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Book review: New Patterns in Global Television - Peripheral Vision

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CUNNINGHAM, Stuart; ELIZABETH, Jacka; and
SINCLAIR, John (eds) (1996)

New Patterns in Global Television - Peripheral Vision.

Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-19-871122-0, ISBN 0-19-871123-9 (Pbk)
238 pages.

Reviewed by David Blackall

This book holds a brave position, both in its analyses and its freedom from political, ideological or theoretical encumbrances. It contributes to the necessary erosion of a false notion that television and its effects are simplistic because television is young, simple and stupid. The book is reflexive in its acknowledgement of its own observational and analytical position. This runs a danger of superior posturing, yet "*New Patterns in Global Television*" pulls itself free of such dangers through its strong research.

The editors suggest in the Preface that "rather than the self-absorption which now characterises most communication research in Europe as it undergoes the privatisation and regional integration of its television systems, and the traditional insularity of mainstream US work, a more outward looking and truly international vantage point is possible from Australia".

Using the language of the sophisticated communications text, the book has important implications for contemporary media studies and journalism studies. The coupling of the book's rigour with its editorial freedom provides university educators with a text that can be prescribed in many contexts. The text escapes the pressures of theoretical and political correctness at one extreme while it is also relatively unaffected by the extremes of state political oppression, misinformation and history re-writing that is generally the case in some of the contributors' "geolinguistic regions".

The range of the contributors' experience gives the work an ability to throw real light on some patterns in world television distribution. The contributors work in universities and the media in the regions that they discuss. Thus, they are culturally positioned to provide the analysis of cultural relationships as established through global television distribution. Considering the whole range of shifting factors within economies, audience power, culture and population densities; the book has achieved a level of excellence difficult to attain in the genre.

Observation of the global television phenomenon from the Australian perspective, offers unique and unaffected reflection with clarity. The editors argue that Australia, a democracy with a newly formed multicultural perspective, offers a landscape for clearer analysis and an opportunity to start the process of disengagement

from the grand theories of the day. This disentanglement empowers the writers to critique the ways that television information is controlled, produced and disseminated, while it also strongly acknowledges the ways that the audiences use screen texts.

In the first chapter, "*New Patterns of Television Flow*", the classical communication myths are debunked. Public discourse about television and the media studies literature are both replete with anxiety about the supposed cultural effects of the global spread of programmes like *Dallas* or more recently, *Beverly Hills 90210*. The unquestioned basis for this anxiety is expressed in the orthodox critical paradigm for analysing the connection between international power relations and the media, the thesis of "cultural imperialism", or more particularly, "media imperialism".

According to this view, world patterns of communication flow, both in density and in direction, mirror the system of domination in the economic and political order. This Marxist analysis of the capitalist culture of television held credence until the 1980s. As such, it had the all-embracing appeal of a comprehensive theory, and also provided the high moral ground from which the international activities of USA networks and the ideological content of their television programmes could be analysed, and then denounced.

Clarity in analysis of global television patterns is achieved by a focus on discrete regions and cultures -- India, South America, Europe, the Arab World with an Egyptian perspective and the Canadian experience in the huge television market of North America. This focus allows editorial and theoretical argument to pull back on a wider view; providing the global patterns and a set of arguments that contextualise the regional; accounting for audience economies, their cultures of viewing and their processes of making meaning.

The opening chapter "*Peripheral Vision*" works at contextualising the book. It pares away the padding, makes analytical methodology transparent and sets the scene for the ensuing analysis of the audio visual landscapes, the historical formulations and the new distribution patterns. The study examines through "*Geolinguistic Regions*", the workings of various information "gatekeepers". The book's theoretical discussions also consider *Cross-Cultural Textual and Audience Analysis* before drawing its geolinguistic debate.

The editors are all eminent media communication researchers and commentators. They jointly edit the journal *Media International Australia* and they are well known for their academic work in journalism, film and television. The six contributors are similarly placed in epistemological terms. While their cultures

are located in the regions about which they write, they are also working in relatively pluralist locations provided through universities and networks throughout the world.

Students' reading ability in this very specific and sophisticated communications text might be considered before recommending the book. A case in point is the following in which complex notions like "cultural ecologies" and "geolinguistic regions" are presented as assumptions of prior understanding:

"Shifting geopolitical patterns within the world system most notably the partial dismantling of national boundaries in Europe, the demise of Communism, and the rise of the Asian economies, are having a profound effect on cultural ecologies and the consequent receptiveness of many regions of the world to new cultural influences, including new sources and kinds of television. Alongside this, and related to it, the last ten years have seen major changes in television cultures of many countries as technological innovation, industrial realignments, and modifications in regulatory philosophy have begun to produce a new audiovisual landscape."

This is not meant as a criticism, but rather a warning that understanding concepts like these require some contextualising before the book is recommended to students. ●

JAKUBOWICZ, Andrew; GOODALL, Heather; MARTIN, Jeannie; MITCHELL, Tony; RANDALL, Lois; SENEVIRATNE, Kalinga. *Racism, ethnicity and the media*. Allen & Unwin: Sydney (1994) ISBN: 1-86373-364-7 (210 pp)

Reviewed by Martin Hirst

A central concern of this book is that the myths of Australian national identity, especially as generated and communicated by the mass media, do not accord with the multicultural diversity of Australian life. This dissonance has varied and related causes. Some of them, such as declining national economic fortunes are locally-generated, though with an international context. Other factors are external, but impinge explicitly on national life and consciousness in Australia.