

*Television Culture*

John Fiske

London and New York: Methuen, 1987. 353 pp.

*Television Culture* may be best read as a textbook survey of recent research into the cognitive activity of audiences, their competency in decoding television, and the role of television audiences in the construction of contemporary popular culture. This new concern for audiences arises in part out of dissatisfaction with previous models, methods, and theories of how audiences respond to mass media. Characteristic of these dissatisfactions has been the doubts raised about the narrowness of the questionnaires and surveys favored by market oriented research organizations, the persistence in policy-making circles of communication models little removed from the Shannon and Weaver prototype, and the difficulties experienced by a new generation of academic researchers in stretching the uses and gratifications method into a fuller understanding of how different "communities" can and do construct divergent meanings and satisfactions out of the same television fare.

Fiske believes that a preferable alternative for furthering our interest in audiences can be found in two allied themes of academic research. On the one hand he draws from a text oriented semiotics and on the other from an audience oriented cultural studies. Both of these ways of thinking about media seem to have become persuaded of late that audiences should be regarded not as textual subjects so much as "primarily social subjects." Fiske argues that to apprehend audiences in this new way -- as more active social agents in the production of meanings around television -- obliges researchers to "shift our focus from the text to its moments of reading", where he believes the "points of stability and anchored meanings (however temporary) are to be found not in the text itself, but in its reading by a socially and historically situated viewer."

This shift away from media texts and toward a richer empirics of readers, listeners, and viewers is in large part made possible because of what Fiske sees as the new methods and possibilities opened up by audience ethnographies. Much of the book is concerned with assembling materials of this sort and with demonstrating the ethnographic approach as a "valid method of studying television and its viewers." What validates ethnography for the analysis of television appears to be its mix of methods, including participant observations, focus group interviews, and non-formal questionnaires involving people in their own environment, all points of inquiry which respect such matters as viewer differences, modes of viewing, and "the meanings and pleasures produced."

The theoretical origins for this questioning of the relative power of the television text and the television viewer have diverse origins -- among others Umberto Eco's notion of aberrant decoding and Stuart Hall's claim that television produces different ideological readings based upon one's position within the social structure. Fiske provides an interesting account of how empirically rich ethnographic studies have

begun to fill out these suggestive ideas, demonstrating in the process that "television's power to construct its preferred readings and readers" henceforth must be seen over and against "television's openness...to its viewers to construct their meanings out of its texts."

Exemplary among the many cases cited in the text are David Morley's investigations of audience interpretations of British television and more recently the early reports of the comparative studies of Katz and Liebes on the cross-cultural viewing of *Dallas*. Both these initiatives, animated as they are from contrasting frameworks, provide evidence in support of Fiske's thesis that audiences bring to their experience of television the capacity for a wide variety of interpretive responses and negotiated understandings.

Working in the interstices of elaborated theories such as post-structural semiotics and cultural marxism in order to open up some middle ground by way of ethnographic evidence inevitably raises questions about just how well the bricolage will hold up. Attempting to strengthen the social dimensions of semiotics in this way, for example, seems a more ameliorative task than what amounts to in effect weakening the claims about the role of ideology in the hegemonic models of cultural studies. While we can find evidence of a new willingness among hegemony theorists to acknowledge more indeterminate social processes at work in how audiences interpret the meaning of television content, there nevertheless remains an unyielding insistence that the instances of social change and social challenge arising out of popular culture in this way must ultimately rest within some preconceived structural co-optation.

When one places these elaborate theorizations over and against some of the more pedestrian characteristics of contemporary audiences (time-shifting of programs with VCRs, video-grazing or program sampling with the aid of remote control devices and augmented cable services; video rentals and informal video exchanges which have begun to move TV viewing away from conventional broadcasting itself; or the general conclusions of leisure time-use surveys that a great deal of TV viewing should be seen as secondary forms of accompaniment to other primary social activities in the household), it is not so difficult to see how the practice of television viewing may be in some present danger of slipping away from the capacity of the theorist or for that matter the capacity of the institutions of television to continue to make it, the television audience, fit into settled notions of either social control or social change. Fiske is on firm ground when he argues that we have devoted too little effort to understanding how television as a form of culture has entered into and become part of our popular pleasures. Audience ethnographies promise to take us some way toward that understanding.

Whether the research agenda he lays out, centering as it does on the pleasures and otherwise negotiated readings of the megatexts of contemporary television, continues to develop may well depend upon how successfully it is able to account for precisely

those audience activities, briefly noted above, that currently threaten our received notions of what indeed constitutes the text for today's television audience.

Reviewed by: David Crowley  
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*The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*

Jack Goody

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 213 pp.

Anthropologist Jack Goody has written much that relates to the discipline of communication. *The Logic of Writing* follows a journey that began with *Literacy in Traditional Societies* and continued in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. It would not surprise me, having myself been trained in anthropology, to discover that Goody's name is now as well known in communication studies as in anthropology. If not, it should be. His work is relevant, original, and aware of major sources from which many of us draw—Innis, McLuhan, Einstein, Levi-Strauss, and Foucault, for example.

As in his earlier works dealing with communication, Goody attempts to account for some of the differences in social organization and world view between nonliterate and literate societies. Special emphasis is placed on what happens to societies in transition from one "mode of communication" (a fundamental Goody concept) to the next. Examples are drawn from the ancient near East, and West Africa in more recent times, where Goody has done extensive fieldwork. A major aspect of his analysis is the way connections, often plausible but at times tenuous, are made between archeological interpretation and contemporary ethnographic research.

The opening chapter tackles the question of religion. What is at stake when "the word", in for example, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, is written rather than being confined to the oral mode? Can certain core features of these religions be linked to the mode of communication proselytizing them? Goody answers in the affirmative. When religions become literate, a holy book helps define an autonomous boundary. Only literate religions, he argues, can be religions of conversion, persuading or forcing people to subscribe to a bounded set of beliefs. Examples of how this operates, and where it cannot (in oral traditions) are given. The assessment includes a consideration of ritual, cognition, and the role of specialists in an emerging priestly bureaucracy.

Goody then turns his attention to the interplay between economics and the emergence of early writing systems. How does literacy affect the division of labor? What new technological possibilities can be related to script? In dealing with these questions, considerable emphasis is placed on bookkeeping and ultimately the emergence of money. Here the primary case study is Mesopotamia. Goody draws heavily from the work of Denise Schmandt-Besserat, whose hypothesis on the evolution of Mesopotamia writing from archaic clay tokens has been getting wide consideration.