking how much such productivity really matters in the long run, if, as she argues, it must operate in a space *only* made legible in corporate marketing terms.

Nonetheless, Banet-Weiser's eloquent book shows beyond a doubt the productiveness of examining contemporary forms of normativity and "self-reflexive narrativization" (Sender, *The Makeover*, p. 152) within a broader reading of today's intensely commercialized cultures. **Popular Culture and New Media**, a new book by UK sociologist David Beer, points clearly to the next horizon to which this critical cultural studies must orientate itself. This is "new media," or, more specifically, the production, collation, and analysis of "data" through the very circulation of culture.

Beer's primary examples come from the role that data collection and production now play in the consumption of music. He clearly explains how people's participation in the metrification of their music consumption through software-generated playlists and the like connects with a broader development of algorithmic power and new forms of economic value. On the face of it, Beer's Deleuzian interest in data's role in the "infrastructures of participative organization" (p. 60) could not be further from a concern with reflexivity: All that matters are "relations of exteriority" (quoting Manuel DeLanda, p. 32). But, strikingly, Beer insists at the same time that the result is not system but "culture" and that it is precisely the fusion of our contemporary structures of *meaning*-making with systematic processes of categorizing and counting that needs to be understood. The "ordering of cultural content" (p. 39) through the circulation of data about our experiences of culture is now inseparable from that experience.



The outcome is not to undermine the importance of reflexivity completely, but, as Beer says, to add "a more material dimension to [our] debates" about culture (p. 3). Although Beer does not mention Raymond Williams, this surely returns us to one of Williams' key insights that cultural forms have a particular history and embody a distinctive economic imperative. As Beer insists, the "doing of culture" (p. 171) involves a certain "recursivity" (p. 119), as Skeggs and Wood (and in different terms, Banet-Weiser and Sender) also recognize, and the drive to generate economic value through data is now an increasingly important factor in enabling such currents of recursivity to flow.

In this new context, it is ever more important that cultural/communications studies and sociology learn from each other in unravelling the increasingly elaborate ways in which the norms that orientate us toward power are embedded in the pleasurable habits and diversions of everyday life.

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