

**Karsten Renckstorf, Denis McQuail, Nicholas Jankowski (Hg.):
Media Use as Social Action: A European Approach to Audience Studies**
London: John Libbey 1996, ISBN 0-86196-485-3, Preis nicht mitgeteilt

The last two decades have been marked by growing convergence between once disparate realms in media practice and academic media study. From the side of media practice, it increasingly makes sense to speak of textual networks rather than of 'films' or 'television programs' since issues such as production, financing, stardom, and textual identity all shift across media forms thanks to multi-media corporations, satellite, cable and VCR proliferation, and emerging new technologies. From the side of academic study, the television medium and issues such as audience reception, once the exclusive domain of mass communications and thus the social sciences, now find a central place in film studies and thus the arts and humanities. *Media Use as Social Action* stands as evidence of this convergence, focussing upon the issue of television audience studies from a mass communications and, as its title suggests, a European perspective.

Media Use as Social Action draws upon the work of Dutch, German, and British mass communications researchers working in the Netherlands (and implicitly upon the work of colleagues working in Scandinavia) to put forward a theory of media as social action (or MASA). Rooted in the broad traditions of the social sciences, and specifically informed by developments in 'uses & gratifications,' the MASA approach addresses many of the issues in audience study mapped out by people like Stuart Hall, David Morley, and Ien Ang working from a 'cultural studies' perspective (an approach associated with critical theory, literary criticism, and popular culture studies). If for no other reason, the collection's attempt to interrogate its own mass communications traditions and come to terms with developments on the other side of the theoretical divide is significant.

In their introduction to the MASA approach, Renckstorf and McQuail offer a re-reading of the early work of such figures as Lazarsfeld, Katz, and Klapper, and find evidence of their awareness of an active audience, only to conclude that neither the effects tradition nor the uses & gratifications tradition have paid much attention to the issue. Conversely, the strong interest of cultural studies researchers in the active audience is traced back to 'unacknowledged borrowings'

from the sociological traditions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology. MASA offers a way to bridge the gap, staying open to the questions raised by cultural studies while remaining true to the social science tradition in which it is ultimately grounded. In their summary of the similarities and differences between MASA and cultural studies approaches to audiences, the authors point to common interest in the role of social context and immediate environment in media use, the need for qualitative and interpretive methods, and a similar notion of audience activity. The differences include cultural studies' interest in the text and in discourse about the text (including how the text is reconstructed by readers), and MASA's interest in finding scientific generalizations within the causal tradition of effects research. This comparison marginalizes a key ideological difference: one of cultural studies defining elements is its concern with relations of power and domination, an issue inherent in its critique of the 'science' and 'objectivity' of existing social science approaches to cultural forms. Ien Ang has pointedly addressed this problem and its implications at length in her recent *The Living Room Wars*. Although there may be a high degree of convergence in the questions asked and the methods used to answer those questions, the two traditions remain fundamentally divided on the issue of whose interests are served by their efforts.

Both the theoretical framework for MASA and the collection's case studies demonstrate remarkable openness to cultural studies reception work that has for too long been considered the opposition. On the one hand, this demonstrates the vitality of ongoing efforts to come to terms with that unruly entity known as the audience, and it certainly attests to the intellectual openness of the research teams involved; on the other, it speaks to the growing discontent with the capacity of effects and uses & gratifications based research to address the rapidly changing conditions of media circulation and reception. Since mass communications researchers continue to dominate the institutional vision of the media, providing the data upon which broadcasting revenues and governmental policies are based, the direction taken by MASA is extremely interesting.

The volume derives from the work of researchers largely centered in Nijmegen, and although related work has been published in Dutch, the collection as a whole will make a useful contribution to English-reading specialists. Case studies are focussed on television audiences and include examinations of heavy viewers; non-viewers; viewing as social activity; viewing of foreign channels; viewership of information programs; issue involvement and news viewing; women's use of news; gender difference in recalling news; and the information needs of the elderly. These studies offer a well-rounded exemplification of MASA in action, and more often than not, share an awareness of their relation to larger theoretical debates. Although the Dutch situation is obviously central to the case studies, both the studies' clarity and their methodological self-awareness assure their relevance to non-Dutch readers. *Media Use as Social Action* offers a timely and

valuable contribution to the reconfiguration of audience study within mass communications, and an incentive for cultural studies audience researchers to interrogate their methodological assumptions.

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