

# The People's Media Critique

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Charles R. Acland. *Swift Viewing: The Popular Life of Subliminal Influence*. Duke University Press, 2011. 307 pp.

There is a good chance that those who have taught cultural or media theory will have, at some time or another, come up against the popular persistence of subliminal messaging: a belief that mass media can convey potentially powerful secret messages below the level of sensory perception. As Charles Acland notes in *Swift Viewing*, “on an anecdotal and personal level, teachers of media and culture studies know that the idea of subliminal influences enjoys popularity among students, a popularity that curiously exists side by side with the view that the media have little or no impact upon an individual’s thinking” (18). Such ideas often prove frustratingly stubborn, operating as a form of background interference against which all subsequent attempts to explain ideology, mythology, discourse and connotation will be measured, assessed and potentially dismissed. It is therefore tempting to consider the subliminal simply a form of contemporary superstition for the mass media age: a mystifying belief to be revealed, reviled and disproven. *Swift Viewing*, however, takes up the question of the subliminal in a more generous and ultimately more rewarding manner. Rather than take a stand against the subliminal, Acland instead seeks to understand its tenacious long-term appeal and the fears and desires it continues to incite, despite extensive, repeated and ostensibly successful attempts to debunk the notion. Ultimately arguing for an understanding of the subliminal thesis as a “vernacular cultural critique, that is, a popular and common language of interpretation and analysis” (33), Acland charts the historical manifestations of subliminality as a form of lay analysis that has both shaped and motivated conceptions of mass media as a site of affect, domination, consumerism and epistemological assertion outside of the academy. Tracing the history of the subliminal from nineteenth-century notions of the unconscious, the subconscious and hypnotism through rapid learning machines and advertising scares of the mid-twentieth century to Al Gore’s accusation of subliminal messaging by the 2000 Bush Presidential campaign, *Swift Viewing* uncovers a hidden history of media critique that bears much in common with contemporary calls for “media literacy” (27) and speaks to a variation on Antonio Gramsci’s argument that not only are we all intellectuals, “we are [also] all media critics, though only a few of us are paid as such” (31).

Taking its lead from popular conceptions of the subliminal thesis, *Swift Viewing* is more concerned with tracing the understandings and implications of its everyday usage than with imposing any etymologically-informed 'correct' definition of the subliminal thesis. Suggesting that "much of what is characterised as subliminal is not subliminal in the strictest meaning of the term," Acland embraces the variation "in popular usage [where] the term refers to the unknown, the imperceptible, the almost imperceptible, the subtle, the quick, the backgrounded, or simply the connotative" (25). Drawing together these multiple interpretations, Acland's central argument is thus that the subliminal acts as a "command metaphor" of mass media society: "the frontline of an elaborate apparatus of discourse – talk and expression – that produces understandings of the world and through which decisions are taken and institutional initiatives launched" (29). Understood in this way, the subliminal operates across a broad swathe of cultural texts – including situation comedies, lawsuits, newspaper editorials and scholarly studies – as a core expression for shaping attention and public understanding of the role of mass media. Accordingly, the subliminal means different things at different points in *Swift Viewing*, something that certainly makes sense within the bounds of Acland's conceptual framework, but which can also lead to momentary feelings of disjointedness, as an account of 1950 critiques of consumerism gives way to a consideration of Marshall McLuhan's interventions in US education policy. In these shifting contexts, *Swift Viewing* appears alternately as a genealogy of mid-century pseudo-science, a critical account of popular resistance to advertising, a material analysis of pre-computer learning technologies, and an aesthetic analysis of avant-garde film techniques such as "flicker." That these diverse perspectives hang together is testament to the persuasive construction and execution of Acland's argument, even if at times the reader might struggle to retrace the mental steps by which discussions of the 1958 horror film *My World Dies Screaming* prefigured the introduction of overhead projectors into American classrooms or to align a detailed history of the tachistoscope with the wider project.

The scale of *Swift Viewing* is evident in the book's broad historical sweep which unfolds with the fluidity and accessibility of a popular history, but without sacrificing theoretical and critical rigour. From the very beginning – with the prologue's careful deconstruction of the public panic that greeted Orson Wells's 1938 *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast as a foundational moment (and potentially the first methodological failure) of the scholarly study of mass media and media influence – Acland assembles a host of colourful figures, forgotten technologies and unlikely public debates as evidence for the subliminal thesis's role as the 'other,' unauthorised media critique. This is perhaps nowhere as evident as the second chapter, "Mind, Media and Remote Control," which weaves together nineteenth-century research into the unconscious and hypnosis, *fin de siècle* fear and contempt of crowds, and scientific approaches to telepathy and early radio broadcast technologies to describe the cultural conditions

out of which the subliminal thesis arose. Such an approach illustrates *Swift Viewing's* method of argument through montage, which proceeds through the assemblage of unlikely alliances, out of which emerge surprising, coherent insights regarding public perception of agency, autonomy and the ideological power of media.

*Swift Viewing* even has something of a central protagonist in the figure of James Vicary, who is introduced in the fourth chapter, "Mind-Probing Admen." A leading figure in early "motivational research," Vicary was the man behind the notorious experiment that introduced the concept of subliminal messaging to the world when New Jersey filmgoers were exposed to subliminal imperatives to "eat popcorn" and "drink Coca-Cola" (92). The experiment became something of an urban legend, and Acland carefully unpacks the various contradictory accounts of the event and the surrounding controversy: an especially treacherous task given Vicary's ongoing refusal to release the results of the test, or indeed of many other of his experiments into subliminal effects and advertising. Straddling a line between innovative researcher and conman, Vicary returns several times throughout *Swift Viewing*, whether he is peddling psychoanalytic methods in advertising, founding a firm, Subliminal Projection Company, to (unsuccessfully) market his technology, or attempting to mount the careful argument that subliminal advertising does work, though not so effectively as to be a form of brainwashing. Caught between skeptical advertising executives and fear-mongering politicians (Acland quotes Senator Charles Potter's vehement opposition to evil geniuses robotising the American public [126]), Vicary serves as a metonym for wider debates surrounding subliminal messaging and indeed advertising culture in general. However, *Swift Viewing* is far from a biography, and though Vicary is a constant presence in the discussions regarding the effects and ethics of subliminal messaging, Acland's focus is upon the wider cultural context and the terms of debate which shaped social ideas about media, consumerism and the democratic potential of mass culture. With an eye for the telling anecdote and the colourful textual illustration, Acland marshals a wide array of examples to demonstrate how the subliminal thesis expressed the worries of a liberal political establishment increasingly anxious about the influence of the consumerist media environment on the autonomy and rationality of its citizens. Fears that "advertisers [were] tampering with the unconscious for commercial purposes" (115) are presented alongside political denunciations of Soviet brainwashing, and an exhaustive and somewhat exhausting account of the wide range of mind-controlling super villains active in comic books of the mid-twentieth century to support Acland's argument that "here during the triumphal era of the end of ideology, was a powerful and popular understanding of, and debate about, false consciousness" (174). Indeed, Acland argues that representations and debates regarding subliminality not only expressed popular critique regarding media, but also served as a form of political theory by proxy: mapping out the key assumptions and desires of American politics in an age of increasing corporate media influence.

Subliminal messaging, then, is positioned in *Swift Viewing* as a key site at which public concerns regarding the affective and ideological effects of mass media are worked through and shaped. The ongoing circulation of the subliminal thesis thus speaks to an sustained interest in, and suspicion of, mass media – what Acland refers to as “a form of *practical consciousness about false consciousness*” (42). Framed in this manner, his critical project bears a similarity to both Ien Ang’s account of the “ideology of mass culture” in *Watching Dallas* – whereby viewers take up derivations of the mass culture critique in order to justify their own viewing choices – and Luc Boltanski’s “sociology of critique,” which seeks to acknowledge the critical capacity of all social actors to understand and interrogate their environment. Hovering in a sense between these two, Acland’s account of the subliminal thesis seeks to retrieve the ways in which media consumers are far from passive recipients of media messages, but instead articulate their own indirect critiques through the epistemological resources of everyday discourse. Expressed in terms of a popular prejudice against popular culture, the subliminal thesis serves as a means by which to indirectly convey public concerns about the role of mass media in a democratic society. Thus, in contrast to the image of the viewing public as slack-jawed couch potatoes who have historically figured as both the straw men and boogymen of media studies, Acland argues that persistent concern with subliminal effects reveals a popular suspicion of media that contains the seeds of a careful, critical media-reading practice – even if most other media audiences are thereby configured as hapless victims of false consciousness.

Perhaps the most immediately striking implication of this understanding of the subliminal thesis is not directly addressed in *Swift Viewing*, but emerges in the argument’s inverse: taking the subliminal thesis seriously as a form of ideology critique also implies the extent to which the sanctioned media and cultural critique of the academy shares much in common with popular concerns over the subliminal. As Acland notes, “there are still academically acceptable analyses that reiterate claims to reveal secret, hidden, but powerful meanings, especially found in some forms of structuralist ideological critique” (35), and though he does not return to this provocation in particular detail, it echoes nonetheless throughout the book. Indeed, throughout *Swift Viewing* there are moments when the subliminal critique appears worryingly familiar, such as with the advertising industry-approved notion of “third communication,” an “extra impression, attitude or opinion [that] sounds very much like a Barthesian definition of connotation” (151). The subliminal thesis here emerges as a variant of what Clare Birchall refers to as the “secret” of cultural theory: a family resemblance to potentially illegitimate bodies of knowledge or ways of knowing, such as the subliminal thesis, that have to be constantly disavowed in order to maintain disciplinary credibility. Perhaps this anxiety is the reason we are so quick to renounce students’ recourse to the subliminal thesis: the intellectual gates must be constantly guarded, lest a student, or worse, an unsympathetic critic, mistakes the subliminal thesis for ‘proper’ forms of

critique. The subliminal thesis of *Swift Viewing* speaks, then, to more than just a conspiracy-minded side note in media history, instead acting as an intervention into both the pedagogical and theoretical practice of cultural studies. Rather than attempting to undo popular understandings of mass media, Acland calls for a cultural theory that it is more “more respectful, efficient and advantageous pedagogically to take seriously whatever understandings are already at play” (32). At the heart of this approach is a demand for cultural studies to neither moralize, nor prescribe, but rather engage with popular accounts of the contemporary media world on their own terms. *Swift Viewing* refuses the theoretician’s claim to a monopoly on “the everyday lived nature of cultural life, which cannot be reduced to brute economic explanations nor textualist acrobatics” (33), insisting instead on a need to respect the critical value of the nuances, dead-ends, insights and assumptions of the people’s own media critique.

### Works Cited

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