

**Review:**

**Wood, Helen, 2009, *Talking with Television: Women, Talk Shows and Modern Self-Reflexivity*, University of Illinois Press, pp 256, ISBN: 978-0-252-07602-2**

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Helen Wood's *Talking with Television: Women, Talk Shows and Modern Self-reflexivity* is intriguingly titled: it's not Talking *about* Television or even Talking *on* Television although as Wood avers in the introduction there is a good amount of both within the volume. What the title suggests is much more interactive, the suggestion of something happening alongside television.

Television viewers are often affected by and moved to speak about television texts - indeed, television producers long for programmes that have the 'watercooler effect', that is, programmes that encourage viewer chat and discussion – the prompting of the phrase 'did you see X last night?'. The difficulty for academics is how to usefully capture and analyse such interaction and influence. Within the cultural studies tradition there often appears to be a division between the text and the audience as separate entities to be understood and known, with individual members of audiences asked about a particular text in focus groups or interviews whose responses are then analysed. So far, so old hat. What is new here is that Wood focuses upon the interaction between the viewer and programme as it happens, simultaneously recording text and viewer in order to interrogate the 'act' of television viewing.

The subtitle *Women, Talk Shows and Modern Self-Reflexivity* states explicitly where her particular concerns lie. Wood uses daytime talk shows as her chosen genre and an all female set of respondents to examine 'ritualised acts of self-reflexivity' which enable women's exploration and enactment of feminised roles. The talk show choice fits with her intention to examine the 'act' of viewing as an interaction between audience and text: focusing on the ways the talk show presenters directly address the studio audience and those watching at

home, Wood's research explores the ways in which the audience at home seems to talk back. By analysing the act of viewing as a communicative action *in time* she side-steps the dividing lines between the text and the social. Her participants talk back to the television positioning themselves as women in relation to the discussion on the programme and utilising their own opinions and life stories in alignment with its theme or issues. In this way the viewers act out / perform their gendered identities. As Wood notes, the talk show genre often speaks to the concerns of the feminine arenas of home and personal relationships and she admits this genre 'usually reinforces relatively conservative norms in relation to gendered and hetero-normative expectations of domesticity and femininity.' (Wood, 2009:208) Her research does not attempt to reclaim the talk show as liberating women from the domestic space.

But it is Wood's method that is particularly significant here. She frames the televisual encounter as a speech event, a dialogue, and as such records both sides of the exchange – the television text and the viewer response alongside it. She calls the method 'text-in-action'. Transcripts of both parts of the interaction are placed side by side which enables us to see the exact point at which the viewer engages with the textual discussion. Employing language analysis to understand and interpret the data, Wood is able to question the boundaries of the text as complete and to show how the viewer responds as the programme is broadcast (rather than after it as in many other studies).

Her extracts show the audience talking back to the television, making their own judgments and assessments of programme talk and this demonstrates how identities are brought into being and maintained through action rather than passively absorbing representations and meanings. Wood suggests her research provides

empirical evidence of the bringing about of reflexive subjectivity through the broadcast encounter. The women in my study are making use of the text as they view, 'lifting out' the examples from the studio discussion and 'recasting' them so as to 'pin them down' to their local conditions of time (here, now) and space (my home, my street). (196)

This is a book full of possibilities in terms of audience research because Wood seems to have devised a method taking studies beyond the text / audience binary and to have shown just how dynamic the interaction between viewer and television actually is. However, there are cautionary notes. The study was completed in 1996. There is quite a time lag between then and now and the television landscape is very different. However, the introduction still states 'The television set is the centrepiece of most living room geographies and is at the heart of domestic social action.' (1) I wonder how far this is still true in 2010? More importantly, the selection of respondents is very narrow, all participants are from the same area and are an

established community with connection to Wood through her mother and they are all working class and female. Much of the most interesting and in-depth investigations of audience pleasures are small-scale so this isn't a criticism of Wood's project or its findings, however, in relation to the wider applicability of her methods there are significant implications. Will Wood's method be of use in contexts where the participants do not 'know' the researcher – will they open up so easily and talk back to the television? How might a more 'middle class' participants respond to being recorded as they view? Might male viewers respond differently too? Would this method work with a different genre that did not address its audiences with such intimacy or so directly seeking their response? Even with these questions, I really enjoyed this book. It is well informed and nicely written. Above all though, I like the potential that the 'text-in-action' method offers researchers. It's bold and exciting and I can't wait to see what other researchers *do* with it.

**Biographical Note**

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