MEDIA STUDIES

AN INTRODUCTION

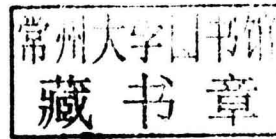### ROBERT KOLKER

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ROBERT KOLKER

⊗WILEY-BLACKWELL

Preface

Media Studies: An Introduction examines a variety of media – journalism, advertising, radio, television, film, and digital – from a variety of perspectives. Its focus is on the historical and cultural place of media, and on our role – we as audience – in their creation, completion, and comprehension.

The following questions are asked in this book. Where do the varieties of media come from? How do they evolve? What do they ask of their audience, and how does their audience respond? As cultural expressions, what do media tell us about ourselves and our worlds, about class, race, and gender? How, finally, do we talk about media and develop our own discourse *about* the media that matches the media's discourse about us? How do we talk back?

Marshall McLuhan, in his groundbreaking book *Understanding Media*, considers media as extensions of human consciousness. But this implies that media are an add-on, an addition to our knowledge of ourselves and the world. I consider media in the root sense of the word, as the *mediations* of consciousness in culture. In the larger sense, anything that is made by someone in order to elicit a response from someone else, anything that represents something to us for our response, whether it is a poem, an advertisement for a cholesterol drug, or a page on MySpace – is a mediation. We live in a world of mediating images, words, and stories that have designs on us and are designed with us in mind. We, in turn, respond to them, and our response is informed by who we are and where we ourselves are placed in the media design. We attend, are moved, informed; we buy things, say things back; we tune in and out; we place value judgments on what is important, what is trivial, what is downright malicious or harmful; we create identities (mediations) for ourselves online. We are not always fully conscious of the mediating act, even as we answer our cell phone, respond to an email, read a newspaper, or watch a movie. But at some level of engagement our minds and emotions – our consciousness – are always at work decoding a message. That work – of understanding, of *mediating* media – is what media studies is about and what this book is about.

How does this book differ from a mass communications text? Rather than present an encyclopedic view of media from a sociological perspective, it presents instead a

"reading" of media history and media texts – of texts within contexts – of the ways we are asked to respond and the ways we do respond. The book is written in a somewhat informal style, more congenial, I hope, than the average college textbook. It is opinionated and draws conclusions, and it tries to remain focused on the ways media are used and the ways in which they reflect their moments in history, their creators, and their audience. Its aim is to make the reader conscious, responsive, and intelligent about the designs of media. It offers the reader a voice.

Reference

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1994), p. 9.

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Introduction

"What are you doing?"
"Watching television!"

This is a common enough exchange that contains a large amount of meaning. "Watching television," like "going to a movie," or "reading the paper," or "going online," even "reading a book," makes a very general statement about a relationship to a particular medium. In interesting ways, our relationship to various media is generic – that is, we engage with television, the movies, the Internet as objects unto themselves, sometimes without regard to content. They are time off from more particular, even more important, events – at least what we consider more important. We take part in something that engages us and gives pleasure. If we're "watching television," we pass our time with sounds and images, coming to us electronically, offering stories, news, adventures, even (we're told) "reality." We may settle in to watch a show, or we may actively pursue something that pleases us, punching through channels on the remote – in fact, channel surfing may, itself, be what we want to do with television. Similarly, if we go online, engaging in the newest form of mass media, we may spend time on a particular site or, again, surf through links on the Web, looking, resting on a page, or clicking through.

Many years ago, the media critic Marshall McLuhan famously said, "the medium is the message." The form itself, no matter what its content, creates the relationship between the participant and the medium, so much so that the relationship goes beyond the connection between an individual and program – movie, television show, website – and becomes part of an entire cultural event. As far back as the advent of books in the Renaissance, or as close as the invention movies at the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of radio in the 1920s, television in the early 1950s, and the Internet at the end of the twentieth century, media have made and remade society in important and lasting ways. We are changed, individually and collectively, by the history of media, by the introduction of new media, and by the variety of ways we interact with it all.

Media involve not only a delivery system and an individual participant – a viewer, reader, listener, web surfer – but the entire complex of social, cultural, and economic events that are generated by and around the media themselves. We need only consider the changes in communication, commerce, legislation, and, indeed, a way of life, created by the Internet to realize how profoundly the influence of media and our relationship to them expands far beyond ourselves. Even the more established forms of film and television, of radio and journalism, have individually and collectively changed the life of the culture and continue influencing the lives of people who engage with them.

Media have multiple components. We can speak about our relationship to the larger forms – watching television, surfing the Web – but we also need to consider the particular content of those forms. So, let us return to the question, "What are you doing?" Another response would be: "I'm watching my show." *Your* show? From the general act of passive engagement with television, we jump suddenly to a sense of ownership. Content is foregrounded along with you and your status as viewer. "My show" implies, specifically, a show you particularly enjoy and may even watch with some regularity. It is on television, but, in a sense, transcends the medium because of the way you respond to it, personalize it – make it your show. But this form of personalization is different still from, for example, your home page, which is out there, sort of like a television show, but that is something you yourself created and that is theoretically available to anyone at any time. The relationship is different, though the differences converge in interesting ways.

Convergence is a key concept. As viewers, readers, or listeners, we interact with the media, the media with us, and all with the culture we are part of, including larger societal issues involving politics, law, regulations, and commerce. Together, they form a complex of objective entities, technological, economic, even political, events, and imaginative creations.

Let me offer an example. One of my shows is *Law and Order*, a venerable television series that started in 1990 and survives still, along with three spin-off shows – *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, and *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. I like it for its narrative tightness – the way it tells often complex stories quickly and concisely – and for the ensemble acting that helps knit all its parts together. I like it as well as a kind of engineering feat, the way the narratives are turned out, assembly-line style, even recycled from show to show, season to season, and yet seem original (a concept we will examine in some detail as we go on). In other words, I appreciate the production skills that go into the making of the series and its spin-offs.

But my pleasure is only one part of the equation, the various terms of which move within and around the media complex. On the level of content, the *Law and Order* series combines two genres, two types of stories: linking both police thriller and courtroom melodrama, which are as old as cinema and as old as television itself. Its cops and bad guys genre extends now to video games. Genre, a concept we will develop further, is a form that generates both the way stories are told and the ways we respond to them. We take pleasure in the safe, mediated observations of terrible crimes and their morally principled solution and prosecution. We enjoy observing the process of detection and prosecution. Our enjoyment, and this holds true for any genre,

stimulates production. In other words, *Law and Order* has existed for as many years as it has, and spins off as many variations as it does, because a significant number of people watch it. Its popularity leads not only to spin-offs, the various flavors of *Law and Order* created by its own production company, but also the creation of somewhat similar shows made by other producers. Production, pleasure, response, more production: this is the cycle of programming that has moved from film and radio to television.

The *Law and Order* group is produced by a man named Dick Wolf for the National Broadcasting Corporation, which began life in 1926 as the radio broadcasting arm of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), and is now one part of a huge conglomerate that is part of General Electric and includes many cable channels as well as Universal Pictures. It is rivaled by the three other networks, the American Broadcasting System (now owned by the Disney Company), the Fox Network (owned by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch), and the Columbia Broadcasting System. CBS was founded in 1927 as a rival to NBC. It has gone through many owners, including the Westinghouse company. CBS needed a counter-program, something "new," but not too new, that would bring audiences with a taste for the detection and prosecution genre to its screens. Jerry Bruckheimer, a movie producer known for films like *Top Gun, Con Air, Armageddon, Black Hawk Down,* and *Pirates of the Caribbean,* offered *CSI,* which reinvented and elevated the lowly crime lab technician into a super-sleuth in Las Vegas, a small city that has itself achieved a mythic cultural significance. Bruckheimer added into the mix elements of violent horror films – sometimes called "slice and dice" or "splatter" films – to portray various stages of violence, wounds, and decomposition. The popularity of the program allowed Bruckheimer and CBS to rapidly spin off the concept by locating it in other cities, namely Miami and New York, and to amuse everyone by making every episode of each program grosser than the previous.

We can begin to see how complicated this all gets. You and I are still sitting in front of the television watching a program. Behind and around it are large, competing entities, fighting (to use the phrase of the television and advertising business) for our eyeballs, our "monetized eyeballs," to be exact. We enjoy the free entertainment and gross-out of programs which are – again in the parlance of the business – the same only different. The networks enjoy the advertising revenue, while the advertisers enjoy the profit that comes their way when we buy the products they advertise.

Television's struggle for eyeballs and therefore advertising revenue is different from that of the movies. A diminishing fraction of a film's profits comes from ticket sales here and abroad. Most now comes from DVD sales and rentals. A relatively small part comes from advertising in the form of product placement in a particular film. The appearance in a film of, for example, an Apple computer or a can of Coke is not accidental, but is paid for by the companies who want their product seen. On-air television networks and local stations get profits directly from advertising. Companies pay to advertise on shows. The more popular the show, the more the network can charge. (Many cable companies, like HBO, get their financing directly from cable carriers, and this presents yet another element of complexity.) So, another part of the equation is that we put up with continual interruption to our show by advertising, each commercial being its own little narrative – its own genre, in fact – nestled in the larger narrative of the show itself.

There's more still. Television programs spin off variations of themselves, like *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* or *CSI: Miami*, but they are also syndicated to various other outlets. *Law and Order* reruns, for example, can be seen almost continually on Turner Network Television, a sponsored cable outlet that once belonged to the Atlanta media empire of Ted Turner, but now belongs to the New York-Los Angeles conglomerate Time Warner (which also owns AOL and the Warner Bros. studios, among many other media). *Law and Order: SVU* is syndicated on USA, a commercial cable network owned by NBC. USA also airs original episodes of *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. It is not impossible, on a given day, to watch all the *Law and Order* shows all of the time. *CSI* reruns can be regularly seen on Spike, a new cable outlet owned by Viacom, a company that also owns MTV, Showtime, BET, and Nickelodeon). In all instances, money is made from the series, the spin-offs, and the repeats. We get to see our shows over and over again; the stars make money by what's known in the trade as "residuals"; and producer Dick Wolf earns about one billion dollars a year.

Like movies – like all media – television is a technological event. What enables us to see a particular show is a convergence not only of a variety of commercial interests, but the confluence of technologies of signal transmission, which, even as I write this, are changing dramatically, moving into the digital realm to converge with computers and the Internet. All popular programs and the networks that show them have Internet sites, allowing some interaction between viewer and program. All network and many cable channels are broadcasting digital signals, which is now the only broadcast technology. These same outlets are broadcasting in high definition, one of the newest technologies that moves the television image from the blur of low resolution to something close to a movie image. More and more television series, including *Law and Order* and *CSI*, are available on DVDs, a digital technology that has changed the way many see movies and that is now creating an archive of television programs to serve both fans and serious students of television.

Clearly, "watching television" is not a simple act. No more simple than any other engagement we make with media. Many forces are at work in creating the sounds and images we attend to; many more are involved in how we make our choices and what we make *of* our choices. This complexity, the interdependence of commercial, imaginative, technological, political, and personal forces at work to create the media we enjoy (or hate), is the subject of this book.

Definitions are needed. "Media," the plural of "medium," is a somewhat fluid and perhaps not always accurate term for what we are studying. Its root is shared by other words, like "mediate," "intermediate," "mediation," all of which derive from the Latin word for "middle." A medium is something that stands between one thing and another. It can be a passive, transparent object. A window is an intermediary between the outside and our looking from the inside, but, at the same time, it frames what we see. A medium can be a person who presumes to transmit messages or insights from the dead to the living, an act itself mediated by a great deal of imagination and willingness to believe.

A medium is a container, a transmitter, a conduit that always changes whatever passes through it and is always itself defined differently by those on either end of the

transmission process. Our definition of media specifically refers to the transmission of information such as the news, and to works of the imagination like *Law and Order*. Of course, if we were to consider media in its widest sense, as the various means humans use to mediate or represent the world to one another, we would need to consider art itself, the act of human imagination that expresses or mediates insight, thought, and emotion through images, words, or music. Considering this wider notion of media, we could well begin with the dawn of humanity and those strange yet familiar images of animals painted on cave walls. More realistically, we can start in the middle of the fifteenth century with the invention of printing, a technology that, to use a well-worn cliché, changed the course of Western civilization.

But for now we need to step back for a more general view. We can assume that anything we see or hear is mediated in some way. Even everyday, one-to-one communication, talking to a friend, is mediated by a number of things, not the least of which is the way we present ourselves to our friend and how she does the same to us. We are slightly different in any conversation, our selves are differently tuned to hear or to speak in any given social situation. Even if we tell the same story to different people, it is slightly changed, differently mediated, according to the situation, the person we're talking to, and our mood at the time. We narrate and mediate our lives.

Art does the same. The artist mediates imagination by means of the forms used to express it: words in a novel or poem; musical notation in a composition; an actor's presentation in a performance; the painter's use of color and shape; the way a writer and director use the narrative and visual storytelling devices of film or television. In all cases, what we receive has been shaped by the media used, and any mediation has to be understood not as something that has become another thing, but an entirely new thing – a result of the mediation process.

Take photography as an example. The camera is a technological device, the product of a long series of inventions developed to capture an image that dates back at least to the seventeenth century. These inventions culminated in the mid-nineteenth century with the combined development of glass ground to the shape of a lens that would receive light, and a chemical base that would be changed by that light and produce the image delivered by it. The camera is a medium, standing between a person or object in the world and the eye of the photographer. The result is an image, a mediation or representation that is the end product of what the photographer saw, how she framed it in the camera, what lens was used, and what was done to the image after it was produced. A photograph can look like the thing photographed but it is not the thing itself. It is a processed representation of it.

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, the history of photography has traveled along a spectrum that helps us further define media and, especially, "mass" media. When you take a snapshot with your digital camera or your cell phone (and the fact that it is a digital and not an analogue process has great importance itself) and show it to friends and family, you have both used and created media. You have created a mediated representation of someone or something. An image. But what happens when you put your images on your website? Technically, a digital file sitting on a