Chris Barker's book introduces a postmodernist and cultural studies approach to media studies for "undergraduate and postgraduate courses". Writing introductory material in an accessible language without sacrificing the complexity of argument is a major challenge because the author is pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, he has to satisfy students who find it difficult to digest abstract ideas. On the other hand, he has to accommodate scholars who are often skeptical about the superficial tendency of textbook content characterized by an assemblage of abbreviated theoretical shopping. This review discusses the extent to which Barker has succeeded in meeting the challenge of satisfying the two demands.

Barker's main thesis is that cultural identities are not fixed or single entities. They are fragmented, contradictory, and socially constructed in the process of becoming themselves. Barker takes up his position within the postmodernist camp and argues against the inwardness of identities and the existence of a "true self" outside the social, since identities are constructed along the axes of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, etc. Identities shift depending on how an agent is socially positioned in a specific context. "Identities are wholly social constructions" (p.169) and agency has to do with "the socially constructed capacity to act" (p.143). Furthermore, the representation of social practices in language is constitutive of identities.

Television, his main example, is a proliferated source of the identity project understood through the lens of the Foucauldian triad of knowledge, power and discourse. Television programs broadcast across geographical boundaries and greatly contribute to the making of rich and complex hybrid and diaspora identities. By discussing the pros and cons of television as an agent of globalization, he claims the medium cannot be simply dismissed as a facilitator of American/western cultural imperialism. American product can be a crucial object of study in itself whether or not one argues it is a facilitator of cultural imperialism. First, television is not only a site of framing various stereotypes through stabilizing dominant ideology, but a competing ground for different political and cultural meanings behind seemingly neutral and objective programming under the banner of realism. Second, given the findings of reception studies that emphasize the active negotiation process between audiences and television content, audiences should not be treated as 'cultural dopes'. Finally, Barker argues for the necessity of the cultural politics of identity and especially for its "redescription and the development of 'new languages' along with the building of temporary strategic coalitions of people who share at least some values" (p.166). In other words, despite his firm anti-essentialist position, Barker does recognize how essentialism is mobilized as a strategic move to form coalitions.

To support the above arguments, Barker provides several case studies on how ethnic, national or gender identities are constructed by television. For instance, in Chapter 3, Barker examines popular American or British television shows, such as The Cosby Show, East Enders and I'll fly away with a conclusion that there is still an obvious range of racist stereotypes. Nevertheless, he also argues that television, as a site of cultural struggle, provides more ambiguous and ambivalent representations of people of colour in one way or another. In Chapter 4, Barker uses the same analytical strategy to scrutinize images of women in television. Whether women are ideally portrayed as the slender body, the independent mother, the Hollywood wife or the more ambiguous role of cultural offender/emancipator (Madonna) - the representation of femininity is globally constructed as subordination. He emphasizes that gender identity is more a matter of social rather than biological difference. Chapter 5 is thematically developed by an account of how young girls discuss specific characters in an English soap opera- EastEnders. Stories and contexts are developed with reference to South-East Asian and Afro-Carribean diaspora. Through analyzing discussions of the characters portrayed, Barker not only exemplifies audiences as active creators of meaning, but also singles out the significance of morality in weaving identities. Although it is arguable whether we can simply treat morality as "a set of imposed rules and prohibitions" or ethics as simply "the care of the self" (p.132), Barker does not undervalue moral fabric in weaving identities, nor does he underestimate morality as the building block of communication.

One disadvantage that is inevitable regarding books that draw on examples from popular culture is that they quickly loose currency amongst students. Except for the discussion of The Simpsons, most of the American or British examples concern programs that are out of date. Miami Vice, Dallas, The Cosby Show or even Madonna were popular among young adults in the 80s, but not among students who currently engage themselves with Friends, The Weakest Link or ER. This creates a certain gap between the reading material and students' everyday television knowledge.

Barker breaks down each topic into several sections of discussion to indicate each dimension of multiple-layered conceptual fields. This thematic organization of his argument is particularly beneficial for students to follow the direction and transition of arguments, as students often get lost in the ramifications of theoretical development. Furthermore, Barker's illustration of the complexity of hybrid or diaspora identity through decoding television messages is a recursive theme across the book, and provides rich and
Barker stands a bit too firm on the anti-essentialist argument with recurring statements like "we do not have an identity, rather we are a fractured self made up of a multiple weave of attitudes and beliefs" (p. 169). Nonetheless, for teaching purposes, a strong and provocative statement often stimulates class discussion and generates heated debates. In addition, there are obvious advantages to advocate anti-essentialism in that it avoids the stagnation of discourse and challenges the formation of stereotypes, while it also recognizes differences as sources of empowerment, instead of hegemonic stratification. On the other hand, it can be very confusing when one reads statements like "agency is the socially determined capability to act and make a difference" (172). Does it imply that identities are assemblages of social categories of each individual? Does it suggest that the duality of agency and structure is discarded or that the pendulum between agency and structure ultimately swings back to the latter? Can it be simply translated into something like: an individual is not only socially positioned but also determined? Do cultural identities refer to collective social groups or personal identities? How might the author respond to the student or the scholar who argues a person's identity is actively constructed from within the agency of one's own self? To close the above theoretical loophole, the author can place a stronger emphasis on subjectivity as the production of intersubjectivity (p. 31). That is, the identity project goes hand in hand with recognition of the other. To quote Iris M. Young, "[a] person's identity is not some sum of her gender, racial, class, and national affinities. She is only her identity, which she herself has made by the way that she deals with and acts in relation to others social group positions, among other things."

(Young; 2000, 102).

Yon Hsu
Concordia University

References