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Media Experiences / Popularizing Japanese TV

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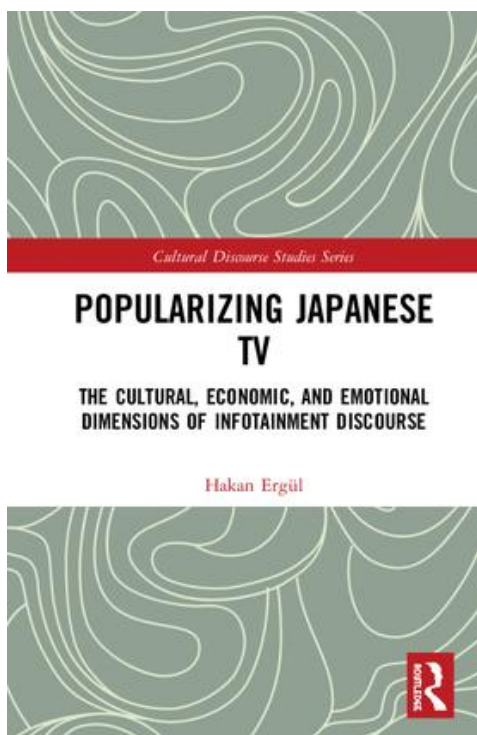
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Hakan Ergül's *Popularizing Japanese TV: The Cultural, Economic, and Emotional Dimensions of Infotainment Discourse* (London-New York: Routledge, 2019) and Annette Hill's *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television* (London-New York: Routledge, 2019) constitute two recent examples of strenuous ethnographic work with empirical focus on popular television. Both publications reveal the extremely rewarding character of studying spaces and processes of production and reception of commercially successful and emotionally impactful television programs. While each project makes use of different sets of resources (Ergül's study is an adaptation of his doctoral work, while Hill's endeavor is the result of a larger project involving a research team and collaborating with the television industry), they share a common interest in taking television seriously which, in this case, translates into clarifying and registering the creative and emotional labor involved in producing and consuming television against the background of different cultural and political-economic contexts.

Ergül's *Popularizing Japanese TV* is a production study of the Japanese wideshow, described by the author as a culturally unique infotainment sub-genre. The study is based on interviews with television professionals and participant observations which took place between 2001 and 2006 in three Japanese television channels. The aim of the study is described by the author as twofold (p. 10). First, Ergül is interested in utilising this access into production spaces in order to clarify the infotainment discourse; a scholarly informed framing of Japanese television according to which the combination of information and entertainment elevates as the most prominent way of information transmission. Second, he makes a commitment towards grounding the concept of infotainment on cultural, emotional, and political-economic dimensions of contemporary broadcasting. The main body of the study is

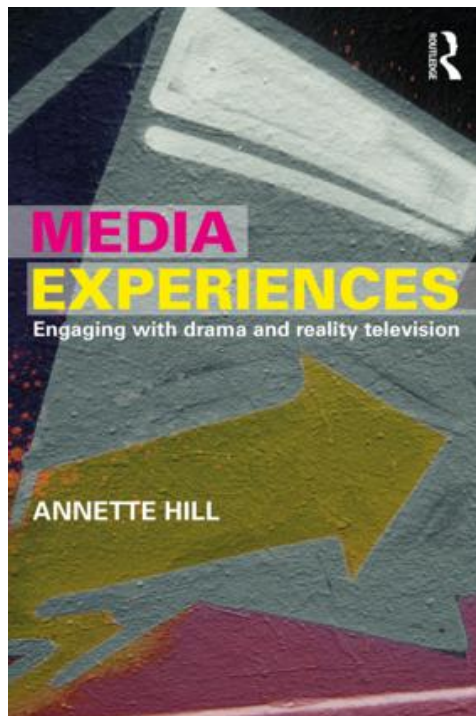
divided in four chapters, followed by a concluding section which contains some closing reflections. More specifically, the first chapter (pp. 17-36) familiarises the reader with aspects of Japanese broadcasting, including the ways it has been addressed in scholarly accounts, as well as with the *wideshow*, a hybrid televisual product which combines information and entertainment and is, in principal, designed for female audiences. The second chapter (pp. 37-68) provides an overview of the study's methodology, clarifications regarding issues of access to the ethnographic field, as well as important contextualising information about the channels and the informants. The third (pp. 69-86) and fourth chapters (pp. 87-138) constitute the core of the study. The former presents the political economy of infotainment television, that is the ways in which the design of *wideshows* aligns with the logic of commercialisation, functioning as a media event which invites (local and national) audiences to think and act as consumers. The fourth chapter examines the cultural elements of Japanese infotainment, with a focus on the production strategies that create emotional ties between audiences and television content, mainly by constructing an ambience of intimacy.



Hill's *Media Experiences* is the result of a project which captures aspects of production and reception in three countries (Sweden, Denmark, and the UK), by focusing on a number of strong and diverse case studies. It showcases an impressive variety of methodological tools and routines, including qualitative interviews, participant observations, social media analytics, and analysis of scheduling and ratings. The book begins with an introductory chapter (pp. 1-14) which provides the key concepts around which the study is organised, such as the idea of push-pull dynamics as a schema that helps to conceptualise the power relations that characterise contemporary industries and audiences. Central to the study is also the concept of a spectrum of engagement as a way to capture the multiplicity of ways today's audiences interact with media products. Finally, the overarching notion of media experiences is discussed as an inclusive approach to the study of people and popular culture, constructing a nexus between producers, audiences, and academia. Chapter 2 (pp. 15-29) unravels the project's philosophy and design and brands this kind of research as an analytic dialogue across media industries and academia.

What follows is seven analytical chapters, compact in length yet rich in argumentative and empirical content, which comprise the backbone of the research project. In particular, chapters 3 (pp. 30-52) and 5 (pp. 72-93) focus on the Nordic noir format *The Bridge* by introducing the key concept of roaming audiences in order to describe contemporary active audiences that experience storytelling through a variety of affective, temporal, and geographical affordances and by going deeper into the emotional character of the show's creation and consumption respectively. Chapters 4 (pp. 53-71) and 7 (pp. 121-137) draw from the case of reality talent show *Got to Dance* and elaborate on the concept of a spectrum of engagement; Hill makes a convincing case for the changing nature of engagement, ranging from positive and negative engagement to disengagement, defined by economic and cultural components. At the same time, the author proves that audiences are active and conscious viewers whose emotional attachment and loyalty towards television products is contingent on viewer-considerate production strategies. Chapter 6 (pp. 94-120) constitutes an interesting study of illegal viewing, having the cult drama series *Utopia* as its empirical case; the author moves the issue of piracy away from the economic and legal framework and allows for the voices of viewers to describe their interaction with conspiracy narratives as stories of power and morality in an increasingly darker political climate.

Chapter 8 (pp. 138-162) deals with *MasterChef*, a strong player of global television entertainment, exploring the issue of engagement through the lens of authenticity; Hill's main argument is that the focus on food – and not on competition – allows for a meaningful connection with the viewers of the reality cooking show who use it as an opportunity to reflect on issues of health and nutrition, food waste, self-identity, eating rituals and routines, as well as professional work ethics. The final empirical chapter (pp. 163-183) constitutes a study of warm-up acts as hidden work both in the production industry and on screen, but also as an underresearched aspect of live entertainment; the author argues that people's experiences with warm-up acts constitute evidence that any study of media engagement needs to go beyond the obvious and the visible. The concluding chapter (pp. 184-192) contains some reflections on the dynamic interactions between audiences and media industries, with the former being imagined as more mobile and more active than ever, navigating an abundant media landscape by blending together old and new ways of engaging with television.



Read in tandem, one can notice that both studies share a strong commitment to discover, analyse, and give a name to invisible processes and relations which factor in the onscreen phenomena. In this sense, they both resonate Vicki Mayer's idea about the existence of less obvious, or even hidden, contexts where production values and practices take shape.[1] For instance, Ergül's study is framed by the author as an attempt to take some distance from Western media studies and to delve into the specificities of the Japanese televisual landscape (p. 2). Although the discourse of infotainment and the logic of the Japanese wideshow are perhaps not as unique as the author argues, the study can be read as a dedicated attempt to register and dissect a number of culturally intricate concepts in order to provide the reader with insights into a (media) world that many may not have access to because of geographical, cultural, and/or linguistic restrictions. In that sense, Ergül manages to deliver a study characterised by a culturally grounded and sensitive account of an aspect of Japanese broadcasting. A specific example of this orientation is the focus on explaining the televisual *uchi* (pp. 87-90), a discourse of intimacy between television professionals and audiences according to which an imaginary household is created sharing language and proximity.

Hill's book also addresses the idea of invisible/hidden processes by shedding light on unseen aspects of popular entertainment, such as the warm up-act, or by digging into the practices and pleasures of illegal viewing. In this sense, the study succeeds in discovering ways that television audiences experience media through an investigation of different production teams, genres, cultural contexts, as well as ways in which they themselves seek, consume, interpret, and enjoy media content (or disengage from it). However, since the study does not employ a traditional ethnographic approach and the discourse of 'learning from' the field, it would be fair to argue that the net knowledge delivered by this study is to be found in its active construction, rather than just disclosure of zones of interaction between media production and reception. The book informs us from the beginning that the project is not conventional ethnography; the research conducted is described as an industry-academic collaborative project between Lund University and Endemol Shine (p. 8), combining production and audience study and, as such, empirically responding to what Scannell and Cardiff have theorised as the social relationship between producers and audiences:

But broadcasting is not simply a content [...] It embodies, always, a communicative intention which is the mark of a social relationship. Each and every programme is shaped by considerations of the audience, is designed to be heard or seen by absent

listeners or viewers. [...] The social relations of production and consumption – as between institutions, programmes and audiences – embody the emerging character and impact of broadcasting on modern societies.[2]

Media Experiences seems to be wholeheartedly committed to grasping the social bonds that are created between the two spheres, allowing the one to better understand the other, with academia not standing as a distanced observer but operating as a dutiful mediator. In that sense, *Media Experiences* is not the only output of the research; as the author informs us, the research team organised several internal workshops with production staff encouraging the exchange of ideas between television professionals and academics, while at the same time processing the feedback received from audiences (p. 19). Along the same lines, some research reports were made available to audiences in order to facilitate communication and understanding between the researchers and subjects of the study (ibid.). As a result, *Media Experiences* takes shape in line with the idea of an analytic dialogue (pp. 22-24) involving academia, media industries, as well as media audiences, showcasing the value and the rewards of listening with respect by assuming less and investigating more in every aspect of the production circuits and reception spaces (p. 10). The high point of this approach is demonstrated in chapter 5, titled 'The cool heart of Nordic noir', an insightful summary of the creative and viewing experience associated with one of the most emblematic television dramas of recent years, *Bron / Broen*. The chapter recounts the emotional labor involved in both producing and engaging with the drama resulting in the aforementioned theoretical notion of a social relationship between producers and audiences taking the form of a manifest social contract, with producers and audiences alike emotionally and intellectually investing in the product (p. 93).

Compared to the above, *Popularizing Japanese TV* constitutes a more conventional example of a production study, combining ethnographic observations and interviews in order to register the variety of processes involved in producing media content within a particular production context. Having said that, it is noteworthy that Ergül combines the analysis of micro production settings, such as the studio, and macro dimensions, such as the political-economic and the socio-emotive spheres. However, this does not mean that audiences never come into play. On the contrary, Ergül manages to demonstrate how audiences always hold a central role in terms of how the industry imagines and engineers the production process. When Ergül insists on the value of the concept of intimacy (pp. 151-154), he communicates the emotional context which characterises the production of wideshow which exists

in parallel with the economic factors determining the orientation of production in capitalist societies. In that sense, even though the study does not accommodate for the actual voices and experiences of audiences as in Hill's book, Ergül makes use of the concept of the discourses of television (pp. 2-4) in order to grasp the modes of address and interaction with audiences or, to use R.C. Allen's words, 'the complex of all the ways television addresses us, appeals to us, tells us stories, entertains us, and represents itself and the world'.[3]

Having presented the main contributions made by each of these publications, as well as the gains from their parallel reading, some final remarks concern their aftertaste. All in all, *Popularizing Japanese TV* constitutes an honest attempt to provide visibility to a non-Western media landscape and specificity to a particular category of programming, the Japanese wideshow. However, alongside its contributions, one can identify some noteworthy limitations and missed opportunities. The book is based on ethnographic observations which took place between 2001-2006, which means that the book was released more than a decade after concluding the fieldwork. While the author acknowledges that a lot has changed since then in terms of how audiences consume media content – he specifically refers to the dominant role undertaken by new technologies and social media – the study lacks the reflective tone which could make the connections between the then and now clearer. As such, the study feels more historical rather than contemporary. Consequently, the reader might find the book to be barren of updated observations regarding the status of wideshow today in terms of contemporary production and reception practices and routines.

The case of *Media Experiences* is different since it makes full use of the power of the contemporary. It is strongly rooted in present-day experience, making the book a valuable companion to any television researcher (but also maker or viewer) interested in becoming more knowledgeable about how things are done today. On one hand, it is not surprising to see an audience study conducted with respect and delivering rich empirical material grounded on popular cultural forms; Hill's previous work functions as a guarantee of quality.[4] On the other hand, this is a kind of work that shows the future of television studies. It is an example of good practice and at the same time a work that inspires by showing what kind of academic research is possible. Finally, it is worth noting that *Media Experiences* also feels like a tribute to all the subjects involved in making television the culturally resonant medium it (still) is today. In a subtle, yet powerful, way it reminds academia of

the gratitude it must show towards them. And at the same time, it reminds academia of its responsibility to always give something back.

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Notes

- [1] Mayer 2008, p. 143.
- [2] Scannell & Cardiff 1991, p. xi.
- [3] Allen 1992, p. 15.
- [4] Hill 2005, 2007.