



### **Resource Review**

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<b>Name of reviewed item:</b>	Key Themes in Media Theory
<b>Author(s) / Editor(s):</b>	Dan Laughey
<b>Publisher / distributor details:</b>	McGraw Hill, Open University Press
<b>Publication / release date:</b>	2007
<b>ISBN number:</b>	13: 9780335218134
<b>Price:</b>	£17.99

### **Review:**

What sort of book is a 'text book' anyway? The distinctions were very clear a decade or so ago, but that was before the proliferation of digital media and the web. Since then, increasingly the 'text book' has come to mean something else, as media courses have flourished, and older more established disciplines, such as English Literature, Film Studies and History, have been 'remediated' by media theory. The very best text books are not just summaries of complex ideas for a student audience or an introduction to a critical canon; the very best add something to the canon they reflect upon, and Dan Laughey's *Key Themes in Media Theory* is one such book.

Media Studies as a field has always been difficult to define. The terrain is a constantly shifting array of theories and texts. Laughey's contemporaries are busying themselves with 'Media Studies 2.0' which this book dismisses as the "Malteser of media theory – lightweight and hollow to its core" (p.198) in characteristic style. So, *Key Themes in Media Theory* then, is something of a rethink. Students of such subjects often find the theories themselves as far too abstract and complex. This book doesn't just present the ideas of others, but rewrites them, brings them up-to-date, fills them out with contemporary examples and then assembles them along a timeline of media history.

Not only that, but this timely book has clearly germinated from some skilful teaching, which is grounded firmly in the students' own experience and context. The chronology presented here is interesting, the ideas in this book are not necessarily in historical order. For example, Michel de Certeau does technically come before John Fiske, but this book's timeline has him coming afterwards, which does seem more logical for the student. Similarly, de Certeau is shown to be an improvement of Stuart

Hall's work too. So, the order of ideas, theories and theorists is the thing that is most interesting in this book.

After an excellent 'reader's guide' section, Laughey begins by boldly asking what media theory is, and he defines media by its technology, and therefore by its history. He argues that "media theory, without dialogue and debate is always sterile and short-lived" (p.194) and that theory and practice therefore are, "happily married, but always liable to divorce" (p.4). This book is littered with such analogies and metaphors, as the book sketches a media history of ideas coupled with innovation. Media theorists then, are cast as 'characters' in such a history, as each theorist in this book is shown to have improved upon what went before, and media theory is shown to be an evolutionary and revolutionary body of ideas and knowledge.

We begin with a trawl through effects theory, and the book does well to link theorists such as Harold Lasswell with not just the Second World War, but also to CCTV. Laughey asserts that, "very few studies have conclusively identified or rejected the possibility of media effects" (p.7) so these overviews are nuanced in a way that not only introduces the topic, but also the debates that circulate around it. These links make complex theory more resonant and relevant to the reader. As first glance however, there do seem to be some curious juxtapositions, such as 'Modernity and Medium Theory' but these turn out to be another strength, as modernity – often a very abstract idea - is linked to media history via technology – in this case the printing press. Here, modernity is broadly sketched out in three phases. Marshall McLuhan's 'Hot and Cold' is explained using a graph, and this allows Laughey to bring the "only media theorist to have become a celebrity" (p.33) into contemporary debates, as "McLuhan's medium theory can only be understood through an historical lens (p.35).

In this book, Erving Goffman is a man concerned with radio DJs and the 'front regions' of MySpace. Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord both write about the 'war on terror' and Michel de Certeau is fascinated by DVDs. We can only speculate what F. R. Leavis would think about being included in such company. However, some ideas are left alone, and it's still fairly refreshing that Raymond Williams' critique of technological determinism has never really been bettered since 1975. The chapter on structuralism takes in all the usual suspects, via the Glasgow Media Group and returns to the book's recurring theme of surveillance, by way of Michel Foucault. The seventh chapter lets Marxist theorists loose on racism and fundamentalism, and the decline of public service broadcasting and the BBC's current problems are thrown into sharp relief when being tagged as one of Jean-François Lyotard's grand narratives.

By also bringing in Laura Mulvey and Edward Said, the book effectively reconfigures the media studies canon. So *Key Themes in Media Theory*, brings this cast of characters into the 21<sup>st</sup> century seminar room, by examining more participatory media, such as videogames in the context of these theoretical ideas. Here, Laughey neatly links consumerism to play, as "gamers become authors of their own consumption" (p.172). Laughey's own voice is never lost however, and we get his pronouncements on the crisis in masculinity and what he calls "men's miserable predicament" (p.118).

Each chapter has a useful summary and a list of key readings, but not the sort of summary you could get away with just reading on their own. The final chapter opens out the discussion further by providing a list of possible future debates, because "media theory, without dialogue and debate, is always sterile and short-lived" (p.194). In fact, Dan Laughey seems refreshingly 'old school' despite his innovative approach to critical ideas, as he warns: "I would discourage web research as a way into media theory for undergraduate level students" (p.197). So, *Key Themes in Media Theory* is not a means to an end, as many such books can be. Rather it is a motivational

primer, and one that should send both students and teachers heading to the library to read the theorists presented here again, for the first time.