What Else is New?

Mary Ann Watson, **Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience in the 20th Century, 2nd Edition**, 2008**,** Wiley-Blackwell, 320 pp., $17.26 (paperback).

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Putting aside for the moment the book's stated premise — that television, "more than any other aspect of American life," caused "a reorientation of culture and the shift of American values after World War II " and became "the primary means by which Americans defined themselves and each other" (p. 7) — which was already axiomatic upon the first edition's publication in 1997, the question becomes: What else is new about the second, 2008 edition of Mary Ann Watson's *Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience in the 20th Century*? The question is meant in multiple senses, and the answer is ambivalent: precious little and a considerable lot.

For starters on the downside, the second edition is a near carbon copy of the original. This wouldn't be a problem necessarily — reissues are often rehashings rather than reworkings — except for the dust jacket's tantalizing claim: "The new edition includes discussions of key events in American history since the book's original publication in 1997, including the Monica Lewinsky scandal and Clinton impeachment; the massacre at Columbine High School; the 2000 presidential elections, and the television coverage of September 11, 2001. In addition, the book considers the cultural impact of recent prime-time programs such as *Seinfeld*, *CSI*, and *Will and Grace*." Contrary to the hype, however, within the book's covers these impressive-sounding supplements are handled only cursorily, with only 9/11 (an event lying outside the book's temporal parameters) receiving any in-depth treatment.

That so little separates the two editions is doubly disappointing given how much *might have been* added in light of the turbulent world events and sea changes in the telecommunication industries over the past decade. Paradigm-shifting phenomena such as globalization, digital convergence, big media, reality TV, and (especially) the Internet are mentioned, but only in passing. And while one can counter that the impact of these changes was mainly felt after the text's focal period (end of World War II through 2000), this is a lame excuse. All the developments were clearly emergent (and for globalization and big media, already dominant) pre-new millennium. And those that have assumed critical mass since, such as reality TV and the Internet, would seem to offer made-to-order frames for re-examining the immediate past.

The dearth of new material or insight forces one back onto the 1997 edition, and to the more compelling question of what was new about *Defining Visions* in the first place. Here the book's premise cannot be ignored, to its detriment. As is evident from early effects studies, 1950s' Congressional investigations, films such as *A Face in the Crowd* and *Sweet Smell of Success* (both 1957), and books such as *Understanding Media* (1964), and *The Selling of the President* (1968), TV's epochal social, political, and cultural impact — building on a half-century of mass culture scrutiny — was recognized and critiqued from the new medium's inception.

As for TV's overweening influence compared to other mass media, one can easily make the case, as many have, that movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *The Graduate* in the 1960s, and *Star Wars*, *Rambo*, and *Dirty Harry* in the 1970s and 1980s, along with comic books and pop music, have been at least as reflective and determinant of the postwar zeitgeist as television. Nor have any of the popular cultural forms ever functioned in a vacuum, with the cross-fertilization between TV and the movies in particular, both aesthetically and industrially, increasingly apparent. Moreover, Watson herself curiously undermines her über-claim for TV in her discussion of its representations of race, gender, and sexual orientation, which are shown consistently to lag behind, rather than reflect or determine, societal developments among people of color, women, and GLBTs.

For starters on the upside, the book's structure (in both editions) is refreshing. Its thematic rather than chronological format ranges, with thoroughness and sensitivity, across a broad spectrum of pertinent topics: race and ethnicity, gender and family, violence and sexuality, advertising and consumerism, celebrity and fashion, religion and ethics, news and information. Coverage of individual personalities and programs snares the usual suspects, from Milton Berle and *Marty* to Seinfeld and *The Simpsons*; but the book also ventures into less well-mapped terrain, devoting significant attention to TV's treatment of often neglected groups such as the aging and disabled and to atypically highlighted shows and figures such as *Supermarket Sweep* and the Jerry Lewis MDA telethons, *Buffalo Bill* and Morton Downey, Jr., *Reasonable Doubts* and Heather Whitestone.

Where Watson unearths the most intriguing material is in her mining of the historical record. Exhibiting the same archeological gift evinced in her earlier, more narrowly focused historical study, *The Expanded Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years* (1994), Watson consistently enlivens and enriches *Defining Visions*' well plowed-over ground with juicy factoids, quotes, and anecdotes. To cite a few examples: the discussion of 1950s TV's campaign to counter suggestive sexual display is punctuated by a variety show costumer's allusion to the program's so-called "Department of Cleavages and Crotches," for whom the "slightest shadow on bare skin could cause a panic. We always had flowers and bits of lacery standing by to add to the fronts of the lady performers" (p. 110). The section on TV's treatment of rape resuscitates the *General Hospital* incident from the early 1980s, in which heartthrob Anthony Geary, who — after his soap character, Luke, married a woman he had recently raped — was greeted at public appearances by teeny-boppers shouting, "Rape me, Luke, rape me!" (p. 94). And while some feminist historians might know that in the 1930s, "twenty-six states had laws prohibiting the employment of married women," how many are aware that in a 1950s' *Honeymooners* episode, Alice Cramden, in order to get a clerical job at husband Ralph's bus company, must lie that Ralph is her brother because of the company's policy against hiring married women (pp. 57, 59)?

As is virtually unavoidable in a book of such scope, occasional historical lapses occur. The most irksome errors of omission, for me, include: the landmark WLBT case of the 1960s, whose ruling allowing public input on station licensing crucially increased the clout of media monitoring groups (see Kathryn Montgomery's *Target: Prime Time*); the precedent-setting *coalition* of these groups, not just involvement by the NAACP, in the "lily white" programming controversy of 1999 (see my forthcoming article in *Television and New Media*); the Reagan-era repeal of the Fairness Doctrine, enabling the onslaught of

"unfair and unbalanced" political discourse (see Thomas Krattenmaker's *Regulating Broadcast Programming*, among others); and ad agencies' cooptation (cum-encouragement) of the '60s counterculture through campaigns such the VW anti-car, the Pepsi Generation, and the Dodge Revolution (see Thomas Franks' *The Conquest of Cool*). As for errors of commission, the sole inaccuracy I detected: Billy Crystal's Jodie Dallas on *Soap* (1977-1981) was not the first recurring gay character on primetime TV, which honor goes to Lance Loud, as himself, on the popular PBS documentary series, *An American Family* (1973).

As has become de rigueur in television analysis, Watson fluctuates ideologically, though not in the postmodern sense of straddling the political fence. Rather, her positioning is "old school" in both directions, alternating between the socially progressive (in her critique of TV's treatment of the marginalized and oppressed and her indictment of the medium's role in propelling hyper-consumerism) and the culturally conservative (in her swallowing whole of effects studies linking TV viewing to violent behavior and her reluctance to acknowledge the — admittedly double-edged — satire in shows like *Married . . . with Children* or *Seinfeld*).

In terms of writing style, as Watson promised and delivered in *The Expanded Vista*, *Defining Visions* again provides "a scholarly investigation as a readable narrative" (p. vi). However, while erring on the side of accessibility makes the book a more than serviceable historical survey for the casual reader or undergraduate student, it also limits its appeal and value for media specialists. Industrial context, as indicated above, is particularly weak, especially when compared with other prominent survey texts such as J. Fred MacDonald's *One Nation Under Television* (1994), Michele Hilmes's *Only Connect* (2002, 2007), or even Eric Barnouw's *Tube of Plenty* (1975, 1990). And one searches in vain for any awareness of, much less engagement with, influential theoretical models such as cultural studies, political economy, or postmodernism, or even with recently rehabilitated theorists such as Marshall McCluhan, whose TV-centrism (sans technological utopianism) might have bolstered Watson's case.

Highly readable and informative, then, the book, at least for the media studies or mass communication scholar, is a bit of a mixed bag. Unlike *The Expanded Vista*, which fulfilled its premise and its promise, *Defining Visions* (in both editions) would have benefited from expanding *and* narrowing its sights.

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