



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University Review

Volume 12

Issue 1 *Sacred Heart University Review, Volume XII,*
Numbers 1 & 2, Fall 1991/ Spring 1992

Article 7

February 2010

Video Icons and Values, ed. Alan M. Olson, Christopher Parr, and Debra Parr

Christopher Sharrett

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Recommended Citation

Sharrett, Christopher (2010) "Video Icons and Values, ed. Alan M. Olson, Christopher Parr, and Debra Parr," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol12/iss1/7>

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BOOK REVIEW

Video Icons and Values, ed. Alan M. Olson, Christopher Parr, and Debra Parr. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991. 189 pp. \$16.95 paperback.

by Christopher Sharrett

This collection, culled from papers presented at a 1987 Boston University conference on television and society, offers a useful introduction to some of the principal concerns of media studies, although the book often travels well-trod ground. Most of the topics familiar to students of video culture are covered here: the decline of literacy with the triumph of television; the replacement of lived, social experience with privatized fantasy; the collapse of any sense of temporality as past, present, and future become simultaneous on the media landscape. The difficulty is that the approaches to these topics in some of the essays proceed from technician or otherwise reductionist or determinist arguments that clearly show the legacy of McLuhanesque thinking about the media. That is, there is a tendency here to see media technology and the video image in particular as prime movers and shakers in human affairs rather than as phenomena entangled in numerous political and economic issues. This collection, like much recent media theory, is prone to separate technology from the economic assumptions that find a need for it and generate it.

Some arguments, such as Robert Scholes's admonition that we need to take TV seriously and learn to "read" its texts, seem rather tired. The dissolution of distinctions between high and low culture occurred some time ago, and in contexts outside of media studies. Equally naive is Gregor Goethals' remark that TV has taken the place of the stained glass windows and monumental art of antiquity, that the medium has proven its centrality to world culture. True enough, but too many analyses of mass media assume blithely that media are endemic to postmodern society, and are supported by "us" because

they are "popular." A new valorization of media, especially television, takes place that assumes them as legitimate and spontaneous expressions of culture rather than as carefully-managed advertising forms that work as much to impose sensibilities as to reflect them. The authors here show some awareness of this idea, but their methodologies are often too sketchy and tentative to allow a truly adversarial analysis of the media environment.

Representative of the problematical strategies of the book is Renee Hobbs's essay on television and the audience's cognitive skills. Hobbs argues that a distinction must be made between television's content and its presentation format. Although the format of television tends to fragment meaning, Hobbs argues that this is not necessarily a characteristic inherent to the medium. Television's format as we currently know it is basic to commercial television, and unfortunately audiences are exposed to little else. Hobbs argues, however, that audiences have embraced commercial television, and although the unavailability of more experimental forms is lamentable, this is apparently not disconcerting to the general public. According to Hobbs's reasoning, commercial television is not necessarily wedded to its prevailing stylistics, and the medium itself does not by its nature show contempt toward critical analysis and logical mentation. This begs the question as to why commercial television has indeed depended so exclusively on such a narrow range of presentational styles. Whether or not the audience has fallen in love with TV's banal content is a separate matter; given the hegemony of mass media, the parameters of the "popularity" debate have always been very circumscribed.

Lenore Langsdorf, like Hobbs, is concerned with the viewer-television relationship. She notes that the television environment has produced a situation not so much of illiteracy but of aliteracy, that is, a preference not to read. According to Langsdorf, the appeal of TV is in the limitation of its format to spatial and temporal presentation. Issues concerning "inherent substance" cannot be dealt with by television. This situation necessarily presents a problem, especially for younger viewers, who are unable to make distinctions between the real and the simulated, the significant and the trivial. Questions of truth and falsehood have become obviated in an era when a videotape of a tour of France can substitute for an actual, lived

tour.

Given the reticulate nature of these analyses, Rebecca Abbott's more tough-minded Frankfurt School study of the now-defunct show *Max Headroom* is refreshing. *Max Headroom* was originally a British-produced cult film with a caustic, Kubrick-style edge about a post-apocalypse society totally dominated by supranational corporations and TV conglomerates; Max Headroom was a literal "talking head," composed of computer graphics, who dominated the air waves with Orwellian omniscience. When optioned to ABC-TV, the adversarial force of this cautionary film was not so much lost as co-opted; it became a temporary hit, with Coca-Cola using Max Headroom as a sales gimmick. Using Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Roland Barthes, Abbott argues that *Max Headroom* is a model for explanation for Frankfurt School reasoning. Adorno and Horkheimer, and later Barthes, suggested that by appearing to acknowledge the public's critical faculties, dominant ideology can gain fresh credibility to a point not only of making people buy commodities they know are worthless, but of actually demanding their own servitude. Given the media's demonstrated ability to absorb and trivialize all sorts of adversarial discourse, Abbott's remarks are extremely cogent and useful.

Media scholars regularly note it is difficult to analyze a situation in which one is so deeply and constantly immersed. The tentative, exploratory nature of many of these pieces support the notion, but a few of these essays (most notably Abbott's) show that TV is not so illusive once we demystify it and refuse to be enamored of it. Television's assault on reason, taste, and critical consciousness seems merely of a piece with our political/economic circumstances in the last phase of this century.