

**Gunhild Agger & Jens F Jensen (eds.):  
*The Aesthetics of Television*, Aalborg  
University Press, 2001.**

One of the first books to take the »aesthetics« of television seriously, Horace Newcomb's *Television: the Liveliest Art* (1974), was an influential study that considered genre and narrative form to be fundamental to understanding the cultural significance and »art« of television. Several subsequent developments displaced this field-establishing focus on genre and the art of television. These included: the importation of screen theory and post-structuralism from film studies in books by Fiske (1987) and Mellencamp (1990); studies of the medium and its technologies from political-economic, phenomenological, and sociological perspectives (Williams 1975, Ellis 1982, Browne 1984, Winston 1985); and the popularization of British cultural studies as a methodology (Morley 1980, Jenkins 1992, Seiter 1989, 1999). Post-structuralist theory rejected the ostensibly naïve formalism of aesthetics; political economy extrapolated from the media apparatus to ideologies (and vice versa); and cultural studies worked to make fans and audiences—rather than the forms of television—a dominant focus in television studies. While these shifts influenced a great deal of scholarship on television, they tended (unwisely) to overlook the very categories and stuff of which television is made. Programs, series, and genres, that is, all remain key institutional frameworks deployed world-wide by practitioners in television industries, even as such objects were largely ignored by critical theorists in the academy.

Given this imbalance in theory, the publication of *The Aesthetics of Television*, edited by Gunhild Agger and Jens F. Jensen, is a welcome addition to the field of television studies. Far from being a return to the earlier era, in which the aesthetic was deemed a mostly formal or structural preoccupation, this book succeeds at synthesizing and integrating a full range of insights from the very theoretical trends in the 80s and 90s that posed as antithetical to aesthetics. That is, the book provides: first, generalizable analyses that help introduce and frame the »medium« of television; second, a series of in-depth case studies of specific »genres«; and third, a range of chapters that re-deploy aesthetic perspectives in order to understand not good or bad television, but how and why some television works successfully with audiences, while some of it does not. This

approach stands to benefit scholars seeking to better understand the nuances of television, even as industry practitioners can benefit, as the editors argue, from more precise concepts and perspectives that the book's researchers offer (12). Jørgen Stigel's chapter is exemplary in this regard. Stigel shows how central discourses about »space« and »place« are to television; their deployment serving to promote the sense of a present moment through articulations of proximity. By plotting many genres within a single model defined by temporal and spatial distinctions, Stigel provides a way to compare very different genre categories under the same schema—a useful approach given the intensifying proliferation of genres that define the multi-channel era.

The book also tangles with a range of problems that simply did not exist in the same way when scholars in the 1970s were writing about television aesthetics. Globalization and transnationalism, for example, are particularly instrumental forces in television today. Gunhild Agger addresses these issues in a chapter that breaks through the standard »globalization—localization« dichotomy employed by many scholars. Building on recent scholarship focusing on globalization in film distribution, Agger shows how »nationalism« (thought by many to have been eclipsed by transnationalism), actually still plays a fundamental role in the ways that television finds commercial success in the television markets of many mid-size countries. The next chapter, by Poul Erik Nielsen, shows that globalization can also be productively understood in terms of genre. This is a good case-study of how one genre—the sitcom—created a problematic »pattern« by which domestic versions of the genre were created in Denmark. Nielsen makes suggestions about how and why the local variant of the sitcom failed to achieve the success its makers had intended. Likewise a chapter entitled »Crime and Punishment in the Provinces« shows the complicated ways that Danish program producers negotiate pressures of popularity established by the past successes of British and American crime shows. Agger traces out the Danish cultural specificities that inform local versions of the police-series genre, and shows how the hybrid genre evolved in the 1990s in response to continued cultural changes.

The next three chapters comprise what is essentially a very good primer of documentary and reality aesthetic practices now so pervasive in the television of many countries. From its very inception, television was marketed by its devel-

opers as being distinctive in allowing viewers to be both »here« and »somewhere else« at the same time. This »you are there« ideology fueled subsequent developments that exploited the medium's »liveness« and its potential for documentary authenticity. »Reality television« plays a central role in programming today. Yet the designation is, unfortunately, far too crude and generalized in typical critical usage to usefully describe the many different variants of reality television aired and syndicated today. Rasmus Dahl provides a corrective to this state of affairs, along with much-needed specificity, by developing a three-tiered descriptive model based on dual forces he terms, first, the degree of »intervention,« and second, the degree of »restriction« utilized in a documentary program. His chapter helps explain why documentary's »there and then« sensibility has also provided the basis for many generic manipulations of reality in TV programming today. Preben Raunbjerg follows this »there and then« genre with a chapter analyzing an alternative: the »now and there« genre of televised TV sports. This is a good account of the various influences that make up TV sports; and a useful schema for further analysis, one that considers: first, the visual or »photographic« dimension in televised coverage; second, the use of graphics; third, sound recording (and its role in producing a sense of space); and finally, the (now conventionalized) »rules« used to structure principle and secondary commentators.

The next three chapters examine the slippery boundaries that converge and interact, respectively, in the talk show, »breakfast television,« and hidden-camera »video-reality« shows. Hanne Bruun's chapter shows how the talk show embodies a sense of simultaneity, one that underscores not reality, but rather a sense of dramatic tension between »uncertainty« and »sociability« that controls decorum on the set. This provides context for four modes that the genre deploys (debate, research, therapy, and consultation) as a show interacts with studio audiences (and vicariously through them) audiences at home. Stig Hjarvard's chapter »Journalism as Company« shows how breakfast television, a mixture of genres by definition, finds its central dynamic in the harmonization and/or tension that operates between the »host function« and the »journalistic function« of the on-camera figures. Finally, Tove Arendt Rasmussen's chapter on hidden-camera and reality video programs shows how covert, videotaped

interactions between strangers can actually produce a greater sense of authenticity than journalistic or talk formats. This chapter is notable for the instructive ways it invokes the work of Goffman and Scannell on speech acts, communicative performance, and situationism to understand this very recent, cost-effective, non-studio, form.

I especially like the way that the close studies of television genres and practices in the second half of the book also bring to bear institutional and technological perspectives; thereby constantly connecting on-screen form to the various logics of industry and its programmers. A chapter entitled »TV Advertising Virtually Speaking« examines the structuring function that voice-over narrations provide and produce. A concomitant ad/audience relationship results, when voice-overs cultivate a sense of the proximity and the perceived space between the ad and the viewer. The final contribution to the book, by Jens F. Jensen, surveys a range of possible ways that »interactivity« can be deployed in shifting television away its founding definition as a transmitting medium toward a much more nuanced form of »conversation« and responsiveness. This is a particularly valuable study for the ways in which it comprehensively summarizes the very complicated histories of interactive technologies (ITV, data-casting, VOD, Internet applications, etc.)—as well as the new media theories that have sanctioned and explained them (Negroponte, Gilder, Bordewijk).

The studies published in this book were all completed between 1993-1999. While the volume provides one of the best collections of research available on genre forms during that period, subsequent developments have continued to intensify many of the issues that were only provisional at this stage of research. Digital technologies, for example, have further modified many if not most of the aesthetic forms on television. The era after the dotcom/hi-technology crash in 2000-2001, furthermore, makes many of the assumptions critically summarized in the final chapter seem rather optimistic. This is especially so given the fact that the major entertainment brands today have rushed into the dotcom vacuum to develop the web and new media not along the lines of the responsive »pull media« promised earlier by cyber-theory, but rather according to the strategies of traditional media and broadcasting. The new transnational conglomerates, like AOL/Time-Warner, now actually attempt to profit from the world-wide-web through advertising sales and by »programming«

it according to the »dayparts« and »demographics« that have long been denigrated by cyber-theorists (Caldwell 2003b).

In the final analysis, many former new media prophets and internet proponents have finally had to acknowledge the fact that we already had a ubiquitous, world-wide, electronic network—something called »television« (Caldwell 2000). This fact, the resilience of television programming, means that the chapter studies in this book will continue to be of relevance for some time to come. Recent changes also mean, however, that scholars of TV aesthetics must also begin to pay more attention to phenomena like »branding,« corporate conglomeration, technological convergence, syndication, and multi-platform »re-purposing« since all are increasingly instrumental forces in the production of televisual form (Caldwell 2003a). Such practices now arguably function in the highly competitive, multi-channel, post-network age as authoring agents and (therefore) constituent parts of *television aesthetics*. It is almost impossible today, that is, to talk of television aesthetics (and to build on the many insights of this book) without also talking in some way about the changing industrial, technological, and global conditions that transform the television that continues to be delivered and consumed on a world-wide basis.

John Caldwell, Associate Professor  
Film, Television, and Digital Media Department,  
UCLA

## Bibliography.

- Browne, Nick (1984). »The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text.« *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*. 9, no. 3. 174-182.
- Caldwell, John (2000). »Theorizing the Digital Landrush.« In John T. Caldwell (ed.). *Electronic Media and Technoculture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Caldwell, John (2003a). »Convergence Television: Aggregating Form and Re-purposing Content in the age of Conglomeration.« In Lynn Spigel (ed.). *The Persistence of Television*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Caldwell, John (2003b). »Second Shift Aesthetics: Programming, Branding, and User Flows.« In Anna Everett and John Caldwell (eds.). *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, London and New York: Routledge.

- Ellis, John (1982). *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fiske, John (1987). *Television Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, Henry (1992). *Television Poachers*. New York: Routledge.
- Mellencamp, Patricia (1990). *The Logics of Television*. London: The British Film Institute.
- Morley, David (1980). *The 'Nationwide' Audience*. London: BFI Press.
- Newcomb, Horace (1974). *Television: The Liveliest Art*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Seiter, Ellen, H. Borchert, G. Kreutzner, and E. Warth, eds. (1989). *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Seiter, Ellen (1999). *Television and New Media Audiences*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1975). *Television Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Winston, Brian (1986). *Misunderstanding Media*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

## **Ole Christensen og Birgitte Tufte: Familie i forandring – hverdag og medier i danske familier, Akademisk Forlag, 2001, 127 sider, 150,00 kr.**

Familie i forandring er et af resultaterne af det 5-årige forskningsprojekt »Pigers og drenge hverdagsliv og mediekultur – i spændingsfeltet mellem det lokale og det globale« som gennemføres af 5 forskere fra Danmarks Pædagogiske Universitet.

Projektets sigte er at undersøge, hvilken rolle fritidens og skolens mediekultur spiller i 8-15-årige børns hverdag. Projektet har sit afsæt i det forhold, at medieudbudet bliver stadig mere internationaliseret, samtidig med at lokalsamfundets nære kultur spiller en måske stadig stigende rolle i håndteringen af en globaliseret mediekultur. Glokalisering hedder fænomenet, og projektet bekræfter, at der er noget om det.

Et af hovedformålene i projektet er at indhente viden om disse forandringsprocesser, en viden der kan »skabe et nyt og bedre grundlag for børnepolitiske, mediepolitiske og uddannelsesmæssige initiativer til gavn for barnet i velfærdssamfundet« (s. 126). Det er således en erklæret hensigt i projektet at kunne pege på områder i en foranderlig mediekultur, som skolen skal indrette sin fremti-