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Book Reviews: Volume 4

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J. Fiske *Power plays, power works*

David E. Butler

Two quotations. The first is fairly typical of the relativist reasoning underscoring John Fiske's book *Power Plays, Power Works*. The second passage is drawn from the latest in Tony Hillerman's series of Navajo detective novels *Sacred Clowns* (1993). In it he offers an account of an instance of reading against the grain of dominant meaning.

> In 1985... a New York-based, Korean and Jewish owned company marketed a brand of sports shoe to inner-city Black and Latino men. The brand name was 'Troop'. Rapidly a rumor spread that it was owned by the Ku Klux Klan and that it was a strategy to use Black dollars to fund the Klan's operations... The substance of the rumor was 'untrue' in the objective sense, but the knowledge of an invasive economics was a true part of the Black experience [...] These two ways of knowing...may not be equivalent in their relationship to those empirical data which form the base of scientific rationalism, but they are equivalent in the social truth of contemporary racism. (245-246)

> Then the telephone rang.
>
> 'It's Janet,' the caller said. 'I got the impression the other day at the Navajo Inn that you wanted to talk to me about something? Was I right?'
>
> 'Absolutely,' Chee said.
>
> 'So I have an idea. Remember you telling me about that old movie that used Navajos as extras, and they were supposed to be Cheyennes but they were talking Navajo, and saying all the wrong things? The one that they always bring back to that drive-in movie at Gallup? Sort of campy deal, like the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*?'
>
> 'Yeah,' Chee said. '*Cheyenne Autumn*. A couple of my relatives are extras in it.'
>
> 'Well, it's back again and I thought – ' [...]
>
> 'We can talk after the movie,' Janet said.
>
> 'Of course. But they could have talked during the movie. And talking about the movie during the movie – celebrating the small victory of The People over the white man which the John Ford classic represented – was the reason Navajos still came to see it [...]
>
> Scenes came in which sombre-looking Cheyenne leaders responded to serious questions in sombre-sounding Navajo. When converted back into English by the translator the answers made sombre sense. But they produced more happy bedlam among the audience and the 'What did he really say?' question from either Janet or Blizzard... What he really said tended to have something to do with the size of the Colonel's penis, or some earthy and humorous irrelevancy. Chee would sanitize this a bit or put the humour in the context of Navajo customs or taboos, or explain that the celebratory honking was merely noting the screen appearance of somebody's kinfolks. (111-113)

Power Plays, Power Works is a study in applied post-structuralism. Three features identify it as post-structuralist. The key conceptual premise of the work is that grand motivating theories (like religion, market liberalism, historical materialism or psychoanalysis) which claim to provide totalizing social explanation, are necessarily incomplete because, in our increasingly heterodox societies, the veracity of any one (dominant) system of knowledge over another (subordinate) perspective invariably depends upon the power of its users to assert the 'truth' of its meanings. When you come to think about it, post-structuralists argue, as we can only know and describe the world in language (symbolic expressions of various types), these cultural processes actually constitute reality. In this fashion, as the above quotation shows, Fiske contends that meanings are effectively made in discourse, so much so that from an analytical standpoint the reader needs to grasp the primacy of discursive representation over material determination. On this view, the Navajo subversion of *Cheyenne Autumn* is as true as the White narrative of conventional Hollywood westerns. (That this is a fictionalized instance of resistance should matter not at all to the likes of Fiske, for whom textual significance is as good as, arguably even better than, the real thing. From a conceptually similar stance, Baudrillard argued that the Gulf war had not happened because public knowledge of it derived from media interpretation.) Second (from Foucault), in a set of extended case studies Fiske puts critical stress on the body as the principal site of the exercise of institutional control over transgressive subjects – transgressive in the sense that they threaten 'the power-bloc'. Third (from Derrida), Fiske accords a privileged role to a 'deconstructive' methodology as a way of cracking open the 'monofrontal' facades of orthodox social interpretations – notably of homelessness, popular pastimes and race relations – to the plurality of repressed points of view hidden below.

Though appearing in the Verso imprint (formerly New Left Books), on the evidence of this text, the author of *Power Plays, Power Works* has no business regarding himself as politically progressive. Ruling out any future prospect of a politics of universal emancipaton, the final message of the book is to endorse (in a passage resonant of Nietzschean irrationalism) ethnic particularism and reverse racialism. Speaking in the cultured voice of a recent emigré, Fiske begins by detailing the inappropriateness of what he calls European theories, specifically Western Marxism, to cope with the diverse configuration of contemporary US society. Accused of unrefined logocentrism, or 'monovocality' operating in a 'multimodal field' of social enquiry, Fiske caricatures materialist analysis of the structure/social agency duality, casting it in a dim light in relation to his own shiny, syncretic Foucauldian-Gramscian-Bakhtian model of understanding. Ugly neologistic formulations are presented to the reader as radical conceptual innovations when in fact the book's explanatory framework has about as much theoretical novelty as a sliced loaf.

To recognize, as Hillerman has, that idiomatic knowledge and local histories of struggle against domination will predispose the socially marginalized and dispossessed towards subversive readings of mainstream perspectives (in Fiske's terms 'top-down imperialising power') hardly represents a revolutionary break-through in cultural theory. The complex effects of 'multi-accentuality' are long established in media studies research. Eager, above all, to loosen the 'bottom-up localizing power' of creative human agency from the determining influence of social structure (i.e. to decode texts counter to their preferred meanings), in my view Fiske greatly exaggerates the significance of these immaterial 'tactics of inversion, opposition, disruption and evasion'.

For it is one thing to acknowledge the value and relief afforded by symbolic opposition to the suffocating power of orthodoxy, and to applaud instances of coded resistance as, at best, resources of hope. It is quite another to interpret any and all signs of revolt against institutional authority as evidence of real gains against the ruling order. Navajo Indians watching a movie in the manner imagined by Tony Hillerman may well have the effect of illuminating a common experience of inequity, but textual 'reality'

of this kind cannot possibly overturn the official, cannibalized history of 'the West' or change the underlying material forces that produced and confirm it.

And like a lot of resolutely anti-foundationalist theorizing, purism lurks not far away in the Fiskean schema. *Power Plays, Power Works* claims to adequately take account of the social constraints of crosscutting 'multiaxial' determination (by means of racial category, class, gender, age, geography and corporeality) where lesser theories dare not. Yet despite the purportedly 'heteroglossic' approach to selected cultural practices, when it comes to it Fiske's textual interpretations, of fandom or the viewing habits of homeless men for example, are decidedly univocal and homogenous. Freed from any material referent whatsoever, signifiers float off into deconstructionist abstraction. Drawing also on methodologically spurious ethnographic surveys, Fiske's analysis of endzone dances by black American footballers, explained in terms of 'black expressiveness', amounts to little more than racially essentialist tosh.

Infantilism in homeless men as manifest in their illicit use of pornography is sad and in no sense empowering. The emasculated behaviour cited by Fiske would certainly be read as a form of insolence against the institutional authority of hostel management, and maybe for them it is a way of dealing with the degrading experience of poverty and indigence. But to promote these and other consumerist banalities as lethal pricks against what John B Thompson has described as the 'systematically asymmetrical relations of power' *(Ideology and Modern Culture, 1990)* inherent in the formation of contemporary capitalist societies is to divert critical attention from the causes of social inequity and the reproduction of those defining relations of domination, not least as circulated in and through the media of public communication. In the closing paragraph of *Power Plays, Power Works* Fiske suggests that if 'localizing powers can hold off imperializing ones and gain tiny spaces against them...they...have demonstrated their ultimate undefeatability... Over the long haul, weak powers prove stronger than strong ones, their strength lies in their endurance'. To my mind, in severing the relationship of correspondence between text and context, the author of these lines misrecognizes that while women and men may indeed make their own discursive histories, as C. L. R. James wrote in the preface to *The Black Jacobins* (1938), their freedom of achievement is limited by the necessities of their environment. To portray the limits of those necessities and the realisation, complete or partial, of all possibilities, that is the true business of the historian.

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M. Skovmand and K. Schroder (eds.) *Media cultures: reappraising transnational media*

Richard Fitzsimons

Leslie Fiedler, writing on one occasion about popular literature, irreverently suggested that many theorists operating within the cultural realm, secretly relished much of the material which they frequently rubbished in public. Implicit in this approach is the perception of popular culture as vulgar, something to be avoided in favour of the more elitist notions of highbrow culture. Each of the ten essays featured in 'Media Cultures' attempts to address this approach and, by so doing, create a space within which our audiovisual culture may be interrogated in a less prejudicial manner.

Skovmand and Schroder make no secret of their disillusionment with the work pioneered by Adorno and Horkheimer which undoubtedly treated popular culture as something to be avoided whenever possible, believing as they did that any enjoyment or pleasure which a mass audience might glean from such exposure would ultimately

prove to be oppressive. They suggested extreme caution, particularly regarding the effects of film and television, which they believed, allowed 'no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience'.

Media Cultures deals specifically with the benefits to be gained by an audience through its engagement with such 'lowbrow' material as game shows, cult movies and soap operas. Here, recent research in the area of reception theory is drawn upon and expanded. What emerges is a picture of diverse popular media audiences which are much more resilient to penetration by the dominant ideology encoded within much of the output of the mass culture industries than could ever have been imagined by the Frankfurt School theorists.

The knowledge and sophistication which these groups bring to bear on the material presented to them, is frequently based upon the ethnic, social, cultural and religious backgrounds of the group, along with their level of experience of the programme material being presented to them. What emerges is a compelling argument which denies the existence of a passive, homogeneous audience, waiting patiently for their next dose of dominant ideology to be administered by those all powerful beings who control the means of media production. In its place, we are presented with a multiplicity of audience groupings who engage fruitfully with popular culture products in order to more sharply define their identities through processes of both identification and difference.

Media Cultures develops its theses through three stages. Firstly, the historical processes which have led to the establishment of the communication systems which generally predominate in Western societies are outlined and examined, with particular emphasis placed upon the difficulties which have emerged in accommodating the rights of the citizen within the sphere of public communications. Graham Murdock's paper 'Citizens, consumers and public culture' tackles these issues with insight and clarity. Indeed, his analysis of the shortcomings of public service broadcasting and the potential benefits and pitfalls inherent in the commercial sector, set against the changing contours of the political Euromap should be closely scrutinized by all those in this country actively involved in setting the broadcasting agenda, whether through legislation or education. His suggestion that now is an opportune time to 'embrace a philosophy of public communication based on the recognition of difference and the toleration of dissent' is one to which we should give great consideration.

The second section of the book deals at some length with the question of both national and transnational media cultures, with particular emphasis on the impact of American popular culture on cultural identity in both national and European contexts. Not surprisingly, the general consensus which emerges suggests that European fears of an impending deluge of American culture are somewhat overstated. In fact, as David Morley argues, through the appropriation of Saussurean theory which suggests that in the realm of language, only differences exist, so, in a cultural context, identity is wholly a function of differences within a system. European culture is thus constituted through its distinctions from American, Asian, Islamic cultures and so on. The overall impression given is that American popular culture should not be regarded as some dreadful, all-devouring creature, waiting to destroy European culture for ever. Incidentally, it should come as no surprise, given the events surrounding the role of media products in the recent G.A.T.T. negotiations, that none of the contributors to *Media Cultures* are French.

The third and final section of the book deals most specifically with the role of the audience and its engagement with popular texts. The three essays, dealing with the T.V. fiction of Dennis Potter, the cult film and the thorny issue of cultural value are by far the most interesting, stimulating and inventive of the collection. Here we are presented with ideas which seriously and convincingly challenge the passivity of the audience. Here we find an audience who, through years of viewing experience and the availability of new technologies, VCRs, remote controls, etc. are now starting to engage in an

interactive way with the materials presented to them. The future seems full of possibilities for the spectator and an exciting playing field for the cultural theorist.

Media Cultures through its ten essays, provides an eye opening journey into the future of media studies for those of us who emerged from the more traditional Marxist approach to the subject. Although the playful sprite of the postmodern flits through its pages, this could hardly be deemed a bona fide haunting. Indeed, the bold, clear style which characterizes all of the contributions and the numerous references to cultural and national identities would seem to suggest that a clear political agenda exists. Given the premise on which the book is based, perhaps the greatest compliment I can pay its editors, is to describe it as highly entertaining.

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B. Gunter and T. Viney *Seeing is believing: religion and television in the 1990's*

London: John Libbey, 1994. 134 pp, stg£18.00
ISBN 0 86196 442X

Tony Fleck

Gregg Dyke who left London Weekend Television in March 1994, ended a recent speech to the Royal Television Society by saying:

> And now I'm off to the Jobcentre with my P45. Here's my Jobfinder card: 'Bald, rich, ex-chief executive in television industry, keen to meet similar, prefer to avoid anyone keen on religious programming, regulators and Conservative politicians.

While I am not sure why Mr Dyke would want to visit a Jobcentre, for he departed LWT after it was taken over by Granada with share options worth £9m and is strongly tipped to lead a bid for the UK's Channel 5, I have a good idea why he dislikes religious programming and regulators – his avoidance of Conservative politicians is his own affair. In the late 1980s, LWT wanted to shift *Highway* from its early Sunday evening slot – I suppose eventually to abandon it altogether – and was stopped by the IBA after consultation with the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC) which advises the BBC as well as the IBA. Not that *Highway* was not bringing in the viewers, for it regularly produced audiences of between seven and eight million – at that time together with *Songs of Praise* some fifteen million viewers sat down to watch BBC and UTV every Sunday evening – but because the audience for *Highway* contained a large number of older people who were less attractive to advertisers.

It was not until the demise of the IBA, as a result of Mrs Thatcher's ill-conceived Broadcasting Act of 1990, and the appearance of its successor the ITC, shorn of its regulatory power over British commercial television, that *Highway* went the way of all flesh and ITV abandoned its commitment to what was known as 'the closed period' or more popularly as 'the God Slot'. This was the forty five or sixty minutes each Sunday evening when both the BBC and its commercial rival carried 'religious programming' and represented all that was left of John Reith's intention as first Director General of the BBC that 'Sunday programmes should be framed with the day itself in mind without being dull – and they should not encroach on church hours'. As Andrew McIntyre, Reith's most recent biographer points out:

> The result was a programme schedule that reproduced with almost eerie fidelity the unchanging pattern of Sabbath in the College Church manse thirty or forty years earlier. It began with a service which lasted from 9.30 till 10.45. There followed a lengthy period of silence,

broken at 12.30 by a sequence of talks and serious music (Bach cantatas were much favoured). A second service followed at eight in the evening, and then more music until the Epilogue at eleven.

This pattern might have suited the church-going middle-class in the 1930s but for most of the radio audience it was one of complete boredom and as a result, Radio Luxemburg and Radio Normandie – the pop stations of the day – had their peek ratings each Sunday. Today, entertainment has almost triumphed on Sundays and religious programmes have all but disappeared from the evening schedules. However religion is still holding on, even if just by its fingernails, and the Broadcasting Act for the first time ever makes religion a mandatory programme category for ITV. So in a minimal way both the BBC and the commercial networks are still committed to religious programming in contrast to the four national US networks which carry little or no such material on Sundays or on any other day.

Seeing is Believing is the latest in an extended series of monographs produced on varied television topics by the ITC and its direct predecessors the IBA and ITA and one of its strengths is being able to draw comparisons with previous surveys over the past thirty years especially *Godwatching: viewers, religion and television* of 1988. In the present survey Barrie Gunter, the ITC's Head of Research and Rachel Viney, the Religious Broadcasting Officer, take stock of current attitudes towards religion and religious broadcasting in Britain and Northern Ireland. The research was carried out in two stages: first there was a series of 'focus group discussions' including believers and non-believers as well as religious/broadcasting professionals; while the second stage involved a UK survey of a representative sample of television viewers. Although I am usually allergic to statistical tables and percentages – like Lord Randolph Churchill 'I never could make out what those damned dots meant' – in this case I found the text reader-friendly, the tables clear and the findings intriguing for a so-called secular society. Of the sample, more than 70 per cent still describe themselves as Christian and of these two thirds claim to be either Anglican (40 per cent) or Roman Catholic (29 per cent): not so surprisingly more women than men said they were members of either church. The next largest church groupings were the Church of Scotland (5 per cent) and Methodist (4 per cent); while Muslims and Jews represented less than 0.5 per cent each to the Hindus' one per cent. However, despite the 73 per cent who identified themselves as Christian, when asked if they saw present day Britain as a Christian country, less than one in three replied 'Yes'.

But what of religious broadcasting? First there is the apparently simple question of definition. To the professionals and regulators, religious broadcasting is that which fills designated 'religious' slots reserved in the schedules, although this does not mean that from time to time drama or current affairs may not have a religious content. However, the viewing public takes a much narrower stance for to them programmes featuring worship or hymn singing are regarded as the essence of religious programming as well as people talking about and sharing their religious beliefs, although there is also a general welcome for documentaries or plays which explore religious or moral themes. I am personally delighted that there is wide-spread concern over Tele-Evangelists – an American import we could well do without – who are distrusted for their 'over the top' style, and general motivation. Programming on television was considered about right, although of those who disagreed, twice as many said there was 'too little' as 'too much'. The image of religious television was seen by some as 'boring and old-fashioned' (30 per cent) while an almost equal proportion (28 per cent) considered it 'thought-provoking or helpful'. Many felt that religious programmes catered in the main for those who could not get to church through illness or infirmity although, as regular church goers are most frequent viewers, this would be a doubtful premise for programme makers to act upon. Other reasons for viewing were that religious programmes provided comfort (49 per cent) and showed the background to other faiths (46 per cent).

The research carried out by Gunter and Viney confirms that programmes with a religious content and which meet a special need 'are accepted as part of television's

social function'. They are not an immediate turn-off, as many present decision makers in broadcasting who are driven by a market philosophy world claim, although it has to be admitted that the audience for praise and worship programmes is declining, – but not dramatically. Women watch more than men and the age profile is skewed towards age rather than youth. For viewers of minority faiths in Britain, who may express reservations about the emphasis placed on Christian beliefs, the main cause for concern is how their own communities and religions are portrayed in general programming, news and current affairs and how this may affect opinions and attitudes in the towns and cities where they live, work and play.

The objectives of religious broadcasting in Britain as set out by CRAC and endorsed by the BBC, the ITC, ITV and Channel 4 remain:

- to seek to reflect the worship, thought and action of the principle religious traditions represented in Britain, recognizing that those traditions are mainly, though not exclusively, Christian;

- to seek to present to viewers and listeners those beliefs, ideas, issues and experiences in the contemporary world which are evidently related to a religious interpretation or dimension of life;

- to seek also to meet the religious interests, concerns and needs of those on the fringe of, or outside, the organized life of the churches.

The next ten years – before which time we can reasonably expect another ITC report – will test whether these objectives remain valid, what with the proliferation of satellite transmissions and cable systems and it becoming relatively easier for religious groupings to own, and cheaper to operate, their own channels. I would hazard a guess that religious television will have disappeared from the present commercial channels, and probably also from the BBC, by the early twenty first century and we may well be into an era of narrow-casting as seems to have already happened in the United States – each group preaching to its own converted – rather than the eclectic religious broadcasting reported in this survey. Gregg Dyke will be delighted but I know that John Reith would be appalled at the prospect.

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A. Millwood Hargrave (ed.), Broadcasting Standards Council: *Violence in factual television.*

London: John Libbey, 1993. 160 pp, stg£12.50
ISBN 0 86196 441 1.

Muiris Mac Conghail

John Simpson, Foreign Affairs Editor of the BBC, and for a time BBC Correspondent in Dublin, writes in his essay on Depicting Violence on Television

> ...It seems strange that people who go to the cinema, perhaps with their twelve- or fourteen-year-old children, specifically to watch simulated acts of sadistic violence, or who sit at home and watch television actors in police uniform punch and kick their way to the conviction of criminals, should have any objections to watching images of the real thing; and yet those of us whose job it is to see these things in real life find ourselves going to ludicrous lengths to

avoid wounding the susceptibilities of very much the same people when they watch the news...

This is a central strand in the problem about violence on television. The factor which distinguishes television viewing from cinema viewing is the factor of location – the home, social, domestic and personal factors arising from that environment. 'You pays your money and takes your choice' is the factor in relation to a visit to the cinema: choice paid for at the box office. Viewers, in my experience have different attitudes to home television viewing. One such attitude is that although choice of viewing can be got from the several channels available, the content and range of choice, including placement in the schedule, is not in the active control of the home viewer.

Issues of the portrayal of violence are teased out in detail in the fourth of the series of Annual Reviews published by the British Broadcasting Standards Council which was established in 1988. Entitled *Violence in Factual Television*, it is the volume for 1993. It contains three elements: (i) the result of a quantitative study conducted by MORI on attitudes to violence; (ii) a research report conducted by the Institute of Communications Studies at the University of Leeds amongst a number of 'ordinary' viewers who were enabled to act as their own editors (however I have reservations about the process which I outline later) on a selection of broadcast material relevant to the topic and to re-edit and fashion the material in the light of their own views and experiences; and finally (iii) commentaries from a group of professional broadcasters and academics.

It is always difficult and can be dangerous to summarize detailed findings in research surveys of this kind and the editorial approach wisely avoids an easy classification of the results of the survey and research reports of the editing groups although there is a useful establishment of four main principles which seem to govern the response to violence on television.

These principles arise from findings of the editing groups at Leeds (p.86 ff):

1. Principle of closeness: Violence which relates to their own lives is likely to disturb viewers more than other violence.

2. Principle of certainty: An act of violence will shock less if the viewer understands what is happening in the violent scene - if the viewers know the outcome of what is taking place.

3. Principle of status: The greater the sympathy the viewer has with persons who suffer violence, the greater will the disturbance be to the viewer. If the person who has suffered is seen to have a low claim to be regarded well then violent imagery will be tolerated.

4. Principle of minimalism: Images of actual or real violence ought not to go beyond a point of graphic detail once the point which the violence is supposed to illustrate has been established.

Most of these principles will be familiar to broadcasters and media scholars but it is useful to have them drawn together under the four headings in this way and as a result of field and quantitative research.

One of the general findings from the MORI research survey was that two thirds of respondents thought that there was 'too much' violence on television and this was a significantly higher proportion than those who thought that there was either 'too much' bad language (57 per cent) or 'too much' sexual activity (40 per cent). Violence was the issue mentioned by a significant number of respondents (55 per cent) as causing them more concern when considering each of the three areas of (i) sex; (ii) bad language and (iii) violence. Another of the general findings was that three quarters of the sample said that they felt that violence on television reflected the state of society in which they lived and 58 per cent of the sample said that they agreed with the statement that 'violence in factual television makes people more ready to accept violence in real life.'

In essence, the general findings confirm that viewers believed that increased exposure to violence on television 'created a feeling that violence was now more prevalent.' The last statement is a most interesting one for a broadcaster. Violence is more prevalent. The survey findings in this report indicate that one of the attitudes to violence on television and effects on behaviour is that two thirds of the sample agreed with the statement that 'watching violence in factual programmes has made me behave more carefully.' Is that a beneficial consequence of public service broadcasting? Or has it 'made people unnecessarily afraid'? About half of the respondents felt it had according to the survey.

The programme material dealt with by the editing groups at Leeds included *Cops* (SKY 1), a news item about a street brawl (Television South), *Murder in Mind* (serial killers), (Central Television), *Crimewatch UK* (BBC), *World in Action* ('Denis the Menace') (ITV), *The Eye of Storm* (BBC) (which included well known sequences from coverage of the Vietnam War), and a BBC News report from former Yugoslavia (dealing with alleged atrocities in Bosnia). This edit process gave expression to the four principles referred to above. The groups used a method developed by Leeds that allowed them to edit for themselves scenes of factual violence. This enabled the researchers to observe the decision-making process in the choice between acceptable and non-acceptable violence, and also allowed for the members of the groups to be questioned in detail about their reasons for any re-edit where that occurred.

The editing method employed by Leeds was developed as part of a project carried out on television coverage of the Gulf War. In that project, the editing groups were shown three versions of the same event as reported by several television news networks, as well as untransmitted material from a news agency. They were then asked to edit together their own (preferred) three minute version of the event. In the present study, the editing groups had the method explained to them and they discussed the general issue of violence. The programme material listed above was then shown to them, and at the end of each viewing, they could re-edit the material as 'they would like to see it'. They could cut material out or say what they would like to put in. The editing was often carried out with the groups 'commenting on the process as the video editor carried out their instructions.'

While the comments from the respondents are interesting, I would have preferred if the respondents had carried out their own work on editing. The professional broadcaster might have learnt considerably more and the value of this approach would have enhanced the Leed's research method.

This project was carried out within Great Britain and only contains passing reference to Northern Ireland which is disappointing for Irish readers from all disciplines, north and south. It would have been interesting to have looked at the question of the prohibition by the UK Government of interviews with members of proscribed organizations in Northern Ireland and whether and how the principles outlined in the review of 'closeness' and 'status' would apply.

While working in Northern Ireland on a series of radio documentaries for RTE *How Do You Live Up There?* from January to April 1994 my colleague Rodney Rice and I had an opportunity of meeting with a wide cross section of the members of the two communities and discussing with them,inter alia, aspects of violence. I follow with some extracts about television coverage which would seem to follow the four Leeds principles:

(1) 'Community worker' (the Shankill). The reference here is to the aftermath of the Shankill murders by the IRA and the protestant paramilitary murders at Kennedy Way and Greysteel:

> We were so overcome with our own grief, we didn't really feel the
> Greysteel (murders). It didn't really sink in at the time. I think when
> it did sink in was the next week when we actually listened to
> commentators saying that there were nineteen or twenty people

killed in one week. I remember sitting in the house when the commentator said that – nineteen people killed in one week and that really shocked me – when the number of people killed in a such a short time – that really unnerved me, I felt saying to myself, how many more, how many is it going to be in two or three weeks...

(2) Catholic housewife (Cookstown):

> I can plod along quite happily and push all this news to the back of mind until something happens around Cookstown. If you hear someone being shot in Belfast, Derry, whatever, its far away: it's like something happening in Bosnia – it annoys you for a few seconds but you can push down to the back of your mind. But when it happens in Cookstown and the surrounding district which has happened you get this enormous feeling of guilt. A few years back in a protestant estate there was a bomb placed there, the houses were wrecked. I mean your home is your home, you go into your own home, close your door. That is your home, you feel safe. I feel everybody should have that feeling. At the time the bomb went off, I felt guilty as if I had placed it there, I felt so terrible and that went on for weeks – I carried that guilt – even when they report it on the news I feel guilty. I have no time for violence... If you hear that a few men were shot out the road,I have had a few friends that were shot – not friends – friends of friends, that is when it gets to you, when its on your own doorstep. I feel people living around Belfast and Derry – these places – it's like a different world to the world which I live in... even if you are driving through Belfast, we drove through there before Christmas and there was a house boarded up and the TV cameras were there and we went home and you would hear that someone had been shot at the night before. It was terrible because you had been past the actual house and it is different watching it on the TV screen than actually going past it. It was a normal road: there were shops on it. You thought those things should not happen in normal places.

(3) Catholic teacher (Fermanagh) The effect on Southern viewers of violence in the North:

> But once the province got into violence and all the atrocities that happened, it got to the stage that we may as well have been out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean here in Northern Ireland as regards the interests of the South. They just didn't want to know us and didn't want to get involved and didn't want to have anything to do with us and we would have felt that that generally was the case of people from the South. The general comment you would have got was, how do you live up there?

Violence in Factual Television is a useful contribution to the literature on the subject. The broadcasters need to respond and begin to adopt a less defensive attitude to this kind of research and to respond by commentary and further analysis. All of this reminds me how little quantitative research has been done on broadcasting in Ireland. It is a question of funding and this is a matter which should be addressed primarily by the Minister with responsibility for broadcasting. His promised white paper on broadcasting can hardly be secure without having access to a body of Irish research material similar to that provided for and by the authorities in the United Kingdom.

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J. A. Walker *Arts TV – A history of arts television in Britain*

London: John Libbey, 1993. 256pp, stg £17.50

Brian O'Neill

One of the interesting features that emerges from reading *Arts TV – A history of arts television in Britain* is the reminder of just how influential and how good John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* was. Produced by the BBC in 1972 as a four part series, it and its best-selling accompanying Penguin book have found their way into the reading lists and seminar rooms of Communications, Media and Visual Arts courses around the globe. This cannot be said of any other television arts series. I mention it here only because its success as one of the key texts of early Cultural Studies also reminds one of the current crisis in arts broadcasting and how many of the conventions and techniques of arts discussion and dissemination through the media have become problematic.

This book, however, does have a fascinating history to tell and one which in a way mirrors the development of television itself from the 1950s on. An early pioneer of arts broadcasting at the BBC was John Read, son of art critic Herbert Read. Read emerged from the documentary movement of the 1930s and with Grierson's assistance and influence developed the notion of an arts documentary as a film profile of not only art works but also artists at work. Some readers will remember *Monitor*, the BBC open-ended arts series that ran from 1958 to 1965, which acted as a veritable training ground for the British film industry with the likes of John Schlesinger, John Boorman and Ken Russell working under its presenter and editor Huw Wheldon. Wheldon handed over the editorship to a talented 'bright young man' Dr. Jonathan Miller whose more discursive and intellectual style in fact killed the programme. *Monitor's* long term replacement was *Omnibus*, still the flagship of BBC's arts programming and which over the years has vigorously pursued a policy of producing serious and intelligent arts television with a willingness to also be adventurous and to tackle popular culture on its own terms. It was joined in 1972 by *Arena* on BBC 2 which, relieved of the need to cover the major arts that *Omnibus* reviewed, could specialize and innovate by producing imaginative and memorable television on subjects as varied as the Ford Cortina, the Chelsea Hotel in New York and the different interpretations of the popular song 'My Way'. The BBC by no means have had a monopoly of arts programming. *Tempo*, edited by theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, was ITV's first magazine programme about the arts. *The South Bank Show* has been produced continuously by Melvyn Bragg for LWT since 1978 and has, like its counterpart on BBC, maintained its longevity by serving the 'parallel audiences' of those in the know and those who know little or nothing.

A central part of *Arts TV* deals with the so-called pundit series: these are the expensive, prestige productions, the equivalent of the illustrated lecture series on history of art, presented by authoritative and scholarly figures. Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969) provides the model for this genre but other notable examples include *Ways of Seeing* (1972), *Shock of the New* (1980), *State of the Art* (1987), *Art of the Western World* (1990) and *Sister Wendy's Odyssey* (1992). The reasons for the demise of the genre are inherent in its earliest and largest manifestation, *Civilisation*. Commissioned by the BBC as a showcase for colour television and shot over a three year period on 35mm film, it was a sumptuous and lavish celebration of Western European culture from the fall of the Roman empire to the age of industry. It was also, explains Walker, eurocentric, triumphalist, patronizing, traditionalist, sexist, and bordering on racist in its selective and exclusivist approach to culture and ideas. It is against this background that Berger planned his media-literate and politicized *Ways of Seeing* which indirectly through its materialist reworking of art history and its exploration of the televisual processes of reproduction, and in some instances directly debunked the Clark approach to civilisation. The controversy did not end there and in 1988 Berger's one

time supporter Peter Fuller made a well-publicized attack on the influence *Ways of Seeing* had on the attitudes and practice of contemporary art with a consequent re-evaluation of the universal values that *Civilisation* offered.

There has been a noticeable fragmentation in television's coverage of the arts from the mid-1980s though hardly a diminishing of the amount of coverage or the importance of the cultural for the prestige aspects of television schedules. The fragmentation, it must be admitted, is not entirely centred on television; it has been accompanied by a pluralist recognition of the value of other cultures and forms of creativity. The contribution of Channel 4 to visual and formal innovation in arts documentary is acknowledged as also is its influence in broadening the subject matter and audiences for arts programming. But intriguingly, Walker contends, the very proliferation of arts reviews, magazine programmes, arts discussions and televisual events on the whole cultural gamut from the popular to the exclusive while they have helped to create a huge audience for the arts simultaneously reduces their social importance. The debate on which this book concludes – 'posh' intellectual discourse on popular culture and the now more fashionable 'pop' discourse on posh culture (of which *Civilisation* was an early example) – is inconclusive and not entirely satisfactory. To a large extent this is where the subject matter of this history merges with the concerns of such disciplines as Cultural Studies and the study of television's role of mediation between culture and society. This misgiving aside, *Arts TV* presents a stimulating and well-researched account of a significant and important part of television history.

J. N. Didie *Aid for cinematographic and audio-visual production in Europe*

London: John Libbey 1993. 224pp, stg£30.00
ISBN 0861963970

John G. Phelan, Lecturer in Communications, Dublin Institute of Technology and independent producer.

John G. Phelan

The book aims to provide the reader with an overview of the various schemes offered, by European and some non-European countries, to the audio visual industry. In this respect it undoubtedly succeeds, and will assist hard pressed producers to seek co-production funding, particularly in lower budget filming.

The table of contents lists twenty four European and four non-European countries. The format is to present a brief synopsis of the history of each country's policy in relation to the audio-visual sector. Statistical information is then given in relation to cinema, and finally details of the various schemes are described in reasonable detail. In addition, under the various appendices, there are listed many useful addresses and phone numbers, and other 'goodies' about the various European and international organizations.

The only foreseeable flaw in this type of publication lies in its ability or indeed inability to accurately reflect information on an ongoing basis. It will need to be updated yearly to ensure that it does not fall behind actual events. In the light of the current GATT negotiations, specifically in relation to the audio-visual industry, it certainly provides a detailed filofax of the monetary schemes available, and should further promote and encourage a greater awareness of the potential of production and distribution of European films.

Brian Trench, Lecturer in Journalism, Dublin City University.

N. Miller and R. Allen (eds.) *It's live – but is it real?*

London: John Libbey, 1993. 128pp, stg£14.50

Brian Trench

'We now go over live to our reporter in Sarajevo' — it adds an air of authenticity to news programmes. But when it comes to, for instance, comment on the latest diplomatic moves, it is a fraud. The reporter on a fire brigade mission to the conflict zone is less likely than the specialist in Geneva, Washington, New York or London to offer the kind of summary view which news programmes seek. Indeed, the newsroom may have had to feed lines to the reporter on the spot which are then fed back with the added impact of 'liveness'. Journalists covering major conflicts often need to be briefed from base on what the news agencies are saying or to tune into the BBC World Service, before filing their live reports.

The artifice of much that is presented as live and, therefore, immediate, might seem to offer itself as a central theme of a symposium on live broadcasting. The title of these proceedings of the 23rd University of Manchester Broadcasting Symposium indicate an awareness of such issues. But, the editors having summarily answered the title's question in the first paragraph of their introduction — no, it is not real. There is little further detailed, critical exploration of the techniques.

The phone-in, now possible two-way and three-way between listeners, has become a staple of radio programming. But practices vary greatly as to the previewing of callers, the intervention by producers, and the use of delay mechanisms to allow a caller to be cut off. A simple contrast between RTE Radio 1's *Liveline* and the late Michael Cleary's programme on 98FM demonstrates how the apparently unmediated, participatory, live programme can be angled to quite different audiences and purposes. On this potentially fruitful area of investigation and discussion the symposium was largely silent.

It is at least irritating to find recorded the interventions of 'un-named respondent' and 'un-named M.Ed. student'. But the limitations of this work go further. The symposium fell in the week of the April 1992 general election in Britain. Rather than cancel the event, the organizers sought to integrate into their deliberations analyses of the live election night coverage. The result is mainly a rambling exchange of personal impressions, which may have been interesting for the participants but barely stands up to reproduction in print.

The sharpest comment on the election night coverage comes in a contribution by lecturer and producer Andrew Curry, written some time after the symposium and in which Curry quotes *The Observer*'s television critic on a difference of policy between BBC and ITV.

> Dimbleby and his savants were pondering the implications of just four results, while ITN had told us about eight. The BBC rationale for this delay is that results are only registered after their official declaration, whereas the shysters of ITN phone them in the moment the count is agreed. The Beeb's position is ludicrous and amounts to pandering to the municipal bores who make up the Returning Officer class,

wrote TV critic John Naughton. And more might have been added too, on the orchestration of the declarations of results to meet the demands of live television.

Andrew Curry's piece is one of three which were either written, or substantially revised, after the symposium. The most substantial essay on election coverage is by Professor Peter Golding and colleagues at the University of Loughborough, summarizing

the findings of an extensive survey of election material in the press and on radio and television — and making no reference to issues of live broadcasting.

Ivor Gaber has a valuable contribution on the seven types of pressure he discerns on political journalism — this is a speech to the symposium, but, again, has nothing specifically to do with live broadcasting.

Elsewhere, Gaber says of a phone-in programme broadcast during the election campaign that it was live but highly mediated; a dozen callers were selected from 50,000 offering themselves. Where such selection does not take place, the result, says Gaber, is dull, boring, repetitive. 'The problem with real people is that they are usually extremely boring,' he says. Gaber may, as he claims, have said this deliberately provocatively; but it seems certain that this view guides much that is done on RTE which purports to be live and to offer audience access.

In his keynote address, John Tusa of BBC World Service recalls that all radio was live at one time. He decries the 'obsession with tidy editing and compact presentation' as he makes a plea for live, rolling news coverage. He notes:

> the great pretence of journalists is that all the news is of the same weight each day, that the world is in an identical atmosphere of crisis every day, that every headline story is worth as much as the previous day's headline story.

As is so frequently the misfortune of those who deliver keynote addresses, the symposium participants perform in a different key. Tusa's remarks are focused on radio, the medium with the greatest potential for 'liveness'. Almost everything that follows — reflecting the obsession of broadcasting analysts — has to do with television.

Glasgow University Media Group: *Getting the message: news, truth and power*

Karl Eric Rosengren, Professor of Sociology, University of Lund, Sweden.

Karl Erik Rosengren

The title of the new book from the Glasgow University Media Group — *Getting the Message: News, Truth and Power* — elegantly summarizes the overall approach of the Group: an increased interest in the relationship between media messages and their recipients, combined with the old interest in the power-ridden relationship between news and truth. To this reader, the chapters inspired by the new interest are more interesting than those inspired by the old ones, which smack too much of *déjà vu*. After all, the 1976 and 1980 volumes of *Bad News* and *More Bad News* quite powerfully drew home the main message that media truth is the prisoner of power and ideology — especially, perhaps, to those who did not know it before.

In their way, the Glasgow Group seem to have become their own prisoners. They never showed much interest in research done outside their own group, and this tendency has hardly become any weaker. It is a quite legitimate task, of course, to draw a somewhat critical sketch of the development of media studies in Great Britain, as does, for instance, Howard Davis. But it is somewhat surprising to find that the lack of empirical audience studies said to be found in British cultural studies is not contrasted with the existence of such studies within cultural studies carried out in other parts of

the world — not to speak of the audience research carried out within other scholarly traditions.

Another characteristic of the group is its tendency sometimes to produce rather self-evident results. David Miller, for instance, in his study of the 'Northern Ireland Information Service and the Media' (NISS) is able to demonstrate that 'the NIIS recognizes and exploits the varying work routines of different groups of journalists'. He also documents in some detail that 'media outlets which cover all of the "United Kingdom" are more important' than other outlets. In addition, he arrives at the not entirely unexpected conclusion that 'information work for journalists from other countries involves additional tactics not used for British or Irish journalists'. In short, Mr. Miller has spared no efforts to 'explore the broad tactical way in which public relations techniques have been used by the NIO' (Northern Ireland Office) and the NIIS.

Small wonder that a group busy with producing such trail-blazing results tends to become somewhat impatient, now and then, with other, less successful traditions of research, for instance, the 'uses and gratifications approach', or the 'many traditional attempts at "effects" studies" ' said to be using a 'crude stimulus/response model'. We 'reject such methods', they say, referring to Klapper's overview from 1960, without finding the time to refer to later attempts in the area, for instance, recent American and German uses and effects studies very cleverly drawing on modern social and cognitive psychology. Similarly, under these circumstances, when trying to 'explain how exactly these different and sometimes contradictory messages are received and interpreted', they have not found it worth their while to heed all the detailed studies of, say, persuasion research. And when exploring 'the ways in which social interaction mediates audience understandings', they do not bother very much about, say, recent interpersonal communication studies, or the body of work sometimes called 'inter/media' research.

In contrast to the sometimes rather philistine run of the mill pieces, the really impressive parts of the book are the ones building on the technique originally developed by Greg Philo and later on used by other members of the group: the 'News Game'. A set of pictures taken from the media coverage of a particular topic is given to an audience group asked to play the role of journalist in producing a text related to the picture. This approach enabled the researchers to 'look at long-term processes of belief, understanding and memory'. Although a critical reader may entertain some doubts about the role of the researcher in the process, it is an innovating approach, and it seems to be able to produce results which could be linked, for instance, to the cultivation research undertaken by Gerbner and other American, European and Asian researchers (research which, for some reason, is not mentioned at all in the book).

In all then: this is a book mixing trivial results with original approaches. The rambling introductory and concluding sections do not help very much. A basic problem of the Glasgow group seems to be its tendency to isolation and self-containment, which has left them with a basic inconsistency in their approach, visible in their half-hearted, almost journalistic way of comparing media reports with the phenomena reported upon, an approach which for decades has been used in a much more articulated way elsewhere (see, for instance, some articles in the *Journal of Communication*, 1986, 36[2]). In the long run, the combination of an objectivistic ontology and a subjectivistic epistemology characterizing the group may be a heavy burden.

John Eldridge quotes one of the best books ever written about a war — Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* — missing, however, the quotation most pertinent to the work of the group. As Eldridge himself observes, 'The comment that truth becomes the first casualty in time of war has now reached cliché status'. Here is a better one, then, from the afterword written by Orwell in 1943:

> If you look up the history of the last war in, for instance the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, you will find that a respectable amount of

the material is drawn from German sources. A British and a German historian would disagree deeply on many things, even on fundamentals, but there would still be that body of, as it were, neutral fact on which neither would seriously challenge the other. It is just this common basis of agreement, with its implication that human beings are all one species of animal, that totalitarianism destroys. Nazi theory indeed specifically denies that such a thing as 'the truth' exists. There is, for instance, no such thing as 'Science'. There is only 'German Science', 'Jewish Science', etc. The implied objective of this line of thought is a nightmare world in which the Leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past.

Orwell did not mistake journalism for scholarship and research. His epistemology agreed with his ontology, and also with his anthropology.

Y. Tasker *Spectacular bodies: gender, genre and the action cinema*

London and New York: Routledge, 1993. 208pp, stg£11.99
ISBN 0-415-09224-8

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Carmel Roulston

As products of particular historical moments and as formed by and through a variety of political discourses, both popular cinema and academic cultural criticism can be included within a broad definition of culture. The fact that the former tends to address a working-class dispossessed audience, whilst the latter has tended to be the privilege of the middle classes has sometimes led to the mistaken assumption that one can tell 'us' all we might want to know about the 'other'. (Tasker, p. 6)

In her introduction to this lively and detailed study of contemporary action cinema, Yvonne Tasker sets out a challenge to mainstream academic critical response to the genre, which she describes as both elitist and misguided. For many writers, these are 'dumb movies for dumb people'; in particular, the action films of the 1980s, which had bigger budgets, bigger receipts and bigger bodies on display, were viewed as Hollywood's contribution to the Reaganite reaction and the backlash against feminism, their popularity reflecting a worrying rightward shift in attitudes and values among the urban masses. Thus, in Tasker's view, critics and academics have 'pathologized' the audiences for these immensely popular films, while failing to recognize their complexity or understand the sources of their popularity.

For Tasker, the attempt to pin down the political meaning of popular films such as action movies, which has resulted in their being received with contempt in academic circles, leads to a failure to understand the pleasures which audiences derive from them. While acknowledging the importance of commentary upon the ideological or political content of films, she argues that such commentary can overlook ambiguities and conflicts within the film text and can fail to acknowledge the complexity of audience reactions to the experience of enjoying them. Many academic critics, including feminist writers, examine the narrative content of films through a realist framework which measures the events of the film against what is perceived to be the actual or probable 'truth' of the situation. *Rambo*, for example, has been condemned for presenting a false, right-wing, pro-American version of the events of the Vietnam war, compared

unfavourably to films such as *Platoon*, which are more 'truthful'. Likewise, feminist critics have expressed disappointment with *Thelma and Louise*, judging its ending to be unrealistic because the women's inevitable deaths are not shown. Tasker argues that such criticisms are themselves biased and often miss the point of the films' appeal. In relation to *Rambo*, she argues that it may present the truth of Vietnam from the perspective of the socially and politically marginalized groups from whose midst the majority of those drafted were drawn, whose voice is not heard in the allegedly more progressive and 'truthful' versions. In this sense, *Rambo* is not only a film about Vietnam, but also about wider issues of ethnic and class relations in America. The refusal to show Thelma and Louise's dead bodies might be regarded as both a positive antidote to the unpleasant voyeurism in, for example, the work of David Lynch and as providing pleasure and uplift through fantasy, accepted as such by the audience.

The principal theme of the book is the discussion of 'the complex ways in which popular cinema affirms gendered identities while mobilizing identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories'. The action movies reflect conflicts and anxieties over masculinity, offering a visual representation of dramas of power and powerlessness. They are a product of a culture in which male bodies have become commodified in particular ways, in which the equally fantastic stereotypes of 'the action hero' and 'the new man' have been offered up as role models by the advertising industry. They offer a means of settling such anxieties in fantasy, while enjoying the spectacle of the action and deriving pleasure from the eroticized bodies on display. The emergence of the 'action heroine', commanding the narrative, has given rise to considerable dispute among feminist film critics. Tasker sees such figures as reflecting a complex interplay of factors, including the effects of feminism and other social changes on representations of women and the eternal need for genres to be renewed by means of new plots and ideas. The introduction of dominant women characters, she acknowledges, can be problematic. The eroticization of the violence and the acceptance of masculine codes can be both ambiguous and troubling; however, the femme fatale, a similarly ambiguous figure, has attained critical respectability.

It would be misleading to suggest that this book plays down the importance of studying the political or ideological content of films: the book includes, for example, a discussion of black characters in the action cinema, pointing to the restricted range of roles available to black characters in such movies and to the prevalent sexual stereotyping of black male and female characters. Tasker also provides a discussion of the changing context of ownership and control in film culture, attempting to relate the investment in action movies to the video industry and the youth market. Her book is, however, above all a plea for recognition of the merits of a popular genre which for all its faults offers a variety of complex pleasures to an audience capable of enjoying and interpreting. What is missing, in all the careful discussion of dozens of films, is a sense of critical evaluation of the films, a comparison of good with better, using any of the criteria highlighted in the book. It may be significant that Yvonne Tasker chooses to end with a discussion of the films of Kathryn Bigelow. Transgressive, problematic, disturbing examples of action movies, but surely much more cult films than popular cinema.