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Review: Television, Politics, and History

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## Television, Politics, and History

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*Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India.* By Purnima Mankekar. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 1999.

*Politics after Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India.* By Arvind Rajagopal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

*Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space.* By Anna McCarthy. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2001.

Three substantial new monographs present original research into television, but, as will become clear, this seemingly unifying factor does not make them share a single project. Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics* and Rajagopal's *Politics after Television* explore the intersection of television in India with social and political relations, while McCarthy's *Ambient Television* examines the materiality of the television set in unremarkable everyday public places in North America. The relationship between politics, television, and its audiences is very different in the three books, each of which will appeal to a different audience.

Both Mankekar and Rajagopal frame their subject with reference to a roster of cultural Marxists and post-structuralists (Habermas, Foucault, Benjamin, Adorno). Though Rajagopal tantalizingly proffers Mauss's theory of gift exchange as a new way of thinking about television, the offer becomes lost in his complex theoretical web. Both ultimately bind their analyses together through the use of History—Mankekar in a reflexive feminist manner, Rajagopal in that of Grand Theory.

Mankekar's densely informative but highly moving book focuses on her return to Delhi to research the relationship between "womanhood, community, belonging, nationhood, and culture" (p. 3)—or what television has meant for a number of mostly Hindu middle-class women. The state television station, Doordarshan, is a hegemonic state apparatus strategically involved in pro-

moting specific ideas of citizenship based on Hindu culture. Two sections, "Engendering Communities" and "Technologies of Violence," use specific Doordarshan programmes as case studies to examine conceptual issues: modernity and nation (*Ramayan*), enraged womanhood (*Mahabharat*), militarism (*Param Veer Chakra*), and the partition of India (*Tamas*). The study brings together the personal and the political in a gendered analysis, tacking between audience responses and texts which are inherently instable, their meanings constituted in a process of compliance and resistance by what people say and do with them—what they don't say, in the case of a central character, the Sikh woman Bibiji, who violently denies having watched the programme about partition but later lets slip that she has seen it in an emotional comment about her experiences during partition. This willed forgetting and denial gives the analysis its concluding twist and confirms its centre in experience: television (like life) is sometimes too strong.

Mankekar's reach is broad. Amid the extensive data about the history of television in India and details of the programmes, we sometimes lose the voices of the subjects. Given the analytical importance of the family to her argument, it remains unclear who the family, imaginary or otherwise, is and who is actually watching these programmes. The reader is left to deduce the connection between modernity, progress, privacy, and the nuclearization of the family so familiar to anthropologists. But she succeeds in allowing her reader to experience TV along with her subjects, communicating in a way that the second monograph does not.

Rajagopal builds his nine years of research into a massive and authoritative account of Indian state and society by focusing on the subject of one of Mankekar's chapters, the relationship between the televisization of the *Ramayan* and the political disruption surrounding the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992. But for all its surveys, interviews, and erudition, this is not an ethnography about television practices. Rajagopal does not, as does Mankekar, watch TV with his subjects. Rather, he talks to them about it. His real interest is political process; he states repeatedly that to understand the work of the media it is necessary to go beyond a mediacentric approach to examine "the inter-animation between media and the world" (p. 28). This approach is inspired by Negt's (1978:63, cited on p. 24) assertion that "a critical theory of the media cannot have the media as its centre." His crisp introduction will undoubtedly become the source of many key quotations for some years.

Rajagopal's central argument is that television, particularly the broadcasting of the *Ramayan*, "helped to define a context to make evident certain latent opportunities in the political field" but that it was "through print

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and other forms of communication that the bulk of the movement actually worked itself out" (p. 12). The story begins with a discussion of how the market and the media were implicated in the redefinition of Hindu national identity and the liberalization of Indian politics. The *Ramayan* is demonstrated to be a revivalist symbol of Hindu identity, cast in the "great time" of myth, but in no way crudely instrumental. Rather, it generated different messages among its viewers. The core concept of the "split public" is further elaborated in a discussion of how the English-language print media presented Hindu revivalism and the Ram Janmabhumi movement as unified while the Hindi press drew out diversity and division.

Rajagopal's narrative traces interrelations and contradictions in a rigorous and compelling manner. The work at times is dense with local political detail (supplemented by a further 80 pages of notes and an appendix), but non-specialists will still gain much from his approach to communications and social transformation. The discussion of how the print media completed the story would have made a good last chapter, but it is followed by a short chapter about the secularization of religious symbolism which adds little to what has already been made clear in previous chapters and a chapter about the Hindu diaspora in the U.S.A. which makes no mention of television or the *Ramayan* (was it screened in the U.S.A., and if so with what responses?) which seems to be the start of a different story. Clearly Rajagopal has much of interest to say about transnationalism, and it would not surprise me if he were well into a book on the subject. The very useful conclusion sums up the argument about how the relationship between communication and political participation is made possible. Political subjects are constituted by the social autonomy produced by media reception, but the mediation between institution, text, and the wider context must be demonstrated, not assumed. The point about mediation is not new (see Silverstone 1999:18), but both Rajagopal and Mankekar demonstrate how that mediation occurs. Together, these two books provide an important and stimulating account of the media and society in India, not least because of their very different styles and approaches.

McCarthy's contribution, from Lynne Spigel's series *Console-ing Passions: Television and Cultural Power*, is a very different book. As this moniker suggests, it is situated in cultural studies, the writing insistently rhetorical in the style of De Certeau, whose approach to everyday life (1984) informs this book despite its criticism of his imputed binarism. Like Mankekar and Rajagopal, McCarthy is concerned with divergent meanings, in this case of "TV screens in public places" (p. 227). Her innovative project takes television out of the living room and into public spaces, examining site-specificity and "the politics of scale" (p. 11). Her cases come from the U.S.A., and site-specificity is treated historically, starting in the postwar period, in the tavern (the masculine sphere) and the department store (the feminine sphere). From here we are taken into a study of how

television and selling are situated in the 1990s and then into a more diverse exploration of televisions in bars, restaurants, waiting rooms, and shopping malls.

Despite the implied theme of proxemics—how the television is located in a space, which is never specifically addressed in theoretical terms—and despite the intriguing illustrations of where and how sets are situated, the subject of the book ultimately seems to be more relevant for understanding shopping than for understanding television, an impression which is supported by the extensive use of professional publications about technology and sales policies as sources. Once we are in the present, the focus on the set becomes frustrating, given the diversity of screens and forms of display to which we are exposed in our urban and roadside landscapes. The final chapter about art activism in two contexts reaches beyond the confines of television technology and moves into a more interesting area, that of installations, based on visual technologies. The first example is the use of commuter channel monitors, rented out by an arts group to give anti-capitalist messages to the waiting passengers. The second example describes the fate of an elaborate video installation in a city-centre regeneration plan. The discussion of these two cases and the conclusions drawn struck me as more useful and significant than the social-historical data in the book, however fascinating the detail of those cases, and as bringing quotidian matter into the wider context of history and political economy.

The politics of scale is very different in the three studies. It is probably unfair to review a book with a close-up focus on the minutiae of American streets and stores in the same frame as large-scale wide-screen epics of Indian society and history which nonetheless also incorporate the banal and the taken-for-granted. The three books demonstrate how much context is needed to make sense of our media practices and how diverse that sense-making can be. Mankekar perhaps come closest to Silverstone's (1999:2) view, following Isaiah Berlin, that the media are part of "the general texture of experience" if experience refers to direct physical and emotional data, but Rajagopal is more comprehensive in exploring collectivized processes of response when he considers the intersection of different forms of media. His interest in his discussion of popular responses in chapter 3 converges with that of McCarthy: he might have benefited from a reading of her materially defined space, while she might have benefited from Rajagopal's discussion of split publics and his critique of Habermas (p. 147). All three books recognize the materiality of culture, but, in their different ways, all three ultimately use television as a means to an end: understanding social relations and the intricacies of human communication and its technologies at the moment of spectatorship which is part of the series of moments constituting the historical process. The difference in scale also points to a challenge for anthropologists in the form of a sense of proportion in analysis: how much is enough, and how much might the implied significance attributed to material outweigh the subject itself? Mankekar's work is the most directly eth-

nographic, but anyone interested in Indian politics or the media in general will find much to think on in Rajagopal. Those interested in consumption, particularly the processes of shopping, should look at McCarthy's present work and, if her closing chapter is anything to go by, at what comes next.

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