

Myra Macdonald's Exploring Media Discourse

Review by Katharine Sarikakis

Myra Macdonald has written another book that will be widely used by my students. Her previous book *Representing Women*, appears in essays and dissertations again and again and it is usually the first place students will look at for a comprehensive discussion of the construction of femininity and its changing cultural contexts.

Exploring media discourse, although not a 'continuation' of *Representing Women*, works along a similar 'work ethos' namely that of clarity, critical analysis and political astuteness. The book offers a comprehensive; yet highly focused synthesis of theoretical approaches to the matter of 'ideas', 'meaning' and 'discourse'. And of course power and control. Free from the sometimes over-mechanised linguistic tradition, this exploration of dominant media discourses elucidates the interplay between ideological predispositions and the construction of meaning by the media. Macdonald's analysis moves from Hilary Clinton's 'performance', to paedophilia, to the demonisation of Islam, to Frankenfoods, thereby offering not just a discussion on the most important debates of our time, but also demonstrating the ways in which ideology shapes the treatment of 'news', underscores media moral judgement, filters facts, legitimates discourse and ultimately aims for the control over consciousness through knowledge and meaning. Only, this is the easy part. The book addresses the variety of ways in which power is demonstrated or withheld, underlines the actors who find themselves outside the discursive plane and reflects upon the complexities of social change.

The first part of the book brings together the contested concepts of ideology and discourse and links them to the practices of representation. Through an analysis of discourses present in media products (whether in fiction or factual programming, verbal or visual text), the authors argues for a long and careful look at the power relations that can be disguised in progressive (non-racist/non-sexist etc) language. The main argument of the book is a triumphant return to the study of ideology. Contrary to more fashionable perhaps writings about the dispersion of power, multi-subjectivity or even contestations among differentiated interpreting audiences, Macdonald asserts that the concept of ideology directs us to ask questions about the Absences in discourse and power. Who and what is hidden away? Who and what is silent and not spoken about?

The second part of the book deals with two intersecting aspects of the *raison d'être* of the media and their transformation. First, the changing form and content of 'information' is addressed through the critical review of media trends to 'personalise' reporting on the political or social world. This book offers a well-balanced analysis of the complexities of issues surrounding our understanding of and approach to the study of 'soft' and 'hard' news, 'entertainment' or 'information'. Again, the author argues against a monolithic and polarised academic discourse around changing forms of communicating. Far from offering a naïve, all-encompassing relativism, Macdonald takes into account the sensationalisation of news and preferred or dominant ideological positions, while at the same time gives credit to the study of role of subjectivity and personalisation as a method that will disperse the myths of one-sidedness claiming objectivity. Similarly, the author moves away from the usual reference to privacy vs. information and highlights the power structures that remain 'remarkably untouched' even in a media world that has given more airtime to the 'ordinary people' than ever before.

The third part of the book builds upon the theoretical work of the first part and the reflective account of the second part to investigate and apply the same tools on the analysis of dominant discourses in the media. These are discourses of 'risk' and 'danger' as they are related to paedophilia, unsafe food and the demonisation of Islam. This is an excellent choice of subjects that one can argue not accidentally dominate

the mediated 'public' sphere in very particular ways; these three areas cover the realm of 'need' or in other words, they constitute universal issues for human societies namely physical survival, survival of the species and survival of the soul as they refer to archetypal constructions (?) of sexuality, nourishment for the body and spirituality. Students and any scholar interested in these issues will be pleased to read a book written in such an accessible writing style that does not oversimplify or avoid complexity and that stays attuned to the most subtle sounds of the noisy media world. Particularly useful for courses in media and cultural studies, this book should also be read by those interested in ideology and the media, constructions of danger and risk, representations of race and gender and of course those studying the mechanisms of control over consciousness.

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