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Media Culture and Identity Formation in the Light of Postmodern Invisible Socialization: From Modernity to Postmodernity

Abstract

This article investigates shifts that have occurred in recent years within the symbolic universe of television. The point of departure here is that these shifts must be related to a changing conception of the way in which the media fulfill their socializing and identity-formation function. In this article these shifts are situated in the broader context of the changes that have occurred on the socio-economic level and on the level of the socialization system. These changes – from modernity to postmodernity – explain what is happening in media culture.

Philip Schlesinger's (1991: 137) argument that the theme of collective identity "is certain to become increasingly central in the human sciences" actually implies that something that previously seems to have been experienced as unproblematical, namely (collective) identity, will be considered less and less self-evident in the future. Indeed, it does now appear to be that people find their identity less than previously in the traditionally pregiven categories and structures and in ascribed characteristics. "So, class, gender and ethnicity," according to Crook *et al.* (1992: 35), "decline in social significance and so also do some of their characteristic forms of expression." Instead, it is held, people are constituting more and more their identity on the basis of their active consumption of products offered to them by the leisure, media, and consumer good industries (see, for example, Willis, 1990; Featherstone, 1991a; Crook *et al.*, 1992; Friedman, 1992). As is known, these industries are increasingly transnational, offering their products to a global public.

These two movements – the reduction in relevance of the old forms of bonding and solidarity, on the one hand, and, on the other, the finding of one's identity in the consumption of what is offered to a global market – are, of course, linked to each other and have given rise to two opposing points of view. The supporters of the 'cultural-imperialism' thesis point out that this