

MEDIA CULTURES

Reappraising Transnational Media

Edited by
Michael Skovmand
and Kim Christian Schrøder

ROUTLEDGE LIBRARY EDITIONS:
CULTURAL STUDIES



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Edited by
**MICHAEL SKOVMAND AND
KIM CHRISTIAN SCHRØDER**

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1992 by Routledge

This edition first published in 2017

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-138-69145-2 (Set)

ISBN: 978-1-315-45997-4 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-69953-3 (Volume 3) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-51193-1 (Volume 3) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

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Volume 3

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London and New York

First published 1992

by Routledge

11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

a division of Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc.

29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

The collection as a whole © 1992, Michael Skovmand and
Kim Christian Schrøder

The individual chapters © 1992, the respective authors

Phototypeset in 10/12 Times by

Intype, London

Printed in Great Britain by

TJ Press (Padstow) Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Media cultures: reappraising transnational media.

I. Skovmand, Michael II. Schrøder, Kim Christian
302.234

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Media cultures: reappraising transnational media / edited
by Michael Skovmand and Kim Christian Schrøder.

p. cm. — (Communication and society)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Mass media. 2. Popular culture. 3. Communication,
International. 4. Intercultural communication.

I. Skovmand, Michael. II. Schrøder, Kim. III. Series:
Communication and society (New York, N.Y.)

P91.M379 1992

302.23—dc20

91-30422

ISBN 0-415-06384-1

ISBN 0-415-06385-X pbk

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Introduction

Kim Christian Schrøder and Michael Skovmand

When people encounter a scholar who devotes his or her entire research interest to Shakespearian drama, Tennyson's poetry, or Orwell's novels, they naturally expect this scholar to show a deep appreciation for the literature which is studied.

When people encounter a scholar who spends time studying women's magazines, advertisements, or television series they equally naturally expect the scholar to look down upon these media and to be motivated by a desire to curtail their pernicious cultural effects.

It is a constituent part of our educational ethos that the teaching of literature should serve to open the pupils' eyes to the greatness of our cultural past and to induce them to lifelong enjoyment of literary art. In the teaching of the contemporary media, on the other hand, the explicit purpose is more often than not to make the pupils aware of their shallowness of vision and ideological seduction, so as to enable them to better resist the lure of these popular cultural forms.

At the bottom of such public and educational discourses lie deep-rooted notions of what constitutes cultural excellence and inferiority, good taste and bad taste, 'quality' and 'trash'. Generally speaking, in our Western culture, very few people would dream of awarding the stamp of quality to any product of the commercial cultural industries. It is one of the aims of this book to intervene critically and creatively in the contemporary cultural and educational debate about these issues in order to promote a less prejudiced understanding of our audio-visual culture.

Besides the paternal-elitist discourses of the various national guardians of culture, the single most coherent body of thought dealing with the negative effects of the cultural industries is that

of the so-called Frankfurt School, conceived in the shadow of Fascism in the 1930s and then developed (as its main spokesmen, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer among them, had to flee to the United States) under the impression of American laissez-faire capitalism in material and cultural production.

Ever since, implicitly or explicitly, this theory of the cultural industry as 'mass deception' has dominated the 'critical tradition' of analysis in many European countries and in the United States as well. According to this theory, 'enjoyment' and 'pleasure' are inherently oppressive, because they serve to make people forget the inhumanity of the ruling social order:

To be pleased means to say Yes, . . . Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness, it is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance.

(Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/1977: 367)

The Frankfurters were especially concerned about the consequences of the audio-visual media (film and television) because their mode of communication is furthest from the needs of rational man: the sound film thus 'leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/1977: 353), just as the then new medium of television was held to lead to 'the impoverishment of aesthetic matter so drastically that by tomorrow the thinly veiled identity of all industrial culture products can come triumphantly out into the open' (352).

These are obviously voices from the past, but their cultural pessimism is matched, if not surpassed, by quite contemporary contributors to the debate, who have gained an enormous following among educators. Thus Neil Postman, who received the 1984 George Orwell Award from the US Association of College English for his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, idealises the role of the printed word in our culture, finding that 'the phrase "serious television" is a contradiction in terms', because 'television speaks in only one persistent voice – the voice of entertainment', and this is a voice which 'short-circuits introspection' (Postman 1987: 81, 105).

Expressing an 'essentialism' akin to that of Adorno and Horkheimer, Postman argues that every medium, independently of

its socio-economic mode of organisation, has a technologically inherent nature, or essence, which predisposes it to certain forms of knowledge. Thus television's epistemology 'is not only inferior to a print-based epistemology but is dangerous and absurdist' (1987: 27), because in this medium 'serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk', making the prospect of 'culture-death' imminent (1987: 161).

The wide currency of this vision of contemporary culture as composed of narcotised TV zombies becomes manifest when the press succeeds in disseminating a new popular coinage that labels the average modern individual a 'couch potato'. As defined in a major Danish daily, 'the average American has become a red-eyed couch potato demanding TV entertainment 24 hours a day' (*Politiken*, 5 March 1989). For most of its would-be intellectual readers, however, the couch potato will not be a new phenomenon: it is just a new catchy label for the growing number of modern consumers to which they are fortunate not to belong.

TOWARDS A REHABILITATION OF POPULAR CULTURE

In reading Postman one can at least take comfort from the fact that his credibility as cultural analyst and prophet is somewhat impaired by his striking ignorance of any type of media research over the last twenty years.

The general drift of this research – which the contributors to this book wholly embrace – has been to take popular cultural forms more seriously and, more specifically, to examine what popular audiences are actually doing with the cultural products that they consume in their everyday lives. The basic premise has been to try to understand popular cultural practices as meaningful activities: as part of people's ongoing attempts to make sense of their lives and the specific class, gender, race, and other identities which they inhabit.

Such audience-orientated research has opened up completely new roads of inquiry into the role of the media in society, in particular by refusing to rely on the speculative evidence about audience meaning processes acquired through critical analysis of media products, or 'texts', alone. In exploring empirical methods of inquiry into cultural experiences, so-called reception research has restored the commitment in humanistic media research to studying all stages in the communication process: production,

message/text, and consumption, after having for decades turned a blind eye to the strange amputation of the audience dimension from the critical perspective.

The Frankfurters had no qualms about amputating the audience from the study of cultural industry processes, as they quite explicitly regarded consumers as brain-washed accomplices to the cultural industry mass seduction project: 'The attitude of the public, which ostensibly and actually favours the system of the culture industry, is a part of the system and not an excuse for it' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/1977: 350).

In other words, 'the deceived masses . . . insist on the very ideology which enslaves them' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/1977: 359), for the simple reason that the ideological content is projected directly on to their minds. When consumers expose themselves to cultural industry products, no intellectual effort is necessary to process the meanings, which are imprinted on their consciousness: 'There is nothing left for the consumer to classify. Producers have done it for him' (1944/1977: 352).

Such views on cultural signifying processes permeated cultural analysis until the 1980s, both in semiotically orientated media research and in Lacanian analyses of the way in which texts carry 'subject positions' which readers then must occupy. What empirical reception research into a number of media and genres has discovered over the last ten years has been diametrically opposed to this view. A picture is now beginning to emerge in which popular media audiences are characterised not only by a degree of resilience to the dominant ideological meanings encoded in mainstream cultural products, but also by their cultural connoisseurship, their sensitive and often sophisticated appreciation of the aesthetic creations of the cultural industries (see, for instance, Moores 1990).

Some researchers have recently expressed concern that reception studies are too myopic, as they isolate one moment in the cultural process as being of ultimate significance, ignoring the wider socio-cultural conditions of audience practices (Ang 1990). Ang even suggests that 'what we need is not more ethnographic work on discrete audience groups, but on reception as an integral part of popular cultural practices that articulate both "subjective" and "objective", both "micro" and "macro" processes' (Ang 1990: 244).

We feel that such a call for a stop to research on discrete

audiences is perhaps a bit premature: we need a lot more work on actual decoding processes at the micro level – after all, the published work in this field encompasses no more than, say, a couple of hundred titles (most of them articles), and most of it has been devoted to just one medium (television) and just two genres (soap opera, news).

Nevertheless, we believe that the time has also come to start asking the ‘So what?’ questions to reception studies: what are the wider social and cultural implications of the increased knowledge we have about audience signifying processes? Two of the contributions discuss this question.

Anne Jerslev analyses the classic and contemporary cult film, not as a textual form, but as a specific relationship between the visual text and an audience drawing on a ‘visual encyclopedia’. On the basis of her own empirical work on teenage film and video audiences she then discusses whether the specific form of reception of the cult film genre can be seen as embryonic of more general audience experiences of audio-visual products among future, more aesthetically sophisticated generations.

And taking off from a cross-cultural study of *Dynasty* audiences in the United States and Denmark, Kim Schrøder argues that we must abandon universal and absolute standards of cultural quality and formulate a new, relative concept of quality founded on the audience experiences of audio-visual products, taking into account the diversity of social taste patterns.

THE AMERICAN CONNECTION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

We live in an increasingly transnational media culture in which access to a multitude of national and transnational TV channels has become an everyday phenomenon for people all over Europe. Each contribution to this book explores different dimensions of this fact, as the authors analyse the media and genres within the transnational circuit, or compare the media cultures of different countries that may be differently involved in this circuit.

It is impossible to discuss contemporary transnational media cultures without facing the spectre of Americanisation, as it is still widely believed that if the European countries do not react forcefully and mobilise their rich and diverse cultural potential,

we shall be committing spiritual suicide in a flood of Donald Duck Americanisation.

The fear of being Americanised, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, has persistently seen American materialism and vulgarity washing over an authentic, aesthetically sophisticated national cultural heritage. Most recently, the European Community in unison with the Council of Europe has launched its ambitious Audio-visual Eureka Programme, designed to provide an adequate European response to the technological and cultural challenge coming from the American-Japanese audio-visual industries – ‘American pictures combined with Japanese technology overwhelming Europe’, as François Mitterrand put it in his address to the founding conference (Commission of the European Communities 1989: 16). Insisting that culture forms ‘the very cement of Europe’, Mitterrand went on to reprimand those who talk of a European community ‘as if there were not something that could be called – perhaps the term is a little too broad and demands further thought – a European culture’, hastily adding that ‘culture is an old issue, one I shall not venture into here. I am not that rash’ (13–14). In other words, even among those who are taking the initiatives intended to bolster a ‘European culture’, one looks in vain for a concrete definition of this very concept.

This pan-European programme is based on the argument that the audio-visual media enter every mind in every home in every country. Therefore, so the argument runs, it is through these media that one must tackle the problem of cultural identity today, by encouraging the diffusion of different cultures and languages, and new forms of aesthetic expression.

First of all, it should be asked whether the label of ‘Americanisation’ is an adequate description of what is threatening European culture(s). According to recent research it is not: Sepstrup (1989) finds that

the dominant paradigm among researchers and politicians that West European television is dominated by US-produced programmes is *generally* not very well supported by ‘hard’ data when the US imports are related to total *supply* and not to total *imports* . . . The fact is that in the EEC countries US television has a minor role compared to West European-produced television.

(Sepstrup 1989: 41)

As Sepstrup also notes, even if the share of American TV fiction on European prime-time screens is not negligible, we know next to nothing about the possible effect on the European, national, social and cultural fabric of exposure to US television. Consequently, some may firmly believe that national identities and traditions are being eroded, while others contend that the central historical element of national cultures will be resistant to the force of Americanisation.

Those of the contributors to this book who discuss Americanisation and other questions of cultural identity refuse to conceptualise the discussion in such simplistic terms. Finding that until now the debates about cultural identity and cultural imperialism have functioned within a largely uninterrogated model of what 'cultural identities' are, David Morley sees cultural identities as a product of structural semiotic oppositions and differences, not as fixed entities that can be separately defined by enumerating their positive characteristics. From this perspective, European culture is constituted through its very oppositions to American culture, Asian culture, Islamic culture, and so on.

This view of cultural identity also means that American culture cannot be regarded as a monolithic entity that impinges on a unified European culture, or unified national cultures. As Søren Schou argues in his chapter, 'Postwar Americanisation and the Revitalisation of European Culture', within each European nation American culture in its diverse mainstream and counter-culture variants unsettles the already existing structural oppositions between the domestic cultures of class, gender, age, and so on. Morley and Schou thus both find, from the respective contexts of British and Danish cultural history, that American cultural products, by breaking away from traditional, class-based notions of good taste, could be absorbed by the actual tastes and desires of large numbers of working-class people.

The consumption and enjoyment of American goods and popular culture thus came to serve for these working-class consumers as a symbolic resistance to the paternalism of the national cultural establishment, as expressed most visibly in everyday life through the public-service broadcasting institutions that until recently commanded the public cultural space in most West European countries.

Moreover, as pointed out by Jostein Gripsrud in his comparative study of the French film *A bout de souffle* and its American

version, *Breathless*, the cultural relations between the US and Europe are a two-way street. Notions of the American or the European Other are incorporated and given culturally specific inflections when directors such as Jean-Luc Godard or Jim McBride make concrete sense of them within their specific conditions of production. And what appear as thematic continuities, or straight loans, such as the figure of the melancholy macho, on closer analysis make a different kind of sense, depending on the particular moment to which they are seen to relate. Thus, *A bout de souffle* makes sense primarily in the context of French Modernism/Existentialism, whereas *Breathless* is clearly part of the American melodramatic tradition.

Finally, on the question of Americanisation, we would agree with Silj (1988) that perhaps the main advantage of American television lies in its outstanding production quality – which is not particularly ‘American’ in the cultural sense of the word:

Does the merit or demerit of having invented a certain way of producing television belong to the Americans? Or is it just that television works at its best when certain rules are applied, the Americans being the first to have learned and exploited those rules?

(Silj 1988: 204)

In other words, we may see the Americans as merely spearheading, for specific cultural and social reasons, a more general transnational *modernisation process* in the audio-visual field. It may even be, as Søren Schou argues, that American culture has thereby revitalised a European culture that has had very little to offer the majority of the population in post-industrial, urbanised society.

Perhaps revitalisation is also a relevant perspective to adopt for an assessment of the role of transnational news channels in European countries whose populations have been accustomed to just one or two public-service channels. As Peter Larsen observes in his comparative analysis of CNN and Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation News, the recent availability of CNN on Norwegian screens has at least enabled a population previously dependent on the paternal authority of its national public-service channel to discover that there are in fact alternative ways of organising and presenting the news. Basing his analysis on news coverage of the Gulf War, he investigates, among other things, the radically

different modes of address, and the accompanying implied viewer positions, employed by the discourses of transnational news channels like CNN and national public-service news programmes.

COMMERCIAL AND PUBLIC-SERVICE BROADCASTING

The chief culprit for the dearth of audio-visual material which ordinary people could perceive as relevant to their hopes and fears has been the traditional European public-service broadcasting institution. Although there has been a lot of whimpering from the intellectual establishment over the assaults on this hallowed phenomenon through deregulation, commercialisation, privatisation and other measures inflicted on them by right-wing governments, sensible defenders of public-service broadcasting are now acknowledging that this institution is indeed in need of revitalisation if it wishes to continue as a major political and cultural forum for national audiences. As Sepstrup (1989) puts it,

the competition from private broadcasters may be seen as the spur which forces the traditional public service institutions to adopt a new general programming approach and to learn a new television language.

(Sepstrup 1989: 36)

The greatest concern has been expressed over the alleged disappearance of diversity and quality in programming. Often the American situation has been referred to as evidence of the devastating consequences of having a full-blown commercial system in broadcasting. However, only a gross misrepresentation of American broadcasting makes it possible to use it as an example of undiversified cultural production.

In a commercial system two equally strong tendencies are operative: one towards 'common denominator' production, aiming to reach the mainstream taste; the other towards segmented production, targeting the programmes towards well-defined audience groups with specialised needs and interests. In the US, especially in metropolitan areas where minorities have grown to considerable numbers, the broadcasting menu is much more ethnically and culturally diverse than in many European countries, as a comparison between the TV listings of a major US newspaper and those of *The Times* (UK), *Die Welt* (Germany), or *Berlingske Tidende* (Denmark) will demonstrate.