

Wise words but few pictures

Review in Times Higher Education Supplement
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Title: More than Meets the Eye: An Introduction to Media Studies. Third edition

Author: Graeme Burton

Reviewer: Dan Fleming

Publisher: Arnold

ISBN: 0 340 76204 7

Pages: 298

Price: £14.99

Title: Media and Meaning: An Introduction. First edition

Author: Colin Stewart, Marc Lavelle and Adam Kowaltzke

Reviewer: Dan Fleming

Publisher: BFI Publishing

ISBN: 0 85170 844 7 and 843 9

Pages: 465

Price: £50.00 and £19.00

Title: AS Media Studies: The Essential Introduction. First edition

Author: Philip Rayner, Peter Wall and Stephen Kruger

Reviewer: Dan Fleming

Publisher: Routledge

ISBN: 0 415 23610 X and 23611 8

Pages: 331

Price: £50.00 and £14.99

Title: Media Institutions and Audiences: Key Concepts in Media Studies. First edition

Author: Nick Lacey

Reviewer: Dan Fleming

Publisher: Palgrave

ISBN: 0 333 65869 8 and 65870 1

Pages: 230

Price: £45.00 and £14.99

You wait ages for a textbook, then they all come at once. It is a sign of a field's maturity when a clutch turns up that is notable as much for the ways in which the books resemble each other as for any distinctiveness. That said, the current offerings are welcome and not without the occasional surprise. These four - all aimed at A-level or first-year undergraduate readers - share the "key concepts" approach and, with minor variations, all cover image analysis, narrative, genre, representation, realism, audiences, institutions and effects.

Graeme Burton's book, well established among teachers of A level in earlier editions, is unashamed about translating complex theories into accessible summaries and helpful in suggesting classroom activities that will enable learners to make sense of these ideas. This edition deserves its status and manages throughout to strike the right balance between "hard" ideas and classroom work. A feature of the author's approach is the use of spider diagrams showing how concepts and ideas interconnect. These are immensely helpful to the learner and provide accessible overviews in such a reassuringly large and detailed book.

Philip Rayner, Peter Wall and Stephen Kruger are aiming squarely at Burton's market. Their book has a more designed feel, with shorter sections, considerably more white space and more boxes of supporting material. They clearly know the school syllabi in media studies and their book will appeal to teachers addressing those requirements. But the short, punchy paragraphs occasionally feel more like notes than complete discussions. Just three short paragraphs discuss Benetton's notorious advertising campaigns. The authors comment on "the Aids patient advert", without either description or illustration of the advertisement in question. There are too many examples of this throwaway treatment, but this is compensated for by the many ideas for classroom activity and by sections that succeed in achieving depth and a lightness of touch: the section on media audiences, for example, is excellent, as is the section on essential media skills.

Nick Lacey's book tackles the risk of superficiality in trying to pack too many key concepts into one book by instead focusing on only two: media institutions and audiences. It is his third in Palgrave's Key Concepts series and one of the best examples of breezy, well-informed, theoretically astute, accessible writing in this field. There is an essayist's touch to much of the material, with good marshalling of detail, although the suggested classroom exercises are basic and are not the book's strength.

Effectively combining the essayist's infectious interest in developing a line of thought with the apparatus of a text that provides material for classroom work is a challenge for media-studies textbooks in the key concepts genre. Colin Stewart, Marc Lavelle and Adam Kowaltzke set about this challenge differently - by medium rather than concept. So here we have long sections on "Film", "Television", "Radio", "Newspapers and Magazines" and "Computer-based Media". Each section follows roughly the same format, covering the language of the medium, audiences, institutions and so on, and what the authors term "representation issues" - an effective way of punching home why media studies is worth doing. This is a reassuring structure for a big and sometimes sprawling book. What holds it together is partly the way in which the key concepts are revisited in considering each medium but also the way the authors focus on content types or genres as the basis for their most interesting discussions. This is the only textbook to foreground computer-based media, and the only one where the authors fully discuss the content types and audience relationships that are emerging in the digital realm.

Burton's section on "Media and new technology" needs updating and development if his book goes to a fourth edition. Rayner, Wall and Kruger's three pages on new technology and future developments are superficial. Lacey, though, does weave several sensible discussions of the internet and related technologies into his treatment of institutions and audiences.

One final caveat in what is generally a warm welcome for this sturdy bunch of textbooks concerns their use of illustration. Photographs are time-consuming and expensive resources to compile for any textbook. In media studies, one has the additional challenge of deploying illustrations in meaningful ways, given the field's self-consciousness about how images work. For the most part, where photographs are used in these textbooks, the results are disappointing. Burton and Lacey have few, which is the safest option. Rayner, Wall and Kruger use more - some of them sensibly screenshots rather than publicity stills - and for the most part they add to the text, but a full-page paparazzi-style photograph of Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones is used without adequate explanation. Stewart, Lavelle and Kowaltzke, whose book is the most heavily illustrated, justify a photograph's inclusion with their captions; but even here one feels that they are too often responding to what they could get rather than building illustrations into the fabric of the book from the outset.

If publishers want to feed off the demand for media-studies textbooks, they might invest more deeply in the visual side, where photographs and stills remain largely underdeveloped resources for furthering the teaching of media studies in book form.

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