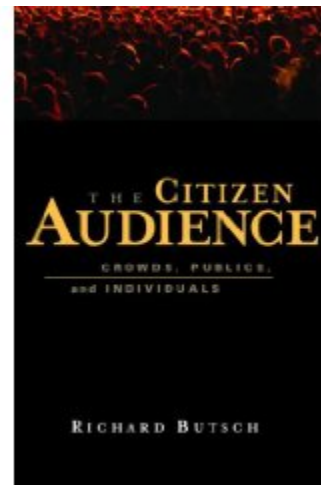


Richard Butsch, **The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals**, New York: Routledge, 2007, 200 pp., \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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We are very fortunate that Richard Butsch, a solid empirical researcher, has turned his gaze to media culture. He is the author of the only really good survey I've read of Gringo audiences (Butsch, 2000). A generous cross-media study, it is literate about the determinations of time and place, and does not rely on either the test-tube fantasies of quantoids enacted on the bodies of a 1,000 undergraduate students captive at "a large university in the Mid-west" or the narcissography of quantoids based on their own experiences and that of their friends'. That book justly won both the American Culture Association's Cawelti Prize and the International Communication Association's (ICA) Best Book Award.



I'm especially pleased about the latter because when I served on the ICA's Best Book Award committee it was impossible to get engaged scholarship valued by contrast with normal-science Yanqui conservatism. Sorry for being indiscreet. Maybe Butsch could get away with it because of his credentials — trained as an engineer, then as a social psychologist. Whatever the reason, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990* is justly renowned. It's wonderfully written, brilliantly researched, and utterly illuminating.

So it is in that context of admiration that I must report a slight disappointment in my reading of Professor Butsch's latest volume, *The Citizen Audience: Crowds, Publics, and Individuals* (2007). It is a rather slighter, shorter volume using, I think, less original research, and perhaps re-traversing some ground from his prize-winning work.

The new book covers the bases: the 19th century terror of the crowd in the discussion of audiences; the bizarreness of the Payne Fund studies into cinema; the mass comm panics; the so-called new world of the Internet; and so on. Butsch is again right to draw our attention to how quantoids reinvent old studies and rehearse old reactionary anxieties. It's an older story even than he suggests. The emergence of private, silent reading in the ninth century, which ended religion's monopoly on textuality, was criticized as an invitation to idleness. In the 12th century, John of Salisbury warned of the negative impact of juggling, mime, and acting on unoccupied minds. As printed books began to proliferate in the early 18th century, critics feared a return to the disorder of the post-Roman Empire. Erudition would be overwhelmed by popular texts, just as it had been by war. When Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

came out in 1774, its suiciding hero was deemed to have caused numerous mimetic suicides among readers, and the book was banned in many cities.

Sound familiar? Check your latest issue of *Human Communication Research* before you deposit it (without the plastic packaging broken) in your recycling *dispositif*. By the early 20th century, academic experts had decreed media audiences to be passive consumers, thanks to the missions of literary criticism (distinguishing the cultivated from others) and the psy-function (distinguishing the competent from others). The origins of social psychology can be traced to anxieties about “the crowd” in suddenly urbanized and educated countries that raised the prospect of a long-feared ochlocracy able to share popular texts.

James Truslow Adams, the Latino founder of the “American Dream,” saw “[t]he mob mentality of the city crowd” as “one of the menaces to modern civilization.” He was especially exercised by “the prostitution of the moving-picture industry” (1941, pp. 404 - 413). With civil society growing restive, the wealth of radical civic associations was explained away in social-psychological terms rather than political-economic ones. The psy-function warmed itself by campus fires in departments of Psychology, Sociology, and Education. Scholars at Harvard took charge of the theory; faculty at Chicago the task of meeting and greeting the great unwashed; and those at Columbia the statistical manipulation. This is well covered by Butsch.

But I’m saddened that his review of the literature on media citizenship doesn’t really address decades of hard work by radical Media Studies intellectuals writing on citizenship and audiences, many about the U.S. and many from other places. It takes just five minutes to think of such names as Rosalia Winocur, Néstor García-Canclini, John Hartley, Renato Rosaldo, George Yúdice, Andrew Ross, Stuart Cunningham, Arvind Rajagopal, Herman Gray, Joke Hermes, Dave Andrews, Laurie Ouellette, Justin Lewis, Sarah Banet-Weiser, Jeffrey Jones, Armand Mattelart — you name it! Most of them may as well not have written a word for all the effect they have had on Richard Butsch, as far as I can see. Because I’ve looked into citizenship and the media quite a bit, I have these names at my fingertips — but those fingertips tap into the same search engines that are available to Professor Butsch. Next time, I hope he is as capacious with his account of citizenship and media audiences as he has been with his stellar history of U.S. spectatorship.

References

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