

Review:

Hill, Annette: *Restyling Factual TV Audience & News, Documentary & Reality Genres*, Routledge, 2007. ISBN: 9780415379564.

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In Annette Hill's essential study of the restyling of factual television *Restyling Factual TV Audience and News, Documentary and Reality Genres* our attention is drawn to the importance of the notion of hybridity in any understanding of new popular forms of factual television, alerting us to the synergistic blend of fiction and non fiction genres which such forms contain. At the same time, Hill highlights the undeniable truth that restyling factuality "has had a disruptive influence on core issues concerning truth claims, knowledge and fairness".(212). It is these two central and often conflicting concerns which sit at the heart of this engrossing and thought-provoking exploration of the relationship between contemporary audiences and the ever expanding field of factual television genres.

Restyling Factual Television draws upon substantial audience data gathered in a joint British/Swedish research project, analysing viewers' relationships with factual television. It uses this as a basis for an analysis of the contemporary factual television landscape. The judicious combination of Hill's challenging critical reflection with a range of illustrative examples drawn from the audience research makes this an extremely accessible text. Additionally, the use of an international sample set affords the reader a fascinating opportunity to compare and contrast current attitudes toward British factual television with those in Sweden. In a global television environment it is of critical importance that anyone studying British television thinks beyond national contexts, and the inclusion of data on Swedish viewing habits and attitudes offers a very valuable insight into Sweden's relationships with factual television, while simultaneously provoking fresh insights into the deceptively familiar territory of British factual television.

Hill organises the text into a series of thematic chapters which tackle debates central to our understanding of the widely ranging changes and the nature of the changes that factual television has undergone in recent years and, in turn, how audiences have reacted to them. These are framed by an introductory section which provides a brief overview of the recent history of factual television and a concluding section which synthesises the main ideas with which Hill engages in the text, as well as providing some signposts regarding possible future developments.

Hill begins with what she refers to as the 'mapping' of factual television, and the processes and strategies that viewers use to make sense, for themselves, of the ever-expanding number of programmes which might fit within the factual genre. The extent to which, for audiences, subcategories of the popular factual fit or do not fit within their definition of the factual is subject to useful consideration. In the chapter *Public and Popular* Hill looks at the ways in which viewers classify factual television according to categories of public service or popular entertainment. Thus for British and Swedish audiences alike there is broad agreement as to the importance of public service categories of factual television, specifically news and current affairs. In contrast, popular factual television, now synonymous with so-called 'reality television' is generally agreed to be of little objective cultural merit.

Yet, as Hill's findings demonstrate, "Viewers over-report watching factual genres they classify as public service and socially important in the public knowledge project. Viewers under-report watching popular factual genres they classify as popular and not socially important to the public knowledge project". (63). This chapter highlights very usefully the complex, contradictory mesh of attitudes surrounding public and personal attitudes toward, in particular, reality television. She categorises particular viewer attitudes which reality television engenders, placing 'reality refuseniks' at one extreme end of the scale, who are simply unwilling to have anything to do with any kind of reality hybrid forms, contrasted with 'contemporary factual viewers', open to new restyling of factuality.

Hill looks next at the importance of genre in audience engagement with new forms of factual television. This is perhaps the richest chapter in the book, focusing on the ways in which viewers experience different kinds of factual television as well as how they work through and make sense of such experiences. This is augmented with candid and telling snapshots of project subjects working through their own processes of assigning and defining genre. The chapter provides much food for thought around how and why audiences make the judgements and decisions about genre that they do.

The next two chapters look at, respectively, the truth claims made by factual television and the amount of knowledge and learning which is to be gained from engaging with factual genres.

The extent to which audiences can believe what they see, be it in news, current affairs and documentary forms, is of course intrinsic to such programmes' credibility and to the individuals and organisations producing them. Hill explores these concerns in relation to viewers' experiences and understanding of the forms. Conversely, "the chain of trust created by news and documentary is a chain of distrust for reality television" (144). The chapter concludes with the ways in which audiences reconcile notions of truth and veracity within the artificial and constructed world of reality television.

Long-standing truisms about the obvious merits of documentary and current affairs forms - that they educate and inform - are subject to provocative reconsideration in the chapter on knowledge and learning. Debates about the quality of learning experience that such forms can provide are mobilised with consideration given to the other kinds of learning that can be informed by popular factual forms. The incidence of learning of free-floating facts unanchored by any specific context knowledge is compared with the value of the emotional intelligence which can be provided by superficially lightweight reality formats.

In the final chapter, consideration is given to ethical treatment of those who participate in factual television. Should different groups taking part in different kinds of programmes for different reasons nevertheless be treated the same? "Fair treatment is an ethical minefield" (173). The particular situation of the reality participant is inevitably the subject of conflicting public attitudes. Simultaneously seen by audiences as the self-promoting authors of their own destiny, at one and the same time audiences feel a combination of shame and guilt at their own enjoyment of the public humiliation of these media-hungry wannabes.

Annette Hill's work makes an extremely important and timely contribution to ongoing contemporary debates about where we find factual television and its audiences in the early 21st century, as well as opening up for the reader potential new ways of thinking about their own understanding of factual forms. However the major contribution that Hill makes is to nuance and problematise unfocused and poorly informed debates circulating around quality factual forms and 'bad', exploitative, reality television. Hill's emphasis is on the increasingly hybrid nature of available factual forms and the subtle and sophisticated understanding that audiences bring to bear in making sense of what they watch and in weighing up their attitudes to how they watch it. As the well-chosen examples of audience interview data make clear, the complex nature of audience relationships with factual forms is informed by the cultural capital entailed in expressing particular tastes and preferences.