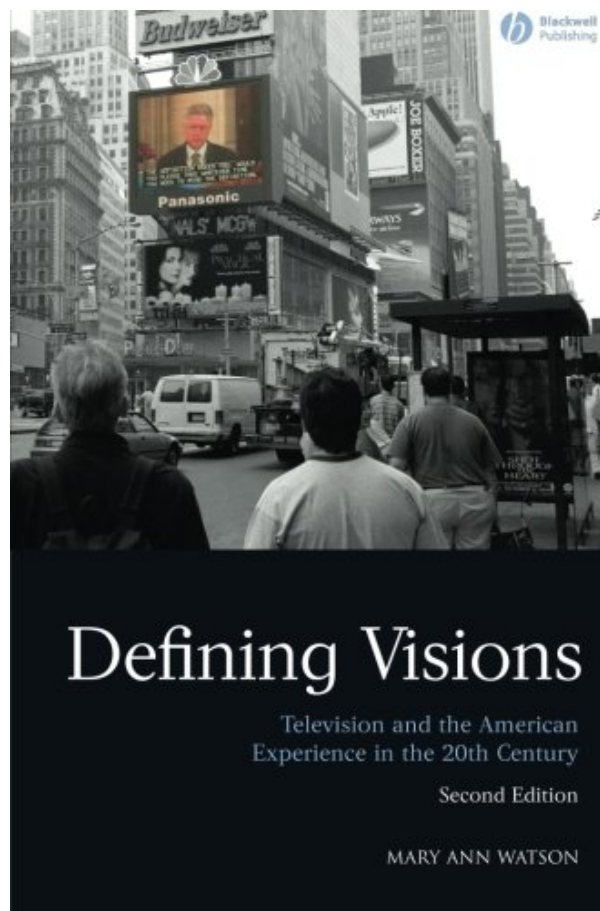
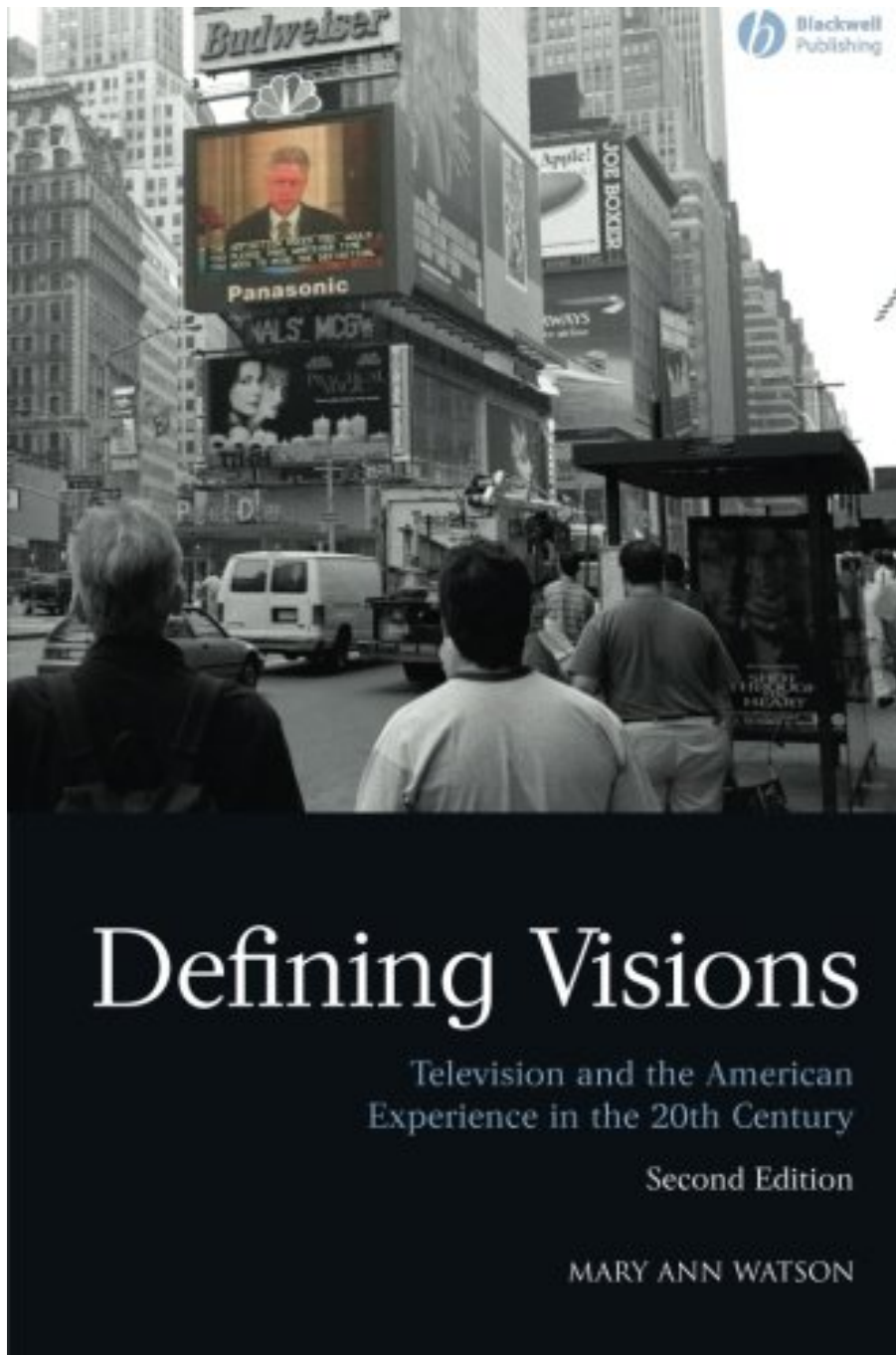


DEFINING VISIONS: TELEVISION AND THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE 20TH CENTURY BY MARY ANN WATSON



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About the Author

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-
- Sales Rank: #1420091 in Books
 - Brand: Brand: Wiley-Blackwell
 - Published on: 2008-01-29
 - Released on: 2008-01-21
 - Original language: English
 - Number of items: 1
 - Dimensions: 9.02" h x .72" w x 6.02" l, 1.06 pounds
 - Binding: Paperback
 - 310 pages

Features

- Used Book in Good Condition

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Most helpful customer reviews

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Very informed and thought-provoking book

By Battleship

This was a very thought-provoking book. The author does an effective job of showing the powerful impact television has had since its inception until the late 1990's. The book is a little dated, but it is a rich resource as it covers many influential shows throughout history.

Watson reveals how television has shaped public opinion in its portrayal of minorities, women, and people with disabilities. It was very interesting to me to note that there have always been special interest groups that have had a powerful impact on influencing how certain groups of people are portrayed on television shows. Womens groups have spent a lot of time and effort to lobby television producers to remove sexist materials from production. Certain professions, like medical practitioners, have had a lot of input on how the profession is represented.

Watson's ideology is apparent in this book. She favors attempts to censor television shows that are vulgar or demeaning to groups of people. She is very critical of the level of violence and sexual exploitation present in shows. She had positive things to say about Newton Minow, a censor of the Kennedy years. She blames a lot of the present trends in television on Reagan-era deregulation. This viewpoint may not appeal to some readers.

I liked the book, because it revealed the major controversies in television history, such as Dan Quayle's controversial comments about "Murphy Brown." She wrote about the changes in viewpoints over the years, such as disabled groups turning against Jerry Lewis by pointing out that the annual telethons were considered paternalistic and insulting to many Americans with disabilities.

I certainly did not agree with all of Watson's conclusions. For example, she is critical of the "Cosby Show." Rather than praise a stable and successful African-American family, she takes issue with the show for not putting enough emphasis on the fact that the minority group has not "arrived" and several reforms need to be taken to ensure that the demographic reaches full equality.

This is an excellent book and very informative. The author did her research and made lots of good points. Not everyone will agree with all of her conclusions. One weakness of the book is that she feels that television has had a strong impact on the culture, but she doesn't place much emphasis on the view that television may also reflect the changing values of society.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Useless and boring relic from the Professional Scold school of academic criticism

By Rac A. Powsky

Television has gone through a renaissance lately. There are more quality shows with interesting plots and fascinating characters than ever before. From HBO shows to comedies to historical shows on AMC there are dozens of amazing shows that prove television's potential as a medium capable of greatness. Of course, like the Globe Theater in the time of Shakespeare, the taint of past transgressions hangs heavy. Few of Shakespeare's contemporaries could see him as a genius because his plays were considered common fare for the commoners. For hundreds of years, his plays were condemned as being too violent, too silly, too chaotic to be quality. It took the Romantics to revive Shakespeare.

Mary Ann Watson is the same kind of professional scold that would have condemned theater 500 years ago for much of the same reasons. She would have ignored everything about Hamlet except for the bloody ending. Christopher Marlowe would have had some praise for his sympathetic portrayal of Edward II but the violent ending would have been a reinforcement of homophobia.

Throughout this dull little trifle, Watson can't stop herself from adding her personal bias into the mix. Frequently she talks about television reaching a "new low" and "leaving its morality at the door" and the like. She condemns 80s and 90s comedies for depicting sex without consequences especially in the era of AIDS (ignoring the fact that AIDS never really affected the kind of heterosexual characters in these shows), traditional families and violence. Seinfeld gets a couple of pages in contrast to "positive" religious and spiritual shows like the saccharine Highway to Heaven and the so-bland-it's-excrutiating Touched by an Angel. The Simpsons is condemned as a show where a traditional family is depicted without comment (forget about the popular culture jokes throughout) and Friends is simply a lot of oversexed too young people who drink a lot. And Twin Peaks is the aforementioned "new moral low" because forget about the non-traditional story telling or the purposeful attack on conventions or the dancing midget dream sequences; the only thing Watson cares about is the violence.

And to make matters worse, she can't stop repeating the same lie about those "numerous studies" concerning the "casual relationship between television violence and real life violence" and as usual, she uses the same tired anecdotes about the murderers who really liked Kojack. If this was an anti-porn book, she'd bring up Ted Bundy's final speech blaming pornography for his serial killer career.

In other words, this is a terrible little book that academics love because it seems profound when it's just another condemnation of popular culture. The reason why critics like Chuck Klosterman and Nathan Rabin (and the AV Club) are so popular is because they approach television not as a mindless entertainment or a condemnation worthy straw man to beat on, but as an artistic medium that should be approached with the academic rigor as books or plays.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A textbook I will keep

By GD Esquire

I usually sell textbooks back at the end of each semester however, I really enjoyed this book. I may order another copy for a friend who is writing a curriculum for his HS students.

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