

Book Reviews

Rose Bene, Editor

Books reviewed in this issue are: *Transmission*, edited by Peter D'Agostino and *Using Computers: Human Factors in Information Systems* by Raymond S. Nickerson.

Transmission, edited by Peter D'Agostino. New York, NY: Tanam Press, 1985, 326 pages.

Reviewed by Suzanne Daningburg

This book is about some of the psychological implications of television, with an emphasis on the medium's manifestation of art and politics. Editor Peter D'Agostino has put together thought-provoking papers about modern society as depicted through television. Steering clear of any reference to commercial aspects of the medium, D'Agostino focuses on social issues and their impact as represented by filmmakers. The main thread cropping up throughout the book concerns the issue of message versus medium. Yet while McLuhan's famous doctrine is referred to in at least one paper, the discussion is kept free from cliched arguments and intelligently exemplified through such real concerns as nuclear war and its portrayal on celluloid.

Many of the papers have been previously published in avant-garde film journals; some have been culled from more standard, academic text publications. For one familiar with the material of experimental video magazines, some of the book will be redundant. For the rest of us, it is an interesting glimpse into state of the art filmmaking issues. The fundamental question pursued is whether television, as the most common and accessible of the telecommunication technologies, can be made to benefit society. As D'Agostino writes in the introduction, the essays in the book are meant to contribute to this task in one of two ways: "Either they challenge accepted beliefs about television, or they identify positive models for the future of television" (p. 5).

The book is divided into three parts: theory; practice; and distribution. These are excellent, very good and poor, respectively. Given that the three parts are neither equally informative nor well-researched, they shall be discussed separately.

The first article in Part I begins with a description of the development of public television by the BBC in 1936. Authors Jon Baggaley and Steven Duck go on to explore the psychological implications of television. This first section goes beyond traditional communication theory and looks at content versus presentation, the functions of television, television as popart, the importance of viewers' act of viewing (i.e., audience response), the context of news and the impact of celebrity newscasters. It also delves into the anthropological effects of television and how children fare as television

viewers. Finally, the section provides an example of interactive television and author Vincent Mosco gives an excellent explanation of Videotex. Mosco refers specifically to the international development of current data transmission systems and charts Canadian progress in this area. The issue of Videotex as a global solution to information and communication problems is discussed. It is pointed out that in fact the medium is shaped by market forces. Although it would be misleading to say this section was complete, it does handle factual information and a psychological study of the medium with flare.

Part II, Practice, offers an intriguing, if also blatantly one-sided look at particular examples of poetry and politics on television. It begins by focusing on pioneer television experimentalist Ernie Kovacs and follows this with a look at the major accomplishments of video artist Narn June Paik. Next comes what amounts to thinly disguised praise of Samuel Beckett's made-for-British-TV "Ghost Trio" in a paper that purports to be descriptive.

The most comprehensive coverage of a topic in this book is James Welsh's essay on the portrayal of nuclear wars in "Nuclear Consciousness on Television." A brief overall history of the political and social issues involved in the making and distribution of the major films about nuclear war is provided. Major films discussed include the commercially successful "The Day After" and "The War Game," banned from broadcast television by the BBC. While informative, the essay sometimes reads like a promotional pitch for director Peter Watkins.

Author Ernie Bamouw provides an interesting study of what happened to war-time film footage dealing with effects of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While more historical than strictly communications-oriented, this paper does not seem out of place, coming as it does right after the discussion of nuclear war films. Following this, a short essay on guerrilla television defines this term and makes a moderate attempt to compare video artists to video documentarists. This is followed by a feeble comparison of television to print and cable television to its broadcast counterpart. Part of the reason this essay fails is its assumption that most readers are familiar with the one experimental weekly cable series, Paper Tiger TV, described. A printed conversation with poet Robert Bly, wrapping up this section, seems incongruous with the main theme of the book.

The phrase "theory and practice for a new television aesthetics" is printed on the book's front cover. While both theory and practice are discussed well, the third part of the book, on distribution, simply does not measure up to the quality of its preceding parts. It contains a thin selection of articles about specific experimental television channels in Britain, New York, Boston and San Francisco, and concludes with a selected chronology of major video events and shows of the last 20 years.

The book should not be faulted for providing a left-of-centre discussion of television aesthetics, when this is exactly what it was meant to provide. Its concern, to describe a "new television aesthetics," is met with some degree of success. The book would be suitable as supplementary reading for anyone interested in what television can and/or should achieve.

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