

A SNIFF OF REALITY

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REVIEWS

David Gauntlett and Annette Hill, *TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life*, Routledge, 1999

Ellen Seiter, *Television and New Media Audiences*, Oxford University Press, 1999

Ah, the smell of real research, and hard impact it invariably has on our tidy models and theories.

Here are two significant books, each concerned with the way television imbricates into the patterns and processes of everyday life. Gauntlett and Hill were assigned the task of digesting the outcomes of a 5-year programme of research conducted from the British Film Institute. 500 people have been writing regularly about the role of TV in their lives, their attitudes towards it and different issues raised by it. This book offers a first, but very fascinating gleaning from the vast materials this process elicited.

The book covers, chapter by chapter, a wide range: the way TV organises and transmutes time for different people; people's uses of news; the role of TV in life-changes, such as becoming unemployed, or losing a partner; people's management of attitudes to TV watching such as that it is an addictive 'waste of time'; the rise of video and what such new technologies mean to different kinds of viewers; the elderly and TV; gender and TV; and the thorny old 'violence and sex' questions. What I found particularly useful was the way in which each chapter reviewed existing work, and in particular claims arrived at by, basically, theoretical or speculative approaches, then carefully measuring its own findings against those claims. So, for instance, it is useful to have a careful revisiting of the strong claims made by David Morley and Ann Gray about the gendering of home technologies. Without forcing their materials to hardened alternative formulations, Gauntlett and Hill make clear that the situation that their larger, and more sampled research reveals is just much more complex.

Mind, one of the consequences of this care is that it makes you pause and wonder about the way some of the findings were being presented. It makes your methodological nose sniff the air. The sample of 500 is broadly statistically representative of the UK's population, by age, class, region and gender. That makes its potential for interest greater. But it should thus lead



to care with claims about, for example, 'typicality', and what will count as a significant figure. For example discussing the meanings of regular viewing, they say: 'Many diarists record having an evening meal while having the TV on. This is an important function of early evening television; it provides a focus point, a marker, for the family evening meal, which often coincides with watching the news or soaps. Fifteen per cent of diarists claimed that they often made sure their meal time was the same time as a favourite programme, and as many as a further 31 per cent said that they occasionally did this' (p31). Is that a lot, or a few? From time to time I sensed that responses that interested the writers were picked out, and their representativeness held second fiddle. Not necessarily a wrong thing to do, since sometimes we can learn more from the exceptional. But important that we know.

This is a well-written and well-crafted book that can be mined for many purposes. The parts I found most interesting, were those where for a while the authors stayed with particular individuals and tracked their views over time, or looked at the relationships among different elements. I hope that in some future publications we will get much more of this. Making a virtue out of the fact that they have five years' worth of responses across a wide range of topics - something rare indeed - seems surely important.

If the great virtue of *TV Living* is its consideration of raw research materials, which in a way allows a deferring of some tricky analytic questions, the strength of Ellen Seiter's work is her willingness to ask difficult questions - though I want to suggest that this also indicates a weakness. In three central chapters she presents the findings of her research into a parental support group, into lay accounts of media influence (focused in particular on *Power Rangers*) and, most fascinatingly to me, into attitudes to television among fundamentalist Christian child-minders. Her discussion is interlaced with a series of methodological interludes in which she reviews her own role in the research process, particularly in relation to debates about 'feminist methodologies'. It would be hard to state conclusions what Seiter comes to - this book works mainly through its display of the complexity of her subjects and of her research-relations with them, rather than through any argued conclusions.



For all the thoughtfulness of her methodological discussions, there are some unconvincing or unargued theoretical dimensions to her work. First, Seiter works with a pre-sociological account of 'class', in particular her notion of a 'middle class'. This is in line, sadly, with a great deal of media and cultural studies, and allows some pretty crude theories of 'interest' and 'ideology' to operate. In this book it shows, for instance, when she prefaces her final discussion of digital technologies with this warning: 'We need to be alert to the ways in which stereotyped notions of the audience are constructing a discourse around the Internet that privileges white, middle-class males' (1999: 115). This is call-and-response categorisation, with no sense of awareness of class as structure or process. It is the evil of category privilege. This weak notion of 'middle-classness' serves in place of addressing any of the social dynamics of ownership and power.

To her credit, this absence almost worries Seiter. Right at the end of the book she signals her unease that she is arriving at a position of celebrating a free market - which she recognises to carry enormous dangers for the very women to whom she has been trying to give a voice. This is the point at which old-fashioned political questions, long denied, creep back and knock at the door. The problem will be paucity of the prevalent political languages available in our field. Here is Seiter intelligently noting the problem: 'As working class women in American society face mounting challenges - ranging from growing economic adversity to the erosion of political rights - the predicament of women who have allied themselves with fundamentalism becomes more important for scholars to confront. We believe it is essential not to overlook the tensions and contradictions in these women's lives' (1999: 113). The question is whether the answers can come primarily through their position as women, or as working class. To answer that, will need a much richer approach to 'class'.

Another area of concern for me is a gap in her discussions of method. Seiter is an enthusiast for qualitative ethnography: 'throughout this book I have argued that using a combination of methods, such as observation, diary, and informal conversations, as well as interviews, will produce more nuanced understandings of media consumption. In contrast to the current dominance of postmodern theories, which create a scepticism about any discussion of methodology, I argue, at risk of sounding old-fashioned, that the most salutary move for audience research would be to concentrate on expanding the repertoire and intensity of qualitative methods' (1999: 134-5). I salute this - but with a caution. Everything Seiter says is about expanding the range and density of methods of gathering. The gap is in what to do then. Cultural studies surely needs to address even more urgently the strength and validity of its methods of analysis - or all the gathering in the world will just lead to materials mayhem.

Seiter's book, then, reads to me as a deeply thoughtful struggle with her recognition that all is far from well with the tradition of feminist research. But despite its excellent intentions and interesting materials, it remains trapped in a series of unchecked theorisations (that undeveloped concept of class, for instance, and an unthought adherence to notions of 'encoding/decoding') abetted by the lack of a method for analysing her materials that could throw up the hypotheses to break the deadlock. With Gauntlett and Hill, I have the sense of the start of a project. With Seiter, sadly, I seem to see the downward curve of a trajectory.

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