

The Subject of Television:

**A methodology of subject-oriented
textual analysis**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis approaches televisual texts and the scholarly practice of textual analysis via the politics of subjectivity. Because subjects are formed in symbolic and representational systems that pre-exist them, subjectivity is an inherently political phenomenon, bound up in questions of power relations and meaning. Televisual texts, it is argued, form part of these representational systems; however, texts can also be understood as being created in the viewing encounter, as subjects imbue objects in their field of vision with meaning. This mutual indebtedness of subject and text indicates that textual analysis can also be seen as an inherently politicised form of scholarship.

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Foucauldian poststructuralism, this thesis begins by arguing that images, gazes, and visual experience are both beholden to and constitutive of subjectivity. The key themes from this discussion of subjectivity – visual history, spectatorship, intersubjectivity – are then proposed as key questions for an approach to televisual textual analysis called subject-oriented textual analysis. This approach provides opportunities for textual analysis distinct from psychoanalytic film theory, which cannot be imported wholesale to television, reception studies, or modes of cultural studies that use texts to diagnose social phenomena, having texts “stand in” for audiences. Situated within media studies' recent “return to the text,” this approach therefore treats texts as ends in themselves while maintaining the political commitments of subjectivity and cultural studies.

Subject-oriented textual analysis understands both texts and subjects as produced via processes of meaning-making, as subjects draw on already existing scopic regimes to make visual phenomena meaningful. Textual analysis that understands textual meaning as indebted to processes of subjectivity therefore must engage with questions of power relations, gazes and spectatorship, the history of visual culture, materiality, and intersubjectivity. Such meanings, moreover, are form and content-specific, so a subject-oriented textual analysis requires textual analysis with sensitivity to form and the ways in which televisual meanings are specifically televisual.

The approach developed in this thesis is therefore one that examines televisual texts but takes as its primary focus processes of subjectivity. In order to demonstrate the usefulness of such an approach the bulk of the thesis is devoted to four case studies, covering makeover television, Australian tabloid current affairs television, and the dramatic narrative television series *The Wire* and *Treme*. In addition to psychoanalysis, Foucauldian theory, and television studies, these case studies critically engage with a wide range of cultural and political theory including postcolonial theories of the other, neoliberalism, the public sphere, emotions and empathy research, trauma and tourism studies, and the Levinasian ethics of the face.

Drawing on these domains of enquiry, the subject-oriented textual analysis developed in this thesis contributes original analyses of television texts to the field of television studies and provides fresh insights to the study of mediated and political subjectivities.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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