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Media, imagination and representation – Time to move beyond the 'Holy Trinity'? Television and the Moral Imaginary: Society Through the Small Screen and Media, Representation and the Global Imagination

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Tim Dant

Television and the Moral Imaginary: Society Through the Small Screen, Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2012

Shani Orgad

Media, Representation and the Global Imagination, Polity: Cambridge, 2012

Reviewed by: Michael Skey, *University of East Anglia, UK*

The ways in which media frame existing and possible social worlds, and thereby contribute to moral debates, has been the subject of renewed interest in the social sciences over the past decade. Often tied to the increasingly global circulation of texts, images and ideas, much of the focus has been on the ability of media to represent the ‘other’ in ways that generate understanding and empathy, rather than fear and distrust. The two books under discussion, Tim Dant’s *Television and the Moral Imaginary* and Shani Orgad’s *Media, Representation and the Global Imagination* come at the broader topic from very different angles, but are also more or less interested in how media shape understandings of self and other in an increasingly complex social environment. In reviewing these titles, I want to make some wider points about how the link between media and imagination has been conceptualised and grounded and to contrast some of these efforts with recent work that has called for a move beyond representational theories and, indeed, media-centric theories of media (Couldry, 2012; Moores, 2012; Pink and Mackley, 2013).

In *Television and the Moral Imaginary*, Tim Dant’s basic argument is that ‘television has become the prime medium for sharing morality and dispersing the mores, the general ways of being and acting throughout a culture’ (p. 2). In contrast to much popular debate around television as a source of moral decline, Dant is also keen to emphasise the continuing importance of television in showing ‘the moral consequences of human behaviour’ (Dant, p. 40) and allowing viewers ‘the autonomy to bring their own moral judgement to bear on a wide variety of situations’ (p. 71). In making his case, Dant draws on an impressive range of theoretical perspectives. To this end, the book offers a useful overview of how general philosophical debates around virtue, duty and fairness, can be applied to television (Chapter 1), the importance of everyday (media) rituals and events in underpinning a wider moral order (Chapter 2), how television, through its everyday rhythms, structures and debates, acts as an agent of socialisation (Chapter 6),

and contributes to the articulation of different moral frameworks (objectivity, harm, panics, distant suffering and witnessing) (Chapter 7).

Of particular note are the discussions (in Chapter 4) of 'televisuality', which provide a thoughtful analysis of the changing aesthetics of television and, in particular, the link between post-modern cultural forms and moral ambiguity (Dant, p. 84). The following chapter on the 'phenomenology of television' is also impressive, examining 'the processes by which viewers give their attention to moving images on the small screen and make sense of what they see' (Dant, p. 94). Using insights from the work of Schutz, Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and others, Dant argues that viewers engage with the flow of televisual images as a distinct, although familiar, 'province of meaning', rather than as a code to be deciphered or read (Dant, p. 107). This emphasis on people's everyday engagements with television as part of their wider 'lifeworld' (Schutz quoted in Dant, p. 113) stands, I think, as a useful corrective against the undue focus on representation in much analysis of the media (more of which below). It is just a shame that Dant does not draw on any empirical research to illustrate these televisual experiences. Indeed, there is a tendency throughout the book to illustrate particular points by making brief reference to this or that television programme, rather than any research on the topic. For instance, in Chapter 7, it is argued that 'interference from the state or from other major social institutions is the greatest threat to the moral diversity that the small screen contributes to the moral imaginary' (Dant, p. 153). This would seem to be a reasonable argument, and yet the discussion of state regulation covers four pages and uses complaints made by 500 British viewers about a late night comedy show on Channel 4 to make its case. There is no inherent problem with drawing from familiar social settings, but surely there are better examples from around the world that might be utilised to demonstrate conflicts over moral harm and offence in relation to television?

A second key weakness of the overall argument is the way in which television is discussed as a largely isolated medium in an era that has been profoundly transformed by the emergence of digital technologies. This means that while there are one or two limited nods to the Internet (as well as the aforementioned discussion of televisuality), there is very little on the fundamental changes that have shaped the contemporary media landscape. It is almost as if the book was written in 1999, rather than 2009, and this is what reduces the impact of some of its more interesting arguments. What of the fact that most households in Western countries now have multiple screens and/or devices for watching television? How have the rise of social media and the phenomenon of 'trans-media' influenced the way television is engaged with? What of the views of those who suggest that we are living in a post-television era (Katz and Scannell, 2009; Turner and Tay, 2009)? The answers to these types of question are rarely considered, never mind answered.

A final problem concerns the abstract nature of many of the debates and whether a book that addresses the topic in such a 'frustratingly unspecific' way (Dant, p. 215) can extend our understanding of the role of television in a complex media environment, rather than simply noting its importance 'as a medium to the form of late modern society' (Dant, p. 215). Nowhere is this exemplified more than in the use of the term 'society', which peppers the text but is rarely, if ever, defined. The following are illustrative examples: 'morality is tied up with the very thing that society is' (Dant, p. 69), 'television

extends ... and adds to the ways in which that people can connect with the moral orders of their society' (Dant, p. 71), 'television reflects society and extends it' (Dant, p. 119), 'the maintenance of a moral order that is characteristic of society' (Dant, p. 181) and 'how we share it [the realm of the imaginary] helps to shape our society and make it what it is' (Dant, p. 211).

There are, at least, two problems with using the term society (or, indeed, culture), in this way. First, it becomes an all-encompassing and largely meaningless concept unless we are told who or what is being referred to in each particular case. Second, there is a risk of putting forward the idea of society as a 'self-sufficient, self-adjusting entity' (Couldry, 2006: 17) where all members share, more or less, the same values. This is a curious oversight given that Dant continually points to television's dual role in underpinning existing forms of social solidarity (Dant, p. 59) and holding up to scrutiny established meanings and values through the evaluation of competing lifestyles (Dant, p. 57).

Attending to the tensions television creates in both sustaining and disrupting different social formations is absolutely fundamental. However, in order to carry out such a task, it is first necessary to identify their parameters, preferably by drawing on empirical research, and, then, to think critically about how they intersect and the types of people and institutions they are tied to. There is a further, more specific point to make in relation to this book and that concerns the argument (in the back page blurb) that the current 'flow of dynamic imagery ... can help sustain a society that has long out-grown the nation state' (see also Dant, p. 210). This has been a fairly popular view in recent analyses of media globalisation and, yet, it seems particularly difficult to justify in this case. First, there is very little empirical evidence presented which details the kinds of 'society' that might be replacing the nation state and that might be sustained by such 'dynamic imagery'. Instead, we get more general statements such as 'the moral imaginary is shared across many parts of the world' (Dant, p. 210), which add very little. Second, this claim is also undermined by the large number of rather parochial examples drawn from the British context, not least the snapshot of 'an evening in' watching television (Dant, pp. 11–20), which, if anything, points to the continuing relevance of the nation state as a frame of reference!

Sites of imagination

If Dant's work acts as a useful primer, limited by its rather generalised approach and failure to adequately address the place of television in a digital era, then Shani Orgad's recent study, *Media, Representation and the Global Imagination* offers another possible way forward combining theoretical insights with a selection of fascinating empirical data, drawn from a range of media and social settings.

The opening chapter of Orgad's book aims to give 'a flavour of the richness of the field of media representations research and its plurality of approaches and perspectives' (Orgad, p. 33) and does an admirable job in summing up the main strands in an accessible manner. Having then highlighted weaknesses in current approaches (compartmentalisation, methodological nationalism, Western-centrism), it is then argued that the concept of imagination can be used to more effectively theorise (and critique) the power of media representations in a global context. I will say more about this below, but first, I

want to briefly discuss the empirical chapters, which focus on five different ‘sites of imagination’ (Orgad, p. 49): imagining of others (Chapter 2), ourselves as a nation (Chapter 3), possible lives (Chapter 4), the world (Chapter 5) and the self (Chapter 6). This is where the book makes its most significant contribution.

Chapter 2 provides a historical overview of how ‘others’ involved in natural disasters have been represented, moving from the 18th century (Lisbon earthquake) to much more recent examples (African famines of the 1980s and Haiti earthquake of 2010). The chapter offers some interesting thoughts around the agency of victims and witnesses, proximity and moral responsibility, and the comparative analyses were welcome, although much of the discussion felt pretty familiar.

The value of the following chapter is much more obvious. Using the example of the French urban riots in 2005, it shows how the increasingly global circulation of images and ideas provides alternative representations of nationhood and, at times, challenges established beliefs around what it means to be, in this case, French (Orgad, p. 85). Using the concepts of ‘symbolic distancing’ and ‘estrangement’, as well as noting how digital platforms offer an alternative ‘voice’ to marginal groups, Orgad shows these mediated debates can present ‘the nation as a stranger to itself’ (Orgad, p. 88), with varying results (Orgad, pp. 105–106). This is an engaging and timely analysis that tells us something insightful about the changing relationship between media and nation in a globalising era.

The next two chapters address representations of mobility and the global community, respectively. In Chapter 4, migration is portrayed as both a dream and nightmare for particular migrants and host society members through a range of media, blogs, video games and TV shows. The key argument is that such competing perspectives ‘have a potential to expand and open up the imagination, to allow and accept ambivalence, instability and uncertainty of meaning’ (Orgad, p. 132). Chapter 5 provides an interesting analysis of a series of mediated celebrations of the New Year, ranging from mainstream television channels to YouTube videos and is particularly effective in exploring not only a ‘generalised mode of belonging’ (Orgad, p. 141) in the way that some cities celebrate the event but also the ‘symbolic production of hierarchies between and among places’ (Orgad, p. 145).

The final empirical chapter, which looks at how media representations are used to construct narratives of the self (Orgad, p. 158), is perhaps the most impressive of all. Moving away from the interpretation of mainstream media texts, it explores the ways in which individuals producing their own media content reflect on their own identities and their (possible) relations with ‘others’ whether that be distant ‘others’ suffering in war-torn environments or those who form part of the same national ‘community’. It is a rich and thoughtful analysis and goes some way towards grounding the sometimes abstract arguments about the potential of media to ‘open up the imagination’ and the consequences of this.

There is much to commend in this work. Its recognition of a changing media landscape and laudable attempts to draw on a range of detailed empirical examples mean that it is able to address the competing ways in which media frame relations between individuals and social groups. Moving beyond simple dichotomies (national/global, us/them) it expertly traces the ‘symbolic production of difference and otherness’ (Orgad, p. 48) in different settings, as well as the moral implications of these representations.

Notwithstanding this contribution, there is, I think, something more to be said about the limitations of placing so much emphasis on processes of imagination and representation, in theorising the role of media, and this will be the subject of final part of this review article.

Imagination and social imaginaries

The link between media and imagination has been big business for some time in studies of media and communication. Primarily, inspired by Anderson's (1991) seminal work on 'imagined communities', the concept has been reinvigorated by scholars such as Appadurai (1996) in relation to processes of globalisation. In assessing the utility of this approach, there are two points I want to make. The first relates to how the term is defined and applied, the second extends a criticism that Anthony Smith (1998) directed at Anderson's work almost two decades ago.

According to my dictionary, imagination is 'the faculty or action of producing mental images of what is not present or has not been experienced' (*Collins English Dictionary*, p. 421). Imagination involves moving beyond, it is 'the capacity to see in a thing what is not, to see it other than it is' (Orgad, p. 45). Using this definition, then, it seems perfectly clear that we are able to explore media's role in firing the imagination, in enabling people to reflect on their own values, traditions and habits and, perhaps, put themselves in the position of others.

The problem, however, comes when too much is left to the imagination! For instance, Orgad argues that the 'imagination is both factual and normative, referring to both meaningful real actions and the fantastical' (emphasis in original, p. 45), which draws directly on the work of Charles Taylor (2002: 106). However, while Taylor does mention processes of imagination (thereby demonstrating his debt to Anderson), what he is actually discussing is the much broader concept of the social imaginary and they are not the same thing. The social imaginary refers to the 'common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy' (Taylor, 2002: 106). It is this key relation between understandings and practices that allow us to 'speak of the repertory of collective actions' that people 'know how to undertake, all the way from the general election ... to how to strike up a polite conversation' (Taylor, 2002: 107). Finally, 'this understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go' (Taylor, 2002: 106). Notice, here, that the emphasis is much more on what people do as a matter of course, not what they reflect on. In other words, the social imaginary cannot simply be tied to processes of imagination because it is mainly underpinned by taken-for-granted norms, values and habits that are routinely implicated, not to mention successful, in organising everyday activities.

As well as drawing a distinction between imagination and the imaginary, I also want to suggest that the term 'imagination' is actually reserved for those moments or periods when we 'go beyond' or consider how things *might* or *should* be. It is worth noting that Orgad distinguishes her approach from those who utilise ideology and discourse, which are seen to privilege '*existing* frames for thinking and talking about the world' (p. 49). Whether you agree with this or not will largely depend on how you define these terms,

but what does seem problematic is the argument that the concept of the 'imagination' can be expanded to also make sense of 'how things usually go' (Orgad, p. 46).

Put simply, we need a different conceptual language to distinguish, and draw attention to, those practices that are habitual, routine, taken-for-granted, everyday and unexceptional, that do very little in terms of stimulating the imagination or causing people to reflect on their lives. This includes media-related practices that have no role to play in extending and challenging, but instead reconfirm and reiterate what is already known or taken for granted. Or to use Pink and Mackley's (2013) terms, 'how media are situated as part of the routine, habitual, normally unspoken sensitivities of everyday life' (p. 678).

This emphasis on unreflexive habits takes us rather neatly into the second point I want to make, which points to the ways in which solidarity and community are theorised and draws on Anthony Smith's (1998) critique of Benedict Anderson. Smith's (1998) argument was that nations, as a particular form of community, are lived, embodied, heard, viewed, represented, 'deeply felt and acted out' (p. 137), rather than simply imagined. It is interesting to note that Anderson (1991) almost acknowledges as much when he discusses the importance of the daily ritual of reading the newspaper. He writes, 'the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday day' (Anderson, 1991: 35–36). But do people really carry around the image of a community 'in the lair of the skull' (Anderson, 1991: 35) that must be activated on a regular basis? Recent empirical evidence suggests not (Skey, 2011: 37). Surely, what this example demonstrates is the importance of 'shared' practices that recreate a particular view of the world in often *unimaginative* ways? In other words, a sense of community, belonging or solidarity, whether mediated or otherwise, is primarily generated by actions rather than thoughts and that to place an undue emphasis on the latter is also deeply problematic.

Now, adopting such an approach does, of course, mean accounting for 'the work of media representations and the meanings that they produce across technologies, genres, contexts, discourses, modes of address and forms' (Orgad, p. 38). But just as focusing on imagination as an organising concept is fraught with difficulties, so is any undue emphasis on representation and this will be the subject of the final section.

Beyond representation

The link between imagination and representation has a long research history in media studies. It has generally been studied through the close examination of the message of a given text and how it looks to position its audience. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong in carrying out such analysis, this type of study often misses out on what seems to be the most interesting aspect of the mediation process, people! And this is not just the standard argument, which Orgad also raises (p. 35), about audience studies being the 'royal road' compared to other approaches. Indeed, given Orgad's interest in people's use of a wide range of symbolic resources to make sense of and tell stories about their own and others' lives, I am surprised she does not pay more attention to more recent approaches that move beyond the producer/text/audience model. This would include the work of Tim Dant, who as we saw earlier suggested that television is better theorised as one 'province

of meaning that draws on, but is distinct from ... everyday life' (Dant, p. 107), rather than as a series of texts to be decoded.

I would like to pursue this argument a little further with reference to a specific example, which comes from Orgad's book. In this instance, she is examining changing representations of natural disasters and, in particular, the charity song produced to raise money for the starving in Africa during the 1980s. She writes,

We are the world consigns to its audience the task of imagination – constructing pictures in their heads ... Thus the song calls its audience to imagine the distant sufferers on the basis of its intertextual relations with other texts and images, primarily the devastating images of distant suffering. (Orgad, p. 65)

Again, I am not suggesting that such analyses are not important but that the focus on the text leaves out a whole host of interesting questions around how this song was (or even, might have been) received, debated, ignored, criticised or incorporated into eventful or everyday activities. For instance, it conjures up a rather sterile process whereby the text is first deciphered and then causes individuals to reflect on its meaning in a coherent and thoughtful manner. But is this really how people listen to pop records, even those made for a good cause? Put simply, it overlooks the actual contexts in which such 'texts' are engaged with, which surely do not always involve such a careful and considered interpretation.

At the risk of painting myself as an inconsiderate boor, let me give you an example. I used to know all the lyrics to Band Aid's 'Do They Know Its Christmas', another charity record aimed at highlighting the plight of starving Africans in the 1980s. While, however, the horrific images of suffering on the news, *at the time, may* have caused me to reflect on my fortunate position vis-a-vis the people of Ethiopia, the song itself has had a very different meaning in my life. First and foremost, it was a catchy tune with some memorable lyrics, but what I remember most about the record from my childhood is trying to do impersonations of the various participants, including those who were featured *on the B-side* offering supportive messages. Subsequently, as I got older, I sang it from time to time with friends, generally while staggering home from the pub at Christmas. Today, I simply view the song in much the same way as all the other 'novelty' records that are wheeled out at Christmas and played, on a loop, in every shop and public place. This is not to suggest that such songs have the same meaning for everyone or that many were not moved by the song and the images and reporting that accompanied it. However, if we only focus on the text and the processes of imagination it is *presumed* to inculcate, then we miss out on all the other interesting things that people do, and did, in relation to this 'text' and, in this case, its changing place in the lives of those who grew up in Britain in the 1980s.

Indeed, this seems to be quite a good example of what James Carey is talking about when he discusses transmission and ritual models of communication. The first is linked to 'the transmission of signals or messages over distance' (Carey, 1989: 15), while the second focuses on the ways in which communication enables people to orientate themselves to other people and wider social institutions. Carey uses the example of carefully watching the news for information, versus watching the news as a nightly ritual where

almost no knowledge is gained. Whereas the transmission model is about texts and their power ('constructing pictures in their heads' to borrow Orgad's phrase), the ritual model requires that we think carefully about people's everyday practices; how and why they engage with different media platforms, products and groups; and how these mediated activities shape or inform others.

This interest in the ritual activities of people in relation to media has been articulated by a number of scholars (Couldry, 2012; Pink and Mackley, 2013), but in this final discussion, I would like to make particular reference to the work of Shaun Moores. Moores' (2012) most recent work, *Media, Place & Mobility*, draws on a range of insights from geography and anthropology to argue for a non-media-centric approach to the study of media. This approach acknowledges both the importance of media in the contemporary era and the specific features of media when compared with other practical objects or social activities. However, it has a primary interest in studying the ways in which media are implicated in people's everyday lives and 'bound up with wider institutional, technological and political processes in the modern world' (Moores, 2012: 108). Therefore, rather than starting with media and, in particular, media texts, we should instead refocus on 'what people are doing in relation to media' (Couldry, 2012: 43) and, in particular, their 'practical, embodied and sensuous involvements' with different platforms, products and publics (Moores, 2012: 109).

These practices may, of course, involve active processes of imagination that are orientated towards distant 'others' and seek to understand or ameliorate social suffering. At the same time, they may also involve nothing more than a desire to slump in front of a screen and watch something familiar while sending texts about nothing much in particular. The latter activities may be unimaginative but that doesn't mean they are not important. More should perhaps be made of the media's role in providing relatively stable frameworks of meaning and practice that can be unthinkingly relied upon, whether it be a familiar soap or voice on the radio, a weekly trip to the cinema or an online status update. Moreover, it is my contention that these features are also significant in informing 'how we come to see, think of and feel about the world, and our place and relations with others in the world' (Orgad, p. 3). This means that such features should not only be viewed as practices with moral implications but also may be particularly important in underpinning a given moral order.

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Dafna Lemish (ed.)

The Routledge International Handbook of Children, Adolescents and Media, Routledge: Oxon and New York, 2013; 528 pp.: £125.00

Reviewed by: Vera Slavtcheva-Petkova, *University of Chester, UK*

To my mother, Chaya Barkai (Mishkov), who once insisted on pulling me away from my desk on the eve of a major exam because ‘there is this great nature documentary on TV. You can learn so much from it too!’ ... Thus, it is fair to say that it is from her that I learned first-hand about the role of media in children’s lives – as well as about her abiding faith in my abilities to study and write about it (or anything else) – if I only want to. (p. v)

Professor Dafna Lemish’s opening dedication to her mother is a telling start of an ambitious collection of essays exploring the relationship between children, adolescents and the media. Telling, because it reveals the editor’s views by clearly placing children at the centre of the relationship rather than viewing them as ‘dupes’ and ‘passive victims’. We should acknowledge from the onset that the handbook itself carefully treads through a minefield. Studies on children as audiences are not only a ‘microcosm of media studies’ (p. 1), but they have also given rise to contention and controversy in the field – often ridden by scholarly arguments between researchers investigating media’s (harmful) ‘effects’ on children, including through controversial experiments, and others who believe that children are ‘active audiences’ able to interpret, decipher and be empowered by media content and messages.

This handbook is indeed ‘a huge undertaking’ (p. xiii) featuring 57 contributions from 72 academics from 38 countries with the aim of creating ‘a shared scholarly arena’ (p. 5) by spanning across a variety of disciplines such as developmental psychology, media studies, public health, education, feminist studies and the sociology of childhood. In reality, however, it does not really span that widely because it is dominated by media studies.

The handbook is divided into five main parts – childhoods and constructions, channels and convergence, concerns and consequences, contexts and communities and collaborations and companions. I will summarize below the main focus of each part, and I will discuss in more detail a few chapters that I found particularly useful and insightful.

The first part ‘sets the stage’ (p. 9) by presenting a variety of disciplinary approaches. Some of the leading scholars in the field such as Kirsten Drotner, David Buckingham