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"Introduction: John Fiske and Television Culture" in Television Culture

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JOHN FISKE AND *TELEVISION CULTURE*

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Pamela Wilson*

(moderated and edited by Pamela Wilson)

For many of us who are now scholars in media and cultural studies, John Fiske's writing about television and popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s was life-transforming and profoundly influential upon our scholarship and our careers. It opened our eyes and our minds to a new understanding of television's role in our social and cultural lives and illuminated a new field of study that has continued to engage us for the past twenty years.

Fiske and his co-author John Hartley first published *Reading Television* in 1978; nearly a decade later, after his broader introduction to semiotics and structural analysis (*Introduction to Communication Studies*, published in 1982), Fiske returned to write his most comprehensive theoretical analysis and text on television, *Television Culture*, in 1987. Here, a group of media scholars who studied with Fiske as graduate students at the University of Wisconsin have come together in a dialogue to discuss the significance of his writing, thinking and teaching about television, popular culture and media studies.

Steve Classen: For me, *Reading Television* prompted an intellectual awakening—and I know I was not alone. I recall picking up the small paperback in the 1980s and finding the authors' insights, approach and sensibility compelling. I couldn't put the book down. In part this was because Fiske and Hartley were first-rate scholars pressing students like myself to think differently and to engage new lines of cultural theory and practice. But the appeal of the book also resided in the clear manifestation of the authors' appreciation for the

potentials of popular TV. They were not television haters or literary elites afraid of television's cultural taint. Rather, they actually watched popular television programs—and more closely than most critics—not with eyes peeled to spot pathological contagions pouring from the small screen, but to bring about a critical conversation regarding the meaningfulness of this most popular of media. Along with Horace Newcomb's important work, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, Fiske's and Hartley's *Reading Television* was one of the first books I read that articulated a scholarly enthusiasm for taking television seriously, not primarily as a social problem, but as a popular practice and site of cultural meaning. So this has been a foundational work for many students, including myself, setting new courses for television and popular cultural studies.

In his 2003 foreword to a more recent edition of *Reading Television*, John Hartley wrote that the book sprang in part from his and Fiske's conviction that the systematic approach of semiotics—employed consistently throughout the book—was a means “for insisting that there's something to analyse beyond politics, behaviour, ownership, even art. That something is ‘semiosis’—the fact, act, and trace of sense-making within contextual constraints.” This focus on semiosis reiterated the alternative approach to media studies emerging during the 1970s from the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). As CCCS director Stuart Hall stated, the Center placed a focus on the ideological role of popular media in place of the mainstream focus on direct influence. Hall and his colleagues had defined audiences as active “readers” of media texts instead of passive and undifferentiated consumers, and the Center had “moved away from understanding ‘media texts as transparent bearers of meaning . . . and gave much greater attention than had been the case in traditional forms of content analysis to their linguistic and ideological structuration’ ” (Streeter 1984, p. 80).

On the other hand, as I had experienced as an undergraduate “Broadcasting” major in the United States, mainstream media research was still a largely social scientific enterprise, primarily centered on psychological and sociological inquiries, with the questions regarding television inevitably coming back to those of media effects, particularly direct effects on audiences, or the relative effects of varied media efforts as part of traditional political campaigns. In my early years of training, to the degree that television content itself was closely scrutinized, it was subject to social scientific methods of inquiry, most often through content analysis. *Reading Television* significantly “broadened out” my view of television studies to ask larger questions regarding the relationships between the popular medium and cultural dynamics and mythologies.

In many ways, Fiske's and Hartley's work provided a primer for myself and other students in the ways and means that semiotics might be applied to television. The work is nicely organized to first introduce and summarize

existing systematic television content studies and then subsequently offer chapters that outline and apply the semiotic method. In that way, it remains a very useful model for teaching such an approach to television analysis today. But it is the last half of *Reading Television*, which concentrates on television's social and cultural functions, that I believe yields the most productive and influential concepts—such as television's ritualistic bardic functions and the medium's "active contradictions" in its reproduction of oral and visual logics alongside those of traditional literacy. These concepts are important points of discussion and debate in my classroom even today.

Throughout *Reading Television*, indeed even in its very organization, two gifted and dedicated teachers are revealed. The writing style, accessibility, and organization of the book clearly indicate that it is designed to engage a broad audience, not just a particular swath of scholarly specialists. It's a primer on a semiotic, structuralist approach to popular television that encourages popular television viewers to systematically and critically engage everyday media content. It is also a terrifically productive book for those interested in thinking through the cultural functions of television and the many contradictions evident in television's daily practices.

Pam Wilson: Thanks, Steve, for pointing out the foundations that *Reading Television* established. Unaware of that book, I discovered Fiske a few years later, with *Television Culture*. If one can claim that a single book might alter the course of history, I will say that *Television Culture* definitely changed my life.

In the fall of 1988, I'd been out of school for five years and craved the more creative and intellectual side of life. I'd previously earned a masters in cultural anthropology but had left that field in the early 1980s, feeling that something was missing for me. As an anthropology student, I'd been intellectually raised in structuralism and functionalism and semiotics, with little to no exposure to critical cultural theory. I loved the study of cultures, but the premises upon which anthropology had been developed seemed to lack the self-reflexivity to see the troubling cultural imperialism and structures of power inherent in its very endeavor. This was the so-called elephant in the room, but few professors were talking about it in anthropology classrooms at that time. Also, while my own interests were in American culture and its ethnic and regional subcultures, the dominant paradigm in anthropological doctoral education called for extended fieldwork, usually overseas in what was then perceived as an exotic or culturally isolated type of cultural situation. It hadn't felt right for me, so I had left, reluctantly. Little did I know that I was caught in the eye of a paradigm shift that was about to radically change approaches to studying culture!

So, considering career options, I thought: maybe I can learn to make documentary films. I enrolled in the University of North Carolina's Radio,

Television and Motion Pictures department with no intention of getting more deeply involved in academics than a three-semester program of skill-building which might lead to a job in public television.

Then two things happened to blow those plans away—reading John Fiske's just-published *Television Culture*, which introduced me to the new field of cultural studies, and discovering critical theory and post-structuralist anthropology. I was hooked.

Finally, I'd found in cultural studies my intellectual home: an interdisciplinary space that built upon my core in anthropology and semiotics and showed me how I could apply the insights of cultural theory to understanding my own culture—and especially the pervasive media culture that was at the heart of my own life experience and that of most of my generation. Importantly, the critical post-Marxist theory, especially the Gramscian influence, provided me with the cultural critique and understanding of structures of power that I had been craving. Fiske's writing, which was both entertaining and deeply theoretical, absolutely engaged me and left me craving more.

As my scope broadened, I realized that I wanted to earn a doctorate in this new field. Moreover, even though I hadn't met him, I knew I needed to study with John Fiske. And thus kicked off what would be an intellectual odyssey that began in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1990 and continues to this day.

Not only was Fiske an amazing writer, but his classes and his personal mentoring illuminated the world for me and shaped my thinking, my research, my writing and my teaching. Through the energized dialogue between my fellow grad students in the Telecommunication (later to become Media and Cultural Studies) program of the UW Communication Arts department, under Fiske's mentorship and also greatly influenced by Lynn Spigel's (and later Michelle Hilmes') historical approach to television and Julie D'Acci's feminist approach, we built upon the foundations laid out in *Television Culture* as well as John's other work.

Those of us who studied with Fiske and Spigel during these precious early years of the 1990s found ourselves in a fascinating hotbed of intellectual thinking that encouraged us to embrace and merge Fiske's passions for cultural politics and critical theory with Spigel's incredibly influential approach to media history (especially television history) within the larger context of cultural and social history. Though the subjects of our research projects were widely varied, we shared the theoretical core that Fiske and Spigel provided and applied these ways of thinking to our analyses of not just "pop culture" television, as it is usually conceptualized, but also the deeper cultural politics of television's involvement in and impact upon social and political movements as well as individual cultural identities. During that time, for example, as I was researching the role of television journalism on the Native American rights movement of the 1950s (see Wilson 1999), Steve Classen (2004) was

working on his groundbreaking study of television and the civil rights movement and Aniko Bodroghkozy (2001) was focusing on her historical analysis of television and Sixties youth culture. And even those of us who took on topics that seemed, on the surface, to be more “lightweight” and “fun” soon found the deeper cultural politics inherent in those program trends and issues as well.

So not only was *Television Culture* a seminal book that can stand on its own, even today, but it was the also the formative influence on an entire generation of media scholars.

Aniko Bodroghkozy: I first encountered *Television Culture* as a disgruntled former Film Studies student. Auteurist, psychoanalytical, structuralist, and apparatus theory approaches just didn’t excite me. I was increasingly interested in how popular cinema operated in the social order and how audiences—real audiences, not a theoretical construct called “the spectator”—made sense of what they were watching. Film Studies, at least as I encountered it as an MA student at Columbia University in the 1980s, seemed tired and irrelevant. And I liked television more, anyway.

One day I happened to stumble across Fiske’s book at a local independent bookstore: a scholarly book about TV, the popular, audiences as meaning makers! There was nothing like this in the Film Studies literature. Fiske discussed the popularity of television as a positive attribute rather than something to be ignored, resisted, or transcended like much Film Studies tended to do, especially when dealing with Hollywood. And the scholars who helped inform Fiske’s work were names like Stuart Hall, David Morley, Charlotte Brunsdon, John Hartley, Dorothy Hobson, Hodge and Tripp. I’d never before come across these names—or these ways of thinking about television and popular culture and popular audiences. And Fiske even managed to take up theorists like Roland Barthes, whom every film student encountered, but in new ways that emphasized new ideas: pleasure, delight, *jouissance*!

Television Culture offered many pleasures, but a key one for me was its clear, accessible, sprightly prose. Fiske obviously wanted his readers to understand a varied range of theoretical and methodological tools, and in this book he goes out of his way to map out complex approaches, from theories of realism to subjectivity to structuralism, in ways that work for undergraduates as well as theoretically sophisticated scholars. Fiske was nothing if not an intellectually generous guide through the literature that undergirded his work as well as the work that he wished to challenge. Much of the Film Studies theoretical literature that I had encountered seemed to make a virtue out of turgid, jargon-laden prose. In contrast, Fiske’s work was complex and nuanced but clear; he never felt a need to hide behind obscurantist prose as a means to signal that this is weighty and serious material.

Alas, Fiske's very clarity and accessibility made him and his work an easy target for criticism, often by critics who latched on to a few of his pronouncements or ideas without engaging in the full complexity of his arguments about power as well as resistance. Had *Television Culture* and his later works been less pleasurable to read, Fiske may never have become the favored whipping boy for critics of Cultural Studies and studies of television and popular culture. On the other hand, a corpus of his work would not likely now be going into reissue.

Elana Levine: I discovered *Television Culture* in my years between college and graduate school. Indeed, finding this book—this title!—made me want nothing more than to study at Madison with Fiske. As an undergraduate in the late 1980s, I had been exposed to critical analyses of television. This in and of itself was eye-opening to me. I loved TV, wanted to work in TV production, and was amazed to discover that scholars were considering television with the same careful, critical eye as had been turned on literature and film. But reading *Television Culture* opened that door even wider for me, as it revealed that the study of television brought new questions to bear on popular culture. Fiske's engagement with matters political and social as well as cultural and textual was a revelation to me; it helped me begin to think about meanings, the significance, of TV in a new way. It confirmed my ever-growing suspicion that what I should really do was go to graduate school and study TV from this cultural studies perspective.

Upon arriving in Madison, I discovered that Fiske's work as a scholar and writer was only a small piece of his contribution. His skill as a teacher furthered the impact of his written work. In class and in individual conversation, Fiske taught much like he wrote—clearly, compellingly, with a tremendous degree of pleasure and enthusiasm.

Jason Mittell: My first encounter with John Fiske was a life-changing happenstance. Landing in a class on American popular culture that Fiske was teaching as a visiting professor at the University of Minnesota in 1993, I had no idea who this professor was or even what "cultural studies" meant, but I soon found out. John ignited my intellectual passion for media studies and I followed him back to Madison. Thus, my own understanding of Fiske's work comes from first being exposed to his ideas in his own classroom rather than reading his work.

If one is only exposed to Fiske as a writer, it might be easy to see his arguments as attacks against a set of academic traditions, but in the classroom and in conversation, John presented arguments as friendly debates (often over an implied or actual pint). His mentorship encouraged me to see the potential utility of structuralist ideology theory, screen psychoanalysis, and

political economy, not just as straw theorists to be knocked down by cultural studies. (However, I will admit that quantitative mass communication theory never got similarly sympathetic air time!) The often-dismissive condemnation of Fiske's work by his critics never treated it with the same respect that Fiske himself gave to the many traditions with which he often engaged. I hope the generosity with which he treated opposing positions can still shine through in his text and that a new generation of readers might approach his work with a more open and sympathetic eye.

Greg Smith: I would appear to be exactly the wrong kind of scholar to have found Fiske's work engaging. After all, I was a Wisconsin "Filmie," a Ph.D. in the film program and a David Bordwell mentee, not a "Telecommie" (a member of the Telecommunications program at Madison that was later renamed Media and Cultural Studies). My own published work focuses on close analysis of texts, and at times I have been critical of the dominance of cultural studies within television studies. But Fiske's teaching and writings were foundational for me as well. If I wear my Bordwell training on my sleeve when I write, I also have Fiske on my shoulder.

The boundaries between the two Madison programs were quite porous and depended on a good bit of "pouring" (of pitchers of Leinenkugel beer, as Jason notes, since both programs met together for drinks after each program's Thursday afternoon colloquium). I took as many classes with Fiske as I took with Bordwell, and what magnificent classes they were! Fiske sat at the seminar table and simply started talking, weaving astonishing connections among the history of ideas using no notes at all. The spectacle of this brilliant mind working without a net was simply dazzling. After spending half the seminar in "guru mode," Fiske would lead us through a discussion of a grounded example, encouraging our brightest responses in a way that helped make each of us more adept critics.

It is tempting for a "guru" such as Fiske to require that his followers follow him precisely, but Fiske had a remarkable generosity of spirit. He encouraged work that was different from his own. Although his writing was not particularly historical or deeply concerned with policy, he inspired a generation of scholars to ground their work in social/cultural history and to become strongly rooted in an understanding of government policy. During Fiske's tenure at Wisconsin, the program hired Michele Hilmes, and that choice reveals how Fiske understood the need for approaches that complemented his own rather than duplicating it.

Pam Wilson: Yes, Fiske definitely encouraged his students to develop our own theoretical perspectives, ideas and analyses even if we did not always see eye to eye with him. He was open to broadening his own perspectives, and I

believe that, like most great teachers, he learned as much from his students as he taught to us. For John, teaching was a dialogic process: he set forth his own ideas and understandings and knowledge and then created an atmosphere in which he invited us to question, challenge, and add to his perspectives. It was invigorating and transformative. For many of us, it became a pedagogical model to which we have aspired in our own teaching.

I remember many examples from Fiske's graduate classrooms that illustrate both his ideological perspectives as well as the way he encouraged his students to think in broader and deeper ways—and the way that he was interested in arguing with us but ultimately allowed and encouraged us to create our own distinctive approaches. Here's my favorite example.

A critical theorist through and through, Fiske insisted that an understanding of power relations must underlie any analysis. Searching for a research topic for one course, I was interested in the major shift happening in the country music industry at that time (early 1990s). What had begun seventy years earlier as a cultural expression of some very regionalized styles of music (and the cultures that those musical styles represented) had become increasingly integrated into mainstream culture yet still maintained many signifiers of its regional and class roots, and many of them had been stigmatized. Until that point, to be "country" had been stereotyped within the hegemonic cultural hierarchy as provincial, low-brow (in a rural and uneducated kind of way) and representing the rural, working-class culture of the American South. However, a change was in the air, and the Nashville-based music industry was at that time undergoing a renaissance with a new generation and style of "country-ness" accompanied by the explosive growth of a national audience embracing not only recorded music but also country music videos, a broader television presence, the publication of "country"-related magazines, and the rise to national celebrity of a new breed of country performers. Suddenly, it seemed, "country" was cool. And everywhere.

I was deeply interested in understanding what this new "country" signifier meant in America's national imagination and what kinds of regional, class and historical cultural values this designation invoked. As a white Southerner myself (though not ever having been a fan or admirer of country music), I felt that I could perhaps bring some insight to the issue. I asked Fiske if he thought it might be a good research topic. We argued round and round about this project. He insisted that I must consider the racial and political issues of the music. I just didn't see it; I wanted to pursue this as a lingering folk culture that was being solidified and celebrated while it was being transformed into mass-mediated and consumer culture. I wanted to figure out just what "country" meant and was encoding: in the style, the swagger, the lyrics. From my angle, it was a search for what being Southern meant in American culture, addressing my own ambivalence about a Southern heritage and

identity that did have its historical dark side but also had a cultural vitality that kept this regional culture alive and distinct.

Fiske urged me to dig deeper, suggesting that what seemed to be an apolitical, roots-oriented style might be a myth to authenticate a rising new social movement. He demanded that I consider the cultural politics, the hidden power differentials, the implicit evocations of values that might not be said aloud but which might be structured into a new semiotic blend of signifiers. I resisted and I argued, yet I considered his demands deeply. In turn, Fiske came to respect some of my perspectives as well. He challenged me to think in some new ways but never forced me to adopt his perspective or to approach the research question just as he might have. For his course, I wrote an analysis of the ways that gender, class and regional culture intersected to inform Dolly Parton's self-constructed image (Wilson 1995) and, with Greg Smith, returned to explore Southern culture again years later in a study of a low-brow Southern cooking show (Smith and Wilson 2004).

I will always be thankful for Fiske's unrelenting style of intellectual mentoring, since it shaped me as a thinker and a scholar. Reflecting back, Fiske's perceptive insights on country music have proven in the intervening years to have been quite prescient. The last two decades have brought Southern and "country" identity issues into the public eye at many levels. The rise of the fundamentalist Right as a powerful force in national politics and mainstream culture has been parallel to the growth of "country" identity and all that it has come to stand for. The country music industry and its fanbase have been the staunchest supporters of a conservative political agenda in the U.S., and country music has in many ways become the anthem for the far right.

While not overtly celebrating racism, country music has undoubtedly celebrated whiteness. This is a concept of whiteness that intersects with class and region—a particular ideological cluster of values that have developed from the historical experiences of not only the Southern but also the Mid-western and Western farming and ranching cultures. With the development of this new "country" style, we see the solidification of a distinctive non-urban, white, politically conservative *habitus*, using Bourdieu's concept, which has provided the identity base for the religious and political Right in American politics during the last two decades. Fiske's insights about the country music culture as a construct that solidifies racial and cultural power, then, were spot on—even though they were developed in the days when critical theories of whiteness were just emerging.

Greg Smith: Fiske's teaching definitely transformed the way I think about media, but so did his writings. If you had to hand someone a one-volume primer on cultural studies, is there still any better choice than *Television Culture*? On the one hand, *Television Culture* is one of the most theoretical books about

television. The academic scrutiny of television has become television studies, not television theory, since cultural studies has encouraged all of us to ground our work in particularity instead of being lured by the seductions of high theory (like some film scholarship). Yet *Television Culture* remains a deeply theoretical book that moves deftly among Fiske's own ideas and those provided by others (much as Fiske made these connections in his classroom). On the other hand, *Television Culture* is a remarkably readable book. There are other books that cover a range of theoretical perspectives, but which ones do so using prose that is so alive, clear, and bold? As a combination of readable style and theoretical grasp, *Television Culture* seems unsurpassed.

While recently writing a textbook myself, I thought of *Television Culture* often during the process, aspiring to do for lower level undergrads what Fiske does in this book. When writing a chapter on the fuzzy concept of "realism," I explicitly returned to *Television Culture*'s still insightful discussion of how realism works in both fiction and nonfiction. Fiske's book is full of moments such as this one, although you wouldn't normally think of Fiske as someone who is a theorist of "realism." His lucid and insightful prose on this and other subjects shows that we can repackage our big ideas into approachable writing for students.

Pam Wilson: In revisiting *Television Culture* now, I am struck by how many of the foundational theoretical understandings about culture, ideology and the semiotics of representation that form the basis of my own scholarship were so clearly laid out by Fiske in this volume. Fiske introduces basic premises like, "There may be an objective, empiricist reality out there, but there is no universal, objective way of perceiving and making sense of it . . . 'reality' is always already encoded, it is never 'raw'" (pp. 4–5) and applies them to illuminate the way these theories work when they touch the ground, such as: "Documentary conventions are designed to give the impression that the camera has happened upon a piece of unpremeditated reality which it shows to us objectively and truthfully: the dramatic conventions, on the other hand, are designed to give the impression that we are watching a piece of unmediated reality directly, that the camera does not exist" (p. 30). "Images," he argues, "are clearer, more impressive than the reality they claim to represent, but they are also more fragmentary, contradictory, and exhibit a vast variety that questions the unity of the world of experience" (p. 116).

Ron Becker: From the perspective of our current media culture where the age of television seems to be giving way to a radically new era of social networking, YouTube, and webisodes, John Fiske's *Television Culture* might seem as antiquated as an episode of *The A-Team*. To some extent, it is. The book is

clearly a product of a specific moment in media culture and of a specific stage in the development of theories about that culture.

Being dated, however, is not the same as being irrelevant. *Television Culture's* toolbox of critical concepts remains immensely useful for understanding contemporary media culture. Fiske's explanation of semiotics and the social politics of meaning making is as valuable today as it was in 1987 and remains unmatched in its clarity and accessibility. In fact, many of the technological and industry changes that have taken place since the book first appeared only make these concepts more useful. Fiske's discussion of intertextuality, for example, is even more valuable for helping students today to think about how audiences produce meaning than it was in the 1980s.

At first glance, it is easy to miss just how current so much of *Television Culture's* ideas are, since all of Fiske's examples seem somewhat archaic. As a teacher, however, I have found such analyses useful for that very fact. Getting students to acknowledge the social politics of their own media culture can be difficult. Many students, perhaps anxious to deflect any indictment of their personal consumption practices and tastes, resist critical analyses. "You're reading too much into it," they often complain. Introducing concepts by analyzing texts in which students don't have a personal investment can be a useful tactic against such resistance. I have successfully used Fiske's detailed breakdown of a scene from *Hart to Hart*, for example, to get students to think about the semiotics of visual culture. Once they're familiar with the approach, we then apply it to contemporary examples.

Greg Smith: Ah, yes, but what about those dated examples? I admit that these pose a problem for our students who have never heard of *Hart to Hart*. This is a sore spot with me, because I think the study of television texts has been too tempted by the contemporary and the hip. Popular culture tends to emphasize the moment when a text is "hot," and then it moves on. All too often we in television studies find ourselves tempted to duplicate that dynamic, which repositions television as a "bad object" not worthy of our attention after it has fallen out of fashion. We need to get over this tendency and to see the value of insightful criticism even if the text is no longer "hip."

Aniko Bodroghkozy: As many of us have noted, the "dated" 1980s examples used in *Television Culture* present both pedagogical problems and opportunities. But let's look at it another way. Why do we label *Hart to Hart* and *The A-Team* as "dated"—with all the derogatory associations that attach to this term—rather than label them as examples of historical television texts from the classic network period of American television? When David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger used non-canonical films from the classic

Hollywood studio system to make arguments about style and modes of production in their volume *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, no one in the field of Film Studies chided them for using “dated” movies. Cinema scholars use films that are forty, fifty, and many more years old to discuss shot-reverse-shot sequences or cross-cutting or continuity editing in their teaching, and no one seems to consider this problematic. So why do Fiske’s analyses of historical television programs threaten to undermine his entire argument and render the intellectual enterprise of *Television Culture* no longer relevant, to some critics at least?

Greg Smith: As I leafed through my well-worn copy of *Television Culture*, I was struck by just how much textual criticism there is in the book. Although some reduce Fiske’s work to a few concepts that primarily deal with reception strategies, they overlook just how good Fiske is at handling texts. Nowadays there is a new generation of TV scholars who look very precisely at the construction of television texts, their style, their narrative construction, and so on. But if you wanted to point out earlier examples of close readings of the style and narration in television, you would have to mention Fiske’s writings. Fiske emphasized active audience processes, of course, but that doesn’t mean he didn’t have the chops to do textual criticism. His textual analysis shows a deep awareness of the multiple meanings that can be made from texts, and perhaps it is here that I most feel Fiske’s influence on my scholarship. In highlighting a pattern of meaning in a text such as *Ally McBeal*, I am very aware that I am not articulating the meaning. Fiske reminds me that I need to acknowledge the multiple paths through the textual forest, even when I as a critic am articulating a single path. The John Fiske that I carry on my shoulder makes a textual scholar like me do better work, encouraging us to be true to the complexity of meaning and to be bold and clear in our writing. For that I am eternally grateful.

Ron Becker: I think Greg’s comments about the need of TV/media scholars to fight the allure of the latest and the hippest is important—all the more so now when industrial transformations can make it seem as though television’s past (and past television scholarship) is not important for understanding its present let alone its future. Like the medium we study, the field of television studies is at an important turning point. As the field matures, as Greg points out, a new generation of scholars will have to figure out how to incorporate the foundational theoretical work done in the 1970s and 1980s. Although critical television studies has always had something of a “presentist” bent (as reflected in *Television Culture*’s of-the-moment examples), we need to avoid falling into a logic that assumes old theories about old shows aren’t useful for understanding what’s going on today.

Aniko Bodroghkozy: As Ron notes, the field of Television Studies tends to have a “presentist” orientation—and I’ve engaged this dilemma elsewhere myself (Bodroghkozy, 2006). Fiske’s work, which is so foundational to the field, was largely focused on the contemporaneous. However, his intellectual insights about how television, its audiences, and power dynamics operated are relevant not only to the period in which his work was originally published but to more recent periods as well. That the “datedness” of his examples seems to be a problem suggests to me a certain immaturity of Television and Popular Culture Studies. These fields do not yet have well developed historical methodologies and ways of thinking about our objects of study. Film Studies developed these rather early on, it seems to me. Film Studies may have its own sets of intellectual and academic challenges, but conceptualizing its field historically isn’t one of them. We might be less concerned about what to do with the *Hart to Hart* example that Fiske weaves through *Television Culture* if this field had a well developed subfield focused on the American classic network system just as Film Studies has its subfield in studies of the classical Hollywood studio system.

Pam Wilson: Your point is well taken, Aniko, though I do think that television studies scholarship has indeed done a remarkably good job focusing on the “classic” television of the network era of the 1950s–1970s, in particular, and putting that programming in its historical context, I’d say, better than the field has handled the eighties and nineties. Your own work has been very influential in that regard: your writing about the cultural politics of the Smothers Brothers and the Monkees is so important to understanding the television culture of the sixties. This infusion of cultural history into cultural studies was a distinctive outcome of the synergistic influence of both Fiske and Spigel during those early years of our graduate study at Wisconsin, and it shaped the scholarship of our generation of media scholars. However, I think the main problem that some of us see with the so-called “dated” examples is merely that students are not familiar with them and that historical television programming—especially those programs that don’t constantly recirculate on retro cable channels—has been difficult to access for teaching.

This has in the past been a real challenge for those of us who teach television history. With the rapidly increasing availability of these programs packaged as DVD sets or even posted online on sites like YouTube and Hulu, this question of access is becoming less of a problem, however. So I don’t see Fiske’s analysis of contemporaneous programs to be too much of a problem. Just as we explain the cultural and historical context of the post-colonial relationship between France and its African colonies to our students to help them understand Barthes’s famous example in which he deconstructs the levels of meaning in a *Paris Match* cover from the 1950s, so

too should we provide the context for the television programs that Fiske uses for analysis.

Far from focusing only on the way that audiences make meanings in resistant ways (as his work is sometimes caricatured), Fiske covers a wide range of approaches to an understanding of the entire process of media production, textual encoding of meanings, reception and interpretation. What is distinctive about his approach is that he leads his readers to see the deep interconnections between production, textual style, and audience reception. He is interested in the code: the structure of the television text (at levels ranging from camera work to narrative structure) and in the many meanings and interpretations that this code can generate. In his fascination with the polysemy of television texts, he brings together Eco's and Barthes's distinctions to create a model of open/writerly texts versus closed/producerly texts, and he also brings Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Propp into conversation about the mythic qualities of television narrative structures.

Fiske also explores the cultural meanings and uses of a range of genres and styles, from soap operas to quiz shows to sports television. A significant Fiskean approach is his interrogation of the sources of pleasure that television provides, coupled with powerful theoretical insights about the nature of play, playfulness, and occasions for excess, transgressive or resistant pleasures (building upon Bakhtin's classic theory of carnival)—all of which, he claims, are about negotiating the tension between rules and freedom. And many of Fiske's students have pursued these questions in their own scholarship. For example, in his first book, Jason Mittell (2004) built upon Fiske's work on television genre in significant ways.

Jason Mittell: One aspect of *Television Culture* that strikes me as particularly—and ironically—salient in retrospect is that the book's insistence that audiences make their own meanings from the raw materials of media ended up applying to the reception of book itself. The book spans quite a range of theoretical perspectives to tackle a variety of television's multiple facets, with chapters dedicated to topics like ideology, psychoanalysis, narrative form, and gender. However the critical response to—and backlash about—the book frames the volume as a treatise celebrating the liberating power of active audiences. While that is not a complete misreading of the book's argument, it is a selective one, overlooking numerous chapters and analyses that highlight the power of the industry, text, and context to limit and curtail audience liberty. While he wouldn't incorporate de Certeau's terminology until his next book, it seems clear that Fiske's critics poached the facets of his arguments that made him most easy to dismiss.

Might Fiske's approach help explain how his book was received with such a narrow perspective? Certainly we need to consider the context of the critics

who dismissed and caricatured his active audience arguments. Fiske served as a trans-Atlantic messenger, ferrying traditions of British cultural studies and continental theory to American media studies. At the time, the study of television in the United States was typically found within the framework of Mass Communications, which had a broadly instrumentalist perspective on the medium—television was regarded either as an economic system or a tool of social degradation via propaganda, media effects, and negative messages. From this perspective, the idea that viewers might be something other than passive victims or economic statistics was a broadside against the core principles of a discipline. And amongst the film and media scholars who might have been more theoretically sympathetic to his approach, the aesthetic horror of treating quiz shows, wrestling, and *The A-Team* seriously certainly could account for much of the skepticism.

Ron Becker: To echo many of the points already made, one of Fiske's greatest contributions in *Television Culture* is to help us think about media culture in terms of the complex processes of negotiation between the power of always-operative structures and the always-relative autonomy of socially situated social subjects. One example is Fiske's discussion of gendered television, which identifies differences between male and female-oriented narratives rooted in the different ways in which masculinity and femininity relate to patriarchal capitalism. From our contemporary theoretical vantage point, Fiske's discussion is dated not just because he spends so much time analyzing *The A-Team*, but also because it doesn't fully address the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and especially sexual identity in the ways we now would expect. Yet I find those chapters refreshingly valuable. Their emphasis on the structuring power of ideologies actually underscores how constrained and channeled audience activity usually is. Such insights are all the more valuable now. They help us remember that such structuring forces persist, even as the proliferation of media choices can make it seem otherwise. In an Introduction to Media Studies course, I ask students to write about their guiltiest media pleasure. I am repeatedly struck by just how powerfully gender shapes their interactions with media. And after re-reading *Television Culture*, I am reminded how much Fiske's work can still help us understand our media culture.

Elana Levine: I have also been struck by the continuing usefulness of Fiske's analyses, Ron. I recently used the *Television Culture* chapters on gendered television in a graduate seminar on gender and popular culture. While students were somewhat amused by the eighties-specific cases, the text opened up a rich discussion on questions of gender and genre, on sites of determination of meaning (text or audience?), and on the negotiations inherent to the consumption of commercialized popular culture. My students were able to

add in their own perspectives on race, class, and the other matters that Fiske's analysis does not consider in depth. But the specificity of his attention to gender allowed us to think about that particular axis of identity in ways that are not always available to us in contemporary scholarship. Yes, we found room for critique, but the analyses were crucial to my students' understanding of the "structuring forces" that Ron has mentioned.

Pam Wilson: We could continue to reminisce about John Fiske's deep influence on each of us, and on the fields of television studies and media studies, as well as to exchange more stories about the ways that those insights we developed in the classrooms of Vilas Hall in the Madison, Wisconsin of the 1990s still resonate today in classrooms across the world.

However, I think it's so important for readers of this book to understand that you didn't have to know John Fiske personally to be touched by his worldview and his penetrating insights. All you need to do is to sit down, crack open a chapter of *Television Culture* (or any of his other books), and you will be able to hear his voice, with its Cambridge-trained British accent, as he leads you lucidly into the enchanting and fascinating understandings of how media and popular culture operate to create many layers of meanings in our social and cultural lives. I hope that you the reader will find an entry into an entirely new way of thinking about and perceiving your own relationship with these media forms, and that you will be able to take the concepts written twenty-some years ago and apply them to the convergent media technologies and forms of today. Instead of *Hart to Hart* and *The A-Team*, substitute any television program or webisode or vlog or podcast of your choice.

And if you happen to like antiques, one day when you least expect it you may run into a grizzled, white-bearded man with a Cambridge-trained accent selling 17th-century oak furniture at a New England antiques show. Somewhere along the way as he leads you deep into a conversation (though he'll probably be doing most of the talking as you listen in fascination) about the circulation of meanings encoded into different stylized features of the furniture and their central role in the lives of the everyday people of early America, you just might hear in his lucid and enchanting prose some turns of phrases that strike you as eerily resonant with your newfound understandings about late twentieth-century popular culture. And you'll ponder what the connection might be. Ah, the master mentor has taken his accessible and pragmatic intellectualism into a new habitus. May the force be with him.

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