Book Reviews

Rose Bene, Editor

The book reviewed in this issue is: *L'école devant les écrans* (The School in Front of the Screens) by Geneviève   Jacquinot.

L'école devant les écrans by Geneviève Jacquinot. Les Editions E S F, Paris, France, *1985.* in French.

Reviewed by Pierre Bélanger

In the spring of 1987, Montréal's French daily *La Presse* began publishing a full page of assorted information every Friday intended for elementary school students. The objective of this venture was to bring to the classroom a fragment of the current events which make the world what it is. Adapted texts corresponding to the pupils' intellectual level allow them to begin to make sense of what goes on around them in a critical and analytical manner. This is official recognition, of sorts, that the school is not a closed-in milieu, but that it can integrate and learn from some of the information materials destined for the public-at-large,

Dr. Jacquinot's book *L'école devant les écrans* (The School in Front of the Screens) extends this thinking to consider some of the most urgent questions affecting today's educational system. Are the new technologies really innovative with regard to the way in which the school handles formal teaching situations? How are we to maximize the educational potency of TV, cinema, radio, and the computer within an integrated education? In addition to exposing the philosophical, social, cultural, and pragmatic aspects of opening up the school to audiovisual (AV) sources of information, the author discusses the findings of research studies in which she has participated in France and other international settings. Dr. Jacquinot contends that, owing to the proliferation of new technologies, mediated images and sounds have now become ubiquitous, and their informative and educational potentials must be assessed and taken seriously. Yet the paucity of both the research into the teaching functions of audiovisual media and the researchers who conduct them leads one to conclude that print is still given priority over other media. In so doing, one perpetuates a form of learning that could certainly benefit from a trend towards less formal, less individualistic ways of acquiring knowledge. It is not that Dr. Jacquinot intends to remodel the education system altogether. Unlike many technological prophets, she does not wish to replace textbooks by computer screens, or chalk by joysticks. Adopting a more temperate stance, she believes that a rational examination of the audiovisual production and

diffusion of various types of messages could contribute significantly to a better understanding of the mechanisms at play in the acquisition of knowledge.

In this vein, she denies the behavioristic stance of stimulus-response research, and instead proposes a dialectical conception of media effects in which social interaction has a major impact on what is retained from a message, program, film, etc. This insistence on the vital role of social interaction in learning leads to an examination of the epistemological differences between learning from computers and learning from a teacher. The current claim by technology designers and manufacturers that many of their products allow the user to interact with the machine and to personalize learning is seriously questioned by Jacquinot. She contends that one must first qualify this interactivity and determine its extent. How does working with a computer differ from learning in a class setting where, as a rule, only question-answer interactions are allowed? This query is indicative of the direction the author takes in her book. Primarily known as an educational semiologist, Dr. Jacquinot applies a heuristic perspective to her research.

In the first chapter, the author makes the surprising contention that semiology, as it is now known and practiced, is passe. She alleges that the traditional approach to the study of signs is far too limiting and fails to account fully for the highly subjective context of surrounding message reception. An integration of the study of rules underlying the formation of a message, as well as the locations and conditions of their production and propagation into semiology, would extend its limits by including the 'social operativity' of a message, a factor about which Dr. Jacquinot is most adamant. Another concept in this first section is that of 'iconic competence', whereby students are given the opportunity to become skilled at 'reading' the significance of visuals and ultimately at utilizing them (in anglophone writing this notion is commonly referred to as 'media literacy'). Borrowing from cognitive psychology, Jacquinot indicates the need to identify those properties inherent in sounds and images which can be applied in designing a model of instruction specifying the interrelationships between the audiovisual elements (intertextuality). To the reader of the English literature, of course, such ideas are already familiar from the writings of Gabriel Salomon, Erhard Heidt, Jon Baggaley and others, all of whom were first introduced to France by Dr. Jacquinot in *Communications* (No. 33, 1981). In this area of educational media literature, it appears that the English-French language barrier may have created two academic 'solitudes', with Geneviève Jacquinot as its prime French proponent. Dr. Jacquinot communicates her ideas with scholarly originality, and one cannot help but wonder at the impact her research would have had on the North American readership if the theoretical ideas of both languages had been fully integrated.

A point most worthy of investigation in Dr. Jacquinot's writing is her opinion regarding the blatant under-utilization of commercial TV programming in today's school system. Contrary to popular belief, TV is not a homogenizing activity, but one among many sources which accentuate socio-cultural differences. Hence, Jacquinot contends, it is the school's duty to show students the components of the cultural environment in which they live. This is a difficult objective in that it calls for a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching, one that dwells on images and sounds as the very objects of learning. Jacquinot perceives a dual benefit in exploiting the 'polysemantics'

of the TV image encouraging the students to express and share the types of relation-
ships they observe among the elements of a TV program will not only open their minds
to the ways other people interpret the same situation, but will also actively enrich their
linguistic development. Any instructional model which allows the student to sift
through the maze of information available to him in this way deserves a thorough and
exhaustive examination. Too often, writes Jacquinot, technological innovations in
education have more to do with economics than pedagogy. This is a sensitive area if
there ever was one, upon which the inadequacy of teacher training has a direct baring.

    To the North-American reader unfamiliar with Dr. Jacquinot's experiments at
Marly-le-Roi (France), and on the Ivory Coast, concerning the incorporation of AV
practices into the school, chapters 2 and 3 of the book may appear too distant to have
any bearing on the North American experience. However, Dr. Jacquinot makes an
earnest effort to decontextualize the emergence of educational TV and cinema on the
Ivory Coast, in order to draw some general conclusions regarding the impact that AV
technologies have had on that mainly rural country. One can compare the author's
account to those of Edmund Carpenter *(Oh, What A Blow That Phantom Gave Me!)*
who tested aboriginal peoples' reactions to media and the ensuing reciprocal influences
between them. On the Ivory Coast, just as anywhere else where TV operates, the
villagers are reported to have developed a more visible feeling of 'appartenance' to
their community since the medium's introduction. The parallel with the current
development of broadcasting activities by Canada's Inuit population is striking.

    Although scientifically more rigorous and socially closer to home, the educational
experiments at Marly-le-Roi cast a grim light on the extent to which technology has
managed to improve educational standards. The project was initiated in 1968 as an
ideal opportunity to demonstrate that AV education does not always need to reinforce
authoritarian models of instruction, and that educational technology does not automati-
cally imply a technicist conception of leaning. However, thirteen years of creative,
dynamic research ended up gathered in a final summative report which, like many of its
kind, has not yet instigated any firm action in either direction. What was once con-
ceived as tbe state of tbe art in educational research has only had minor repercussions
in practice. Given a favourable economic and political climate, many of the Marly
findings could be applied in schools today, easing the nervousness and insecurity which
many educators exhibit vis-a-vis the new technology.

    The educational prospects of television are given substantial attention in chapter 4.
While comparing tbe dismal status of France to the impressive one of Great Britain
with regards to educational TV/radio production, Dr. Jacquinot deplores the general
inability of scholars to generate leaning models more in line with the possibilities
afforded by audiovisual technological developments. The author is a strong advocate of
authentic AV documents which students and teachers can use to construct 'social
signifiers'. Of vital importance in one's cognitive development is the freedom given to
the individual in the modalities of appropriating knowledge. Hence the necessity of
using high-quality TV documents (so tbat they be culturally, socially and historically
meaningful to the students) and of providing high-quality educational practices related
to them.

    By the last third of the book, it becomes increasingly clear that for Dr. Jacquinot

the term 'interactivity' is not strictly an aspect of instructional technology but rather a bona fide element of education in and of itself. Stretching a somewhat restrictive definition of the term, the author suggests that 'educational interactivity' be used to designate the kinds of interaction that evolve when one concentrates on the student as the core of the learning process. Assisting the student to interact meaningfully with his environment is meant to facilitate the creation of links, contacts and bridges of semantic relevance with it. Dr. Jacquinot wisely warns us of the consequences of a blind faith in modem educational technology. The latter is capable of replacing a number of traditionally redundant tasks, but nevertheless demands of the teacher a deeper knowledge and mastery of the processes involved in learning. The onus is on the best way in which to reach the educational objectives desirable for the majority of the students.

For anyone hesitant about the rationale for opening up the school to technologically-mediated sources of information and knowledge, Dr. Jacquinot's book represents a strong collection of arguments in favour of it. She uses a graphic analogy to epitomize her thesis: parks educate and museums divert people. As for those doubting the leaner's ability to ingest and store the glut of images disseminated by information technology, Dr. Jacquinot offers this advice: allow the students to bring to class those experiences and knowledge they have acquired outside of it. With the help of teachers and schoolmates, pupils are thus given a chance to put some order in the mass of information they are exposed to through the communication networks as well as encouraged to react more critically and discriminatingly to them. In the final analysis, we all stand to gain if the school admits into its domain the multi-screen perspective afforded by the media. If Dr. Jacquinot's reasoning manages to instigate sufficient debate in educational milieus, the day may be near where parents will begin asking their children "Did you have an entertaining schoolday?". One may already observe timid manifestations of this concept surfacing in social studies and language classes. For future research the question then becomes: How entertaining can learning get before it reaches an unproductive plateau?

Pierre Bélanger is a doctoral student in the Graduate Programme in Educational Technology at Concordia University.