

# Book Review

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**Jostein Gripsrud:**

**Understanding Media Culture**

*London: Arnold 2002, 330 p., ISBN: 0-340-72034-4*

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Jostein Gripsrud is one of Scandinavia's best known media scholars. He has published extensively on many different topics relating to the media both in his native language and in English; he has dealt with the role of the media in the public sphere and the notion of quality in media texts and his book "The Dynasty Years" (1995) is a standard text for any researcher involved with television fiction. Due to his specific style and temperament he is also one of the field's most distinct actors. This is noticeable in his writings but maybe even more so live. If you have listened to him presenting a paper, chairing a panel or discussing a Ph D thesis, you know his style. He is sharp, elegant and funny. He can also be harsh.

His new book is an introduction to media studies – "Understanding Media Culture" (Arnold 2002).<sup>1</sup> Now the genre of textbooks is a tricky one. Focus should be upon neutral and objective descriptions of particular research fields and the author is not supposed to be noticed. But textbooks *are* of course never neutral and objective. They are always written from particular perspectives – even if these perspectives are not made explicit. Textbooks are thus important. They do not only offer us models *of* the field. They also offer us models *for* the field. They direct us to certain things and not to others. And by so doing they partake in the continuous re-making of the field (cf. Carey 1989).

How does an author like Gripsrud deal with such a genre? Given his temperament and style, does he question the commonly taken for granted assumptions of how a textbook is supposed to look? Is he more visible – and judgemental – than others? And what is his story of the field of media studies? What does his model for the field look like? These are the kinds of question that I brought with me to this book.

It has to be stated directly that I am very fond of "Understanding Media Culture". It is the best introduction to the field that I have seen in English. Due

to his broad knowledge of the field – and to his long experience of teaching – he is able to present the field's main theories clearly, and many of them in-depth. Gripsrud furthermore makes an important contribution to a long overdue re-thinking of the field – a contribution I will return to – by arguing for the importance of paying closer attention to theories of *language* when trying to understand the roles and functions of the media. And on many occasions, Gripsrud's personal style shines through – in choice of examples, in digressions.

Having said that, I am surprised to find that Gripsrud has not chosen to put forward a clearer perspective on – and for – the field. I also miss a discussion on why the field actually looks the way it does; why we have the theories we have. These things I will also return to. But let us first take a look at the outline of the book.

## The Look of the Book

"Understanding Media Culture" consists of three parts. Part one deals with media audiences, part two with media texts and part three with the contexts and conditions that surround media productions.

In the first chapter in the section on media audiences, Gripsrud places media use within an everyday life context and he discusses the role of the media in relation to identity construction and identification. In the following chapter he takes up the question of media influences. He there discusses both the social science tradition of media effects and humanistic theories of influence focusing on language. In the final chapter of the section he puts media use within a lifestyle context. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu are in focus but Gripsrud also discusses the concept of taste as it has evolved within philosophical aesthetics.

The section on media texts is divided into four chapters, one each on semiotics, hermeneutics,

rhetoric and narratology. The chapter on semiotics starts with the transportation model of communication (sender-message-receiver) and then continues with introductions to concepts such as signifier/signified, denotation/connotation and syntagm/paradigm. In the chapter on hermeneutics, based on Gadamer and Ricoeur, Gripsrud discusses hermeneutic self-reflection and the hermeneutic circle. He also gives a concrete example of what an interpretation of a media text may look like. The chapter on rhetoric is to a large extent devoted to classical rhetoric but Gripsrud also looks at “new journalism” as rhetorical practice and he discusses the concepts of metaphor and metonymy as used by Roman Jakobson. Winding up the section, the chapter on narratology primarily discusses the concept in relation to film and television, with theories drawn from linguistics and film.

The section on production starts with a chapter on the public sphere and democracy, based on Habermas’ writings. It continues with a discussion of broadcasting: with the help of a historical perspective, Gripsrud discusses the differences between a public service system and a commercial system. He also takes up the question of whether the development of new digital media will lead to the end of the age of broadcasting. The concluding chapter deals more concretely than the other chapters in this section with creativity and constraints within media organizations. Focus is primarily put on film and television but he also discusses organizational perspectives on news journalism, introducing the gatekeeper concept, for instance.

## The Look of the Field

As should be clear from the description above, the book deals with many aspects of the media, and it does so from a variety of perspectives. We get introductions to approaches and perspectives originating within the social sciences, the humanities and aesthetics; Anglo-American theories are placed alongside Continental-European, Eastern European and Scandinavian ones; a historical perspective is applied on the field; and the media are placed within a larger, socio-cultural context. What does all of this say about the field, then?

First, for Gripsrud the field of media studies is an interdisciplinary field. He does not make a big point out of this; there is not much space devoted to discussions of paradigm wars. But a newcomer to the field will find out that he or she has to get acquainted with social science theories, with humanistic theories and with aesthetic theories of the media.

Second, Gripsrud argues that media studies cannot only deal with the media. In everyday life, media use is integrated with other, non-media practices, and to understand media use, these practices are necessary to take into account. Similarly, the media institution as a whole functions within a larger context, a context structured by, among other things, political decisions and economical factors. Thus, the media as an institution has to be placed in relation to political, economic and social institutions. But – and this is equally important – media studies also needs to take into account theories drawn from other disciplines and contexts. Thus, “Understanding Media Culture” deals as much with social theorists, sociologists and linguists as it does with media theorists. In Gripsrud’s conceptualization of the field, Bourdieu, Habermas and Jakobson are as important as are Fiske, Gerbner and Morley.

Third, Gripsrud forcefully argues for the importance of the careful study of language in relation to the field of media studies. There are of course many scholars within the field that deal with language and a chapter on semiotics is included in most textbooks. However, Gripsrud argues harder – and better – than most others for its *centrality*. One way of so doing is by continuously discussing the etymology of the concepts introduced. But the importance of language is most centrally stated in the chapter on media influence. Such chapters normally start with the by now very familiar history of the three – sometimes four – phases of media effects within American media and communication research. Gripsrud also devotes pages to that story. But he starts the chapter by discussing the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) and the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein’s montage theory. And he continues:

One of my former teachers, the Norwegian poet and professor Georg Johannesen, once, at the top of a flight of stairs, improvised the following example of the difference between defamiliarizing literature and everyday language: ““He tumbled down the stairs” is everyday language, while “he stumbled up the stairs” is literature”. The point of the latter statement is that the expression breaks with the commonly held meaning of the verb “to tumble”. It becomes a *metaphor*, that is to say a comparison between a way of moving up the stairs with the rapid uncontrolled downward movement we associate with tumbling. Consequently we have to take a little break, use our reason and imagination for a moment, before

we can “see” a way of going up the stairs in a fresh light. Simultaneously language, in a way, becomes something relatively independent in relation to the rest of reality and also something that influences our perception of it. Language is something with which we can play and experiment, and it may “create” reality in the sense that it can make us perceive the world differently. (Gripsrud 2002:32-33)

The formulation makes clear, first, the crucial role language plays for our understanding of the world; there is a reality “out there” but the way we make meaning of it depends on our way of using language. And second, by using language in conscious and deliberate ways, we can actually “play around” with reality. We can see things in a new, unexpected light.

Gripsrud’s conceptualization of the field as described above is difficult to argue with. And his way of dealing with relationships within the field is attractive. The elegant formulation about language quoted above serves as a good example of how Gripsrud writes and thinks. That is not the kind of discussion you expect in a chapter on media effects. It wakes you up, makes you take notice. And it shows a linkage between humanistic and social science research normally not noticed. It furthermore serves as an implicit critique of the media effects tradition: How can you make statements about the effects of the media without paying attention to how language actually “works”?

In writing a book such as this one, you have to make many choices on what to include and what to exclude. I don’t agree with all of Gripsrud’s choices, of course; I would have liked to have more of feminist media research and I miss Latin American media research and discourse analysis – but I respect the ones Gripsrud has made. There is a logic behind them. And by not including “everything”, it is also possible to devote more space to the topics actually covered.

What I find more problematic is the way the book is lined up as a whole.

As already described, Gripsrud has chosen to present the theories of the field by distinguishing between audiences, texts and production. This is of course a highly traditional way of characterizing the field; the tripartite division is familiar to anyone working within this field and it is the kind of division one most often encounters in textbooks on the media.

There are advantages with such a division. The most obvious one is that most concrete theories either deal with audiences, texts or production.

But there are also some problems. Theories that work on a more abstract level – theories that are less “local” – do not have a logical place in such a setup. It is also difficult to present research traditions as such (functionalism, political economy, cultural studies, feminism, etc) and relate them to each other.

Gripsrud solves this partly by using the framework rather loosely. For instance, we get a presentation of cultural studies in the section on media audiences and a thorough discussion of the media’s role for democracy is to be found in the section on production. But I miss a discussion of alternate models of, or perspectives on, media and communication. I particularly miss a discussion of James Carey’s (1989:15) influential distinction between a transmission view and a ritual view of communication. This is for me the most central distinction within the field and it is puzzling not to find it in the book. And what makes the omission especially problematic is that Gripsrud, by dividing the field into audiences, texts and production, implicitly lines up the transmission view on media and communication as the “natural” one. That is certainly not Gripsrud’s intention, but in presenting the theories the way he has, the reader may come away from the book with such a view on how to approach the media.<sup>2</sup> The book would have profited from an initial section dealing with more general media theory perspectives.

I am also surprised not to find any reflections on *why* the field looks the way it does. Why do we have the theories we have and not others? Gripsrud discusses very clearly how the development of the media institution and the role of the media in everyday life cannot be understood unless put within a larger context. But that is of course also the case for the field of media studies; it is not always the “best” theories that win out (cf. Hall 1989). The fact that this discussion is missing is particularly strange given Gripsrud’s interest in the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. For instance, reading the historical section on American research on media effects, one gets the impression that American media and communication research always has been dominated by a quantitative social science perspective. But that is not the case. There was a significant, influential American alternative, and that was the work of the Chicago school (Cooley, Dewey, Mead, Park and others). But in the received history of the field, that tradition has almost been written out (cf. Delia 1987; Hardt 1992). Why did that happen? And what are the consequences of that? By not posing questions like these, there is a risk that a newcomer to the field gets the impression that there is a natural and self-evident relationship between the media theories we have and

the media. And that is of course not the case. Maybe Gripsrud thought that such discussions would confuse more than enlight. But I am sure that Gripsrud would have been able to deal with the problematic in an illuminating way.

Returning to my initial interest in reading the book, Gripsrud has chosen to write a textbook that conforms fairly well to the norms of the genre; it is neither a book that questions the genre, nor a book with explicit critiques of existing theories.<sup>3</sup> But it is a book that serves its overall purpose wonderfully well. It gives a solid, thought-provoking and sometimes personal introduction to the field and it manages to make theories of language into “natural” components of the field. It furthermore does this in

an accessible manner; despite the sometimes difficult topics, students new to the field will not get intimidated. I know, I have used the book in classes. But that is not to say that the book is only relevant for newcomers. Scholars with a knowledge of the field will also find it stimulating. And it works very well as a common reference point for a department of media scholars coming from different traditions. Highly recommended.

*Bo Reimer*  
*School of Arts and Communication*  
*Malmö University*

## Notes

1. The book was originally published in Norwegian in 1999.
2. This does not mean that Gripsrud doesn't discuss media use as ritual. He does, particularly in relation to the work of Roger Silverstone. But the concept is not central for the book; it is not included in the index, for instance.
3. For a good example of a textbook that puts forward a clearer theoretical perspective, a cultural perspective, cf. Jansson 2002. Open University's ambitious five volume series “Culture, Media, and Identities”, published by Sage, is also worth mentioning.

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