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# Mediamaking

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## BOOK REVIEW

### *Mediamaking*

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Grossberg, L., Wartella, E., Whitney, D., & Wise, J. (2006). *Mediamaking: Mass media in popular culture* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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The book has an attitude. It has no pictures. It does not come out in a new edition every semester. These three characteristics alone set it apart from many college-level mass media texts.

The lack of pictures, as well as Grossberg's refusal to print a new edition every six months, goes along with the attitude of *Mediamaking*, one of the best media and culture books available for advanced media coursework. The attitude is based on a quasi-Marxist approach to the media, which critiques capitalist institutional trademarks of mass media, therefore implicitly critiquing the glossy and facile approach of most media overview textbooks today.

It is a standout in many other ways as well, as it combines media history and processes with a "not-too-watered-down" approach to media theory. It can serve as a springboard to more complex theories of popular culture and media impact. In fact, the ability of this text to allow teachers and students to move in various directions is what makes it so powerful. For example, the book refers to more radical theories of popular culture without fully ascribing to them, such as the theories of John Fiske and others who believe that popular culture is invented by the people, that it directly contradicts mass culture, thus separating commercial meaning from meaning created by viewers.

Grossberg's view of popular culture is less defined than the view just described. To him (and his co-authors), cultural forms arise from the modes of production ("making") apparent in national media, and are acted on by the various people, groups, and organizations both internal and external to the media. This more general view allows the instructor to teach various critical theories of the media in a way that is consistent with the text, while adding deeper understanding.

Another good feature of this text is its focus on economic principles as tied to cultural production. Grossberg's discussion of Marx demystifies terms like surplus value, exchange

value and superstructure, and at the same time ties them to industry terms such as vertical and horizontal integration, turnstile sales and economies of scale. This blend of practical and theoretical knowledge is useful to students interested in media careers, but also provides an analytical framework for them to understand the reasons behind media processes.

*Mediamaking's* coverage of critical/interpretive theories is concise and easy to understand. Students learn to apply semiotic understandings of meaning to cinematic texts as easily as they learn to apply effects theory to examples of media violence. Discreet descriptions of complex terms allow students to share points of view easily in classroom discussions and exercises. The book's repeated explanation of the cultural model, which teaches ways to account for cultural context in meaning creation, provides an easy way to talk about both sender and receiver perspectives.

Finally, an additional author to the second edition of the text has added a much-needed emphasis on international media. J. MacGregor Wise brings his own international background to the new chapter on media globalization. Students respond well to the chapter's discussion of the co-existence and contradictions inherent in the competing concepts of "McWorld" vs.  *jihad*. Since classrooms themselves are increasingly diverse and international, the text has been improved by providing the vocabulary which allows today's students the means to do advanced investigation into global issues.

*Mediamaking* is a useful and provocative text, well suited to upper-level college media courses with a cultural bent. It supports a liberal arts approach to the study of media and gives students a balanced, yet pointed set of arguments about the commercial nature of the media. In today's increasingly complex mediated universe, *Mediamaking* brings students to a necessary critical understanding of mass communication.