Politics and Culture

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Screen Texts--A Polemic, *Toby Miller*

Most popular and significant screen texts (commercial web sites, films, television programs, and electronic games) are commodities whose key appeal lies in their meanings. Critical political economy is, therefore, a natural ally of textual analysis in understanding them. But a certain tendency on both sides of that division has maintained that they are mutually exclusive, on the grounds that one approach is concerned with structures of the economy, and the other with structures of meaning. This need not be the case. Historically, the best critical political economy and the best textual analysis, most of it done within cultural studies, have worked through the imbrication of power and signification at all points on the cultural continuum. Ideally, blending the two approaches can heal the divisions between fact and interpretation and between the social sciences and the humanities, under the sign of a principled approach to cultural democracy, which requires a focus on the contradictions of organizational structures, their articulations with everyday living and textuality, and their intrication with the polity and economy, refusing any bifurcation that opposes the study of production and consumption, or fails to address axes of social stratification.

We need to view the screen through twin theoretical prisms. On the one hand, it can be understood as the newest component of sovereignty, a twentieth-century cultural addition to ideas of patrimony and rights that sits alongside such traditional topics as territory, language, history, and schooling. On the other hand, the screen is a cluster of culture industries. As such, it is subject to exactly the rent-seeking practices and exclusionary representational protocols that characterize liaisons between state and capital. We must avoid reproducing a thing called, for example, "cinema or TV studies or new media (urggh) studies," and instead do work that studies the screen texts and contexts, regardless of its intellectual provenance.

In addition to social and political theory, I broadly follow the

method of literary and library historian Roger Chartier in locating the meaning of screen texts: a) a reconstruction of `the diversity of older readings from their sparse and multiple traces'; b) a focus on `the text itself, the object that conveys it, and the act that grasps it'; and c) an identification of `the strategies by which authors and publishers tried to impose an orthodoxy or a prescribed reading on the text' (157, 161-63, 66). This grid from the new cultural history turns away from reflectionism, which argues that a text's key meaning lies in its overt or covert capacity to capture the Zeitgeist. It also rejects formalism's claim that a close reading of sound and image cues can secure a definitive meaning, and eschews the use of amateur-hour humanities psychoanalysis or rat-catching sadism (a.k.a. psychology) to unlock what is inside people's heads. Instead, a man happy in his lack of interiority, I look at the passage of texts through space and time, noting how they accrete and attenuate meanings on their travels as they rub up against, trope, and are themselves troped by other fictional and social texts.

To do less is to be neat and tidy, to keep our bottoms as well-wiped as graduate school or tenure or discipleship demand. But that runs the risk of missing the meanings that accrue to screen texts as they move through time and space. After all, at the end of the day, we are trying to comprehend the Web, film, television, and games-how and why they are made and received-not to trot out orthodoxies practiced by the self-anointed of visual culture, film theory, art history, and other pleasurable cordons sanitaires of the humanities.

WORK CITED

Chartier, Roger. "Texts, Printing, Readings." The New Cultural History. Ed. Lynn Hunt. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989. 154-175.

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