

Review:

**David Buckingham and Rebekah Willett (eds.),
Video Cultures: Media Technology and Everyday Creativity, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, ISBN:
9780230221864, 241pp.**

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This book is the product of a three-year AHRC funded project exploring 'camcorder cultures' in Britain. To that end, it addresses a broad range of subjects and approaches, while retaining a principal focus upon 'more dedicated or specialised forms of amateur video making'.

Each chapter engages with a different aspect or example of participatory video culture, and whilst there are a series of common themes that unite them, the book is structured and edited in a way that permits individual chapters to be read as separate entities. Indeed, one of my own students has made very effective use of Chapter 5: 'Speaking Back? In Search of the Citizen Journalist' (David Buckingham), as part of a final-year dissertation. Other chapters examine the role of domestic or amateur video in a variety of contemporary cultural phenomena, such as 'spoof' videos on YouTube and 'user-generated' pornography. In each case, they provide carefully considered case studies, through which concepts such as self-representation, gender and identity can be interrogated in the context of participative practice and shared artefacts.

Throughout the book, there are a number of recurrent themes. One that predominates is the relationship between the amateur and the professional and the inherent tensions between the two. At one extreme, there is Andrew Keen's work which tends to see the extended distribution of amateur products as 'the death of culture' and the loss of informed argument (Keen, 2007); at the other, there are those such as Jenkins who, within culture jamming and blogging find evidence of vibrant 'deliberative democracy' (Jenkins, 2006). In either case, Buckingham's work in Chapter 2: 'A Commonplace Art? Understanding Amateur Media Production' offers a useful sense of proportion on the phenomena of participation. Citing

Auchard, he notes that in 2007 only 0.16% of YouTube visitors actually uploaded material, and 0.2% in the case of Flickr (Auchard, 2007). David Buckingham, Maria Pini and Rebekah Willett's chapter, "'Take Back the Tube!': The Discursive Construction of Amateur Film and Video-Making' examines how hierarchies of practice are constructed through the discourses offered by the publications intended for hobbyists and amateur practitioners. Taking their cue from Bourdieu, they provide detailed examples of the ways in which the 'cultural field is regulated by discourses that attempt to legitimise and accord social status to particular practices, and to delegitimize and marginalise others.

Another key element of the informing discussion is the concept of the 'home mode' (Chalfen, 1982). Maria Pini's chapter, 'Inside the Home Mode', draws on the work of Sontag, Walkerdine, Zimmerman and Spence to explore ways in which domestic representations serve to normalise the ideologies of happy families. Through her interviews with home video producers whose domestic relationships exist outside the 'idealised' nuclear family, she finds evidence of the technologies contributing to the process of redefining relationships, identities and senses of 'belonging'. As Pini concludes, 'contrary to common critiques of the limited, conservative and ultimately insignificant nature of the home mode, it can be viewed as one of the many always-in-process operations involved in constructing a sense of identity and of one's place in time and space' (p91).

Drawing upon similar territory, Rebekah Willett's later chapter, 'Always on: Camera Phones, Video Production and Identity' focuses upon the possibilities of self-representation enabled by the portability of the camera phone. Through a series of interviews with camera phone users, content posters and video exchangers, it takes account of the 'affordances of the camera phone and their social and personal implications', and the device's role in documenting what Giddens describes as 'the narrative of the self' (Giddens, 1991). Utilising aspects of Goffman's concept of 'front-stage' and 'back-stage' behaviours (Goffman, 1959), Willett presents a view as to how these very portable media are influencing the capture and presentation of the daily lived experience.

As with any work that seeks to take a 'snapshot' of a particular moment or moments there are, potentially, elements of the book that will date quite quickly. One only has to view the photographs in Rebekah Willett's very useful opening chapter ('In the Frame: Mapping Camcorder Cultures') to recognise how rapidly 'cutting edge' technologies can age. However, the way that the volume is structured works very effectively to present each of the case studies as an example that needs to be understood in a much broader cultural context. Readers will find much that enables them to situate and interrogate future cultural practices within the critical perspectives that are presented and explored here. Whether read as

discrete chapters or cover-to-cover, there is much to appreciate about this book, and it promises to be an enduringly useful text.

Biographical Note

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