

Television and Ideology

THE LANGUAGE OF TELEVISION: USES AND ABUSES

Author: Albert Hunt
Published by Eyre Methuen,
1981 128pp

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TEACHING ABOUT TELEVISION

Author: Len Masterman
Published by MacMillan,
1980 222pp
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Reviewed by Graham Hayman

Television's arrival in South Africa brought with it many spin-off whirlpools of activity. Home video, consumer advertising, equipment sales to private enterprise, a popular jargonised terminology about 'the media', and slowly, an acceptance of the need to teach communications and mass media studies in schools, colleges and universities. In all of these areas, the South African pattern has largely followed the orthodox imported patterns. Programs on SABC-TV are very similar in style and genre to the stereotypes seen in America and Western Europe. The leisure industry has a multinational character, to suit the urban middleclass in Sydney, Pretoria, Dallas and Amsterdam.

In the field of education, there has been a similar importing of the more orthodox approaches, rather than an exploration of methods and uses which might be particularly relevant to the South African situation. The field has been divided into i) professional training courses ii) theoretical courses with little or no practical content iii) the use of video as a package for orthodox educational content. There is very little work done in a framework which brings together theory and practice, and very little which puts the equipment in the hands of the learners.

These two books carry vast implications for those in the various specialist areas of communication such as education, training, television (both broadcast and closed circuit), community work and development. The authors go against the usual 'functional' view of both television and education, in which the information content is taken as a given, and problems are located in the method of distribution of that information. Proponents of this view call for more schools, more teachers, more TV channels and radio stations, longer broadcast hours and better signal coverage. These views interlock with the top-down school in the debate about third world development. The views of this school are widely propagated in South Africa, although they are under heavy criticism in the rest of the world. The top-down school call for

the creation of more jobs by government and big industry, the provision of more skilled labour, better state education, etc., all in the name of growth towards an urban industrial state, supposedly with the same standard of living and productivity as the big western industrial nations.

This view is being strongly challenged by the grass roots, bottom-up view of development. In this view the emphasis is on self-reliance and self-determination for the man-in-the-street; a movement upwards of decisions and information, a decentralisation of the production of goods and information.

The books also depart from that area of mass media studies which looks for ways of improving the content of certain genres and styles. The implication contained in them is that, far from attempting to change mass media content, or even teaching students to discriminate between the 'good' and 'bad' media content - to watch documentaries rather than cheap crime thrillers, to ignore advertising gimmicks, to detect the bias in the news - media education should take as its subject all forms of television, especially the most popular forms; soap operas, sport, quizzes, news, comedy. In this way students would be encouraged to look hard at those programs which they like and are most familiar with, even more so than the teacher, and assess them in terms of their own personal response and that of their peers. In this manner they would be able to apply their own standards of discrimination, not those learned from the teacher. The language and curriculum of television would then become clear on both the overt and hidden levels, and available for use or response in their own ways.

But the authors do not lay the blame for modern urban ills at the feet of television alone. They say that television and education complement each other in generating an unquestioning attitude to 'official' information. In contrast, most parents and teachers seem to think that the problem lies in the lack of coherence between the school and the television sources of information. On the surface the provision through television of a wide range of unstructured information, values and attitudes seems to cut across the neat, graded subject division of a school curriculum, and reduces the power of parents and teachers to decide at what age and in what order children will get what information. Both parents and teachers lose sight of the informal learning that goes beyond their ken, from peers and other sources, depending on the child's initiative. This leads the adults to a naive view of how both television education, 'work' on children, and a naive faith in the ability of surveys to determine what that effect is. In school this faith is placed in marks, and in television studies it has led to the 'effects' school of studies, in which, for instance, 'violent' programs are related to violent or anti-social behaviour in children who watch (1).

Both Masterman and Hunt challenge two basic assumptions which underlie these attitudes; i) that both television and education systems - from subject divisions to program types, from teacher/TV presenter to desk-bound class/chair-bound viewer - are natural, necessary, right and appropriate to modern urban society;

ii) that the causes of 'faults' in the whole operation - dropouts, violent adolescents - should be sought in the children and audience rather than in the way that the educational and television systems are set up and run. They take as their starting point the failure of orthodox educational methodology to produce students who can think for themselves - witness for instance the fact that a good matric pass in some provincial education systems is not an automatic prediction of success at university - and the failure of most adults to interpret and assess the kinds of information they get from their TV sets.

Masterman's book is the more comprehensive, and is aimed more specifically at the teacher or lecturer. Even for these professional educators, it is not a book which will slot easily into place alongside other subject methodologies such as those for English and Geography. It is rather an omnibus for those wishing to introduce television studies, or wishing to improve present courses. It includes an argument for the study of television rather than film (film studies are only now starting to appear in SA schools), provides a detailed discussion of the methodology he proposes using in the teaching of television (a methodology which must be group-oriented and non-directive, given that students will probably know more about television's content than the teacher), and forewarns enthusiastic educators against the likely reaction of their more academically traditional colleagues. It is not a book for authoritarian traditionalists

There are two chapters of exercises in visual and televisual perception, and a special chapter each on news and on football (easily applicable to Rugby). Other chapters cover the mechanics and tactics of program planning, practical Video production, and the usual television genres; quizzes, documentaries, comedy. All chapters incorporate exercises, some of them quite complex simulation of tv production, and extracts from the work of the 'average' and 'below average' students who Masterman taught. He also gives hints on likely student responses to this novel teaching approach, and how to counter them ('pupils become convinced of the uselessness of personal response early on in their school career, when it becomes clear that success is gauged in terms of the fast production of right answers'). He ends with a chapter on 'Social, Political and Aesthetic Education through Television. There are detailed notes, a comprehensive bibliography with brief comments on each item, and a sample British syllabus at present in use for television studies. In short, a book that has everything, including a simple style.

Hunt's book is shorter and will appeal more to the general reader. In addition, the first of his three sections - 'The Television We've Got - Exploring the hidden curriculum' - gives a short history of the development of the British education system, and how television broadcasting rests on a series of similar assumptions rooted in the attitudes of the British upperclasses towards 'the masses'. In this historical perspective he also tears the veil of innocence from television's presentation of its news; a presentation which implies that it is factual, objective and reliable; and he reveals the hidden curriculum of attitudes and values that we ingest together with the overt 'factual' content of news. He does this without drowning the reader in sociological theory, and provides detailed examples of the way television news selects and distorts in giving its interpretation of what's going on in the world. This makes it hard for the reader to keep believing that television is a 'window on the world', i.e. a natural and unmediated one, rather than a constructed one.

Hunt's second section is a detailed and colloquial account of three video projects done with educationally 'underprivileged' children - tough sixteen year-old school leavers in Bradford Together with staff and students from the Bradford Art College, and using both portable and studio equipment, they produced video that had a specific educational purpose, but which used the language and conventions of popular television; thriller movies, comedy, variety, etc. One project cast Phillip Marlowe, Raymond Chandler's popular detective, as Johannes Kepler, the astronomer who discovered the rules of planetary orbit.

The last section gives detailed and informal accounts and anecdotes of the production process, illustrating how group-oriented experimental situations gave supposedly dull pupils the confidence to discover their

own initiative to learn and create without supervision or coercion.

Neither Hunt nor Masterman are technological prophets who have come to proclaim the curative powers of video for educational and televisual ills. In both books the emphasis is on the learner and on how things are learned. Video is one of several tools that may be used. So those teachers who do not have even a school TV set and video recorder need not give up hope. The exercises in Masterman's book do not all require sophisticated equipment (although he gives a very good guide list of what the ideal television studies room should contain), and Hunt's projects are really just school theatre workshops with the addition of video. Both authors encourage improvisation, and the exercises can be used in isolation from the educational philosophy which underlies them. They do stress the importance of methodology; games and exercises can be endlessly generated and used with success if the methodology is correct, in their view.

Masterman also warns against going into practical video production with students, as they are highly likely to produce poor imitations of conventional television genres. He would like to see pupils moving away from 'ventriloquising of His Master's Voice' and into an ability to see through social phenomena to their structural determinants (such as television and its representation of the world). This would be a social education that is usually denied, repressed or ignored in orthodox formal education, and which would enable pupils to get an understanding of their place in the social groups within which they experience the world. (2)

This social understanding is masked in the usual passive experience of students in schools, colleges and universities. The hierarchical, top-down transmission of knowledge that operates in both television and educational systems alienates the pupil's regard for the relevance of his own experience, and ignores the necessity of 'learning by doing' that primary school educational methodology is currently stressing. The hierarchy operates as follows; i) a few people are highly educated into a conception of 'what's best' in programs, textbooks, subject matter, and how to transmit it. ii) a few people (educational planners and inspectors; television program planners, executives) plan for the reproduction and transmission of 'what's best'

iii) a few people (teachers, television producers and presenters) talk to the many (pupils, students, audience) about what's best'.

Simple though it is, this view of the hierarchy reveals the extremely centralised nature of the systems which provide us with the information by which most of us live our lives. Getting onto the bottom rung of this hierarchy, and getting promotion up it, requires evidence of a more and more thorough acceptance of the orthodox conception of 'what's best'. Curiously, we as pupils or audience don't think of ourselves as a group who share a common experience, either in the classroom or in front of the TV set or elsewhere in our daily lives. Isolated from other viewers in our living rooms, or in the classroom by the usual teacher/pupil dynamic (rather than a pupil/pupil one) we tend to take the overt information and the hidden curriculum of these systems as the only possible ones, and inevitably superior to the ones we might choose. Consequently these authors propose a group-oriented, markless situation, in which the teacher is merely a catalyst, rather than the sole source of information and assessment. In this way they hope to emphasize the benefits of cooperation rather than competition - competition for marks, certificates, jobs, money and goods. One thing leads to another, as we grow up.

South Africa desperately needs people who can think for themselves, who can establish what they have in common that cuts across the artificial groupings of race, class and language that are maintained and promoted by

apartheid under its present banner of total English strategy. The problems in the United Kingdom that Masterman and Hunt refer to are as nothing compared to our

The ideas in these books are innovative, even for the British educational system. In addition, South African media studies are generally rooted in the orthodox tradition (3). It is therefore unlikely that the ideas in these books will be widely implemented in formal state secondary education. Colleges, universities and community groups may find more freedom to experiment, although it is not necessary to adopt the methodology in toto in order to use the exercises and ideas for teaching. The aim, as one of Masterman's pupils realised, is simply to make people realise what they already know. Being conscious of one's knowledge makes one able to use it consciously. If the same old problems of South Africa are not to be perpetuated from generation to generation, then the ideas in these books deserve careful consideration.

Notes and References

1. A prime example of over-simplistic correlations between violent behaviour among children and the viewing of film and TV is given in Slabbert, M. 1981: Violence on Cinema, Television and the Streets. Institute of Criminology, Univ. of Cape Town. This monograph received an extraordinary amount of publicity from the press - all positive and uncritical. Many other simplistic studies have also been done by the HSRC.
 2. There was much evidence of this imitative trend in the work of both scholars and students exhibited at the First National Student Film and Video Festival held at Rhodes University 15-17 July 1981. See reviews elsewhere in this issue.
 3. For further information see The SAFTTA Journal, Vol. 1, No/2, 1980 which carries a special edition on the teaching of film and television at South African universities, Keyan Tomaselli's review of Masterman's book in Critical Arts, Vol 1, No.3, pp. 77-79, and Grove, O. 1980: "Film and the Short Story - A Medium for Teaching English". MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand. In addition, a number of short articles have been published in teacher's journals, all of which emphasise the literalness of film.
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PRINCIPLES OF VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Edited by Paul Hockings

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Anthropology, as Hargret Head points out, has developed as a discipline of words "the informant had only words in which to describe the war dance that was no longer danced, the buffalo hunt after the buffalo had disappeared ... Thus ethnographic enquiries came to depend on words." Yet, as she pleads, the discipline cannot continue in myopic adherence to a mode no longer dictated by necessity; it must now confront its responsibility to contemporary scholarship by embracing the cinematic techniques now available to record as accurately and as fully as possible those groups and cultural forms and rituals which are in danger of succumbing to the homogenization of cultural values ... The present collection is designed to assist students and researchers in meeting this challenge. It explores the various ways in which videotape, photography and film may be used in ethnography, kinesics, archeology and psychological anthropology; how anthropology itself may serve the mass media ... into what has traditionally been the preserve of notebooks and pencils.

Taken from the flyleaf