

tion of thought. But what are the authors saying with their flickering ideas?

I think that central to Kroker's and Cook's argument is the notion of the "cancellation of the real" and the social construction of a "dead sign" which postmodern culture increasingly and effectively achieves. A dead sign can be described as a signifier cut off from any historical referent. Thus unmoored the signifier implodes; it collapses into itself by becoming a tautology. One can, for instance, walk into a shopping mall and find a simulated street scene with quaint shop facades, old fashioned lamp posts and telephone booths, and stone paved streets. The scene is obviously rigged to impose on us a sensation that we are walking in a real city street, yet the signs that create the scene refer to their own surface gloss. In the shopping mall example, ordinary perception and reality come asunder and are skillfully managed as a symbolic organization, part of what the authors would call "relational power": the hyperreal and artificial social world in which all reality is liquidated.

The optical illusions that postmodern culture creates oscillate between the outer eye which registers and the inner eye which controls. A good figure for reflecting on this condition can be found, according to Arthur Kroker, in Rene Magritte's painting *False Mirror*, which shows an empty iris surrounded by the reflection of clouds. Magritte's eye represents "the terrorism of the world as a pure sign system [which] works at the symbolic level: a ceaseless and internal envelopment of its 'subject' in a pure symbolic domination" (p.83). Indeed, the next two sections of the book ("Sliding signifiers" and "Postmodernism and The Death of the Social") explore in more detail the dynamics of power in postmodernist society. Here the work of Foucault, Nietzsche, Barthes, Baudrillard and, interestingly enough, Talcott Parson is used to stress the point that power in postmodern culture asserts itself as an endless process of symbolization.

In the concluding section, "Ultramodernism," the authors' attention shifts to our new *fin de siecle* and its new signs of decadence, excess and

catastrophism as a way of life. Francesca Woodman's photographs, and Alex Colville's paintings are deemed by Kroker and Cook in many ways to exemplify the mood of impending disaster which is our lot. Like Alex Colville, Edward Hopper is an artist of hyperrealism. Hopper always tries to situate the viewer in the position of voyeur. His paintings are full of windows (*trompe l'oeil*) that give the viewer a glimpse into the outside world of a receding nature and an advancing urban sprawl. Hopper's paintings find continuity in the current work of the young neo-expressionist Eric Fischel. Once again, the viewer as voyeur takes on a privileged position as we are brought to the psychological edge of the postmodern condition. This is the parasitic culture which feeds on scenes of excess and disaster, as is evident in Fischel's depictions of desire without any apparent referent, seduction without love, and fatherly love bordering on incest. This is, so it is claimed, the psychological space of the postmodern condition: the unsettled discourse of a culture which has reached contentment with nihilism.

This book, for all its rhetorical excesses and sketchy and impressionistic formulations, is at times capable of a serious analysis of the abyss of modern subjectivity and culture. There are indeed several chapters which merit a close reading. Also, the author's reliance on the strikingly creative work of Georges Bataille provides the book with much of its provocative edge and some of its best metaphors. But throughout it all one must remember that we are dealing with a mode of thinking which is interested neither in the institutional nor the historical nature of social individuals who pursue and develop their daily interests; what it examines is "the liquidation of the real," based on a lame theory of language that is so all-embracing as to be virtually meaningless as an analytic construct. All social life involves some form of influence, molding, direction or compulsion, but the reduction of social relationships to the issue of language and power renders it almost impossible to make the fine intellectual, moral, and material distinctions necessary for any serious evaluation of change in society, or to hope for future action. It is no

wonder then that *The Postmodern Scene* is drained of any political content and lacks any sense of direction. The book holds out no hope, only fashionable nihilistic grief. It also displays a certain glib shrewdness in place of considered judgement.

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Tania Modleski, ed. **Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.

Colin MacCabe, ed. **High Theory/ Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film**. St. Martin's Press.

Two anthologies have recently appeared, generated out of an American conference, and a combined American and British Seminar, on the study of mass and popular culture. They are both uneven collections, yet *Studies in Entertainment* has a project which holds the essays together. The collection attempts to undo the strict division between high culture and mass culture imposed by the theorists and critics within the Frankfurt school. *High Theory/Low Culture*, on the other hand, has little guidance in its overall intention. This looseness in thought characterizes the majority of essays within the collection, leaving the reader wishing the contributors had stayed longer at the conference table to thrash out what it is they wanted to say.

The essays within *Studies in Entertainment* were first presented at a conference on Mass Culture in 1985 held by the Centre for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Its editor, Tania Modleski, is an associate professor of Film and Literature at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and is author of *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. What

binds the essays together in this collection is not only the topic of Mass Culture, but also, as Modleski states in her introduction to the text, it is the "voice of the women's movement" which reverberates throughout the book."

Studies in Entertainment is divided into four sections: the traditions of mass culture criticism; television; feminist studies in entertainment; and the boundaries between art and entertainment. This final section contains three essays which exemplify the theme of the collection - to redefine the distinctions between high culture (art) and mass culture (entertainment). Specifically, contributors attempt to reassess the possibility of an "oppositional" position to mainstream entertainment, this position being traditionally held by the avant-garde. Andreas Huyssen, in "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," approaches the opposition of high art/mass culture as having been created by modernism which he sees as essentially misogynist, for it distinguished mass culture as a degraded Other to its own male grand recits. He optimistically, and simplistically, sees the dichotomy being overcome with the dissolution of modernism.

Tania Modleski begins the section with "The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory." She looks at recent popular horror films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and a selection of the body of work of David Cronenberg, and sees these films as being just as "adversarial" as any avant-garde film. She bases this assessment on the fact that the horror film contains many of the elements characterizing a postmodern work: it dispenses with narrative, and what little narrative it retains is aimed at the destruction of all that is bourgeois; it refuses its audience the narcissistic pleasure of identification with characters, and it defies closure (the possibility of endless sequels has much to do with this latter trait). By finding in the horror genre "oppositional" qualities established by the avant-garde, Modleski concludes that a strict binary relationship no longer exists between high art and mass culture.

Critical thinking which would posit such an opposition comes under attack in Dana Polan's seminal essay, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and The Evacuation of Sense." Polan argues that advancement in critical theories of cultural studies is blocked by the retention of binary oppositions. In his assessment of Roland Barthes' *S/Z*, Polan is critical of high art's adherence to the high art/mass culture split in his formulation of readerly and writerly texts. Polan contends that "cases of popular culture [are exalted] only when the mythic, spiritual, transcendental values usually attributed to high culture can also be projected on to them."

Polan's insight into this problem is temporarily arrested in a section of his lengthy essay which provides an analysis of the intolerably banal comic strip *Blondie* which he asserts contains some "of the most writerly qualities of experimental art." Polan admits his reading of *Blondie* is "fanciful" (actually, it's incredible), but gives it as evidence that the signs of postmodernism are everywhere in this moment of late capitalism. Postmodernism, for Polan, is characterized by excess, by "incoherence" as part of the norm. His concern is that there is a "fundamental weirdness" in contemporary mass culture. In what he terms, along with Guy Debord, "the age of the Society of the Spectacle," Polan proposes that we seek a "totalizing" method of analysis, which will incorporate several systems of knowledge, to comprehend this "weirdness" of late capitalist society.

Late in his paper Polan names feminism as an admirable beginning to his grand theoretical system, a suggestion which Modleski supports in her introduction. A caution, however, must be voiced at this point. Neither Polan nor Modleski seem to realize that the construction of a theoretical framework which contains all critical theories within its boundaries amounts to nothing more than a new dominating discourse. A symptom of this belief, that one can speak for all, is contained in Modleski's introduction where she describes the women's movement as one voice (p.xiv) and also in her mention of feminist critical thinking as if it were a homogeneous unit. Although

one essay in the collection, Jean Franco's "The Incorporation of Women: A Comparison of North American and Mexican Popular Narrative," provides a glimpse of women in working class Mexican culture, Modleski's notion of feminism seems to imply the white, straight middle class norm.

That said, Patricia Mellencamp's essay "Situation Comedey, Feminism and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy" is a finely written example of white, straight, middle class feminism. Mellencamp's persuasive argument uses psychoanalysis to examine the position of women in situation comedy shows of the 1950s. Her specific concern is with the double bind of women as both subject and object of comedy - as both female spectator and comedian. In Mellencamp's analysis, Gracie Allen and Lucille Ball exist in that most complex space "of women's comic containment."

Of the feminist essays, one of the best is "Woman is an Island: Femininity and Colonization" by Judith Williamson. Williamson is the author of the solidly written semiotic analysis, *Decoding Advertisements*. In "Woman is an Island" she examines how "the Other" is created by our culture, specifically through advertisements. The body of her text demonstrates how woman is "the great Other in the psychology of patriarchal capitalist culture." The essay is interrupted frequently by reproductions of advertisements and their semiotic analyses. These perceptive, specific readings reflect the more general argument in her paper that as capitalism requires other economies to conquer and control if it is to exist, an observation Williamson borrows from Rosa Luxemburg, so also patriarchal culture needs woman as an island, as an exotic colony, in order that it might define itself. Early in her argument, Williamson turns to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, to note that difference is what makes meaning possible. Williamson's most convincing essay exemplifies the excellence in critical thinking that *Studies in Entertainment* has to offer.

Kaja Silverman's essay, "Fragments of A Fashionable

Discourse" is another feminist piece which works extremely well. Silverman blends psychoanalysis and semiotics into the history of fashion and explains the ramifications to women's fashion of the "Great Male Renunciation" of the eighteenth century. This was the time at which men gave up their foppish ways and decorative dress to the ladies. The impetus Silverman cites for this new male modesty is the emergence of the middle class with the growth of industry. The sign of a man's wealth became focused on the appearance of his wife, who retained (with or without consent) the old aristocracy's claim to leisure and to extravagant dress. In this shift lies a decisive step toward women's inherited position as spectacle.

Also in her discussion Silverman makes the claim that when the distinctive dress of a subculture or subordinate class is appropriated by the fashion industry it is a triumph on the part of that subculture because, in Silverman's words, "its ideological force and formal bravura can no longer be ignored." Silverman tends to be a persuasive writer but Williamson's reading of a fashion advertisement leaves her argument in tatters. Using Williamson's model, such appropriation is another act of colonization of "the Other" as the exotic. As Williamson points out, "It is fine fashion to wear a turban if you are white [which models do, and are] even though in Britain Sikhs who wear turbans for religious reasons are subject to much racist abuse."

Three of the eleven essays in the collection are not engaged in a feminist study. "The Television News Personality and Credibility: Reflections on the News in Transition" by Margaret Morse is flawed because of Morse's attempt to give the entire history of television news in a few pages. The result is a wandering, circular discussion in need of clarification of key issues. "Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs" enters a direct dialogue with the Frankfurt School and provides a careful reconstruction of Adorno's thoughts on the culture industry, particularly that of popular music. Bernard Gendron transposes Adorno's considerations of jazz onto rock and roll, specifically The Cadillacs and the doo-wop

sound. He discovers that Adorno's analysis, while concentrating on the harmonic sounds of Tin Pan alley, can be engaged, though with restrictions, with the rhythmic based rock and roll. "Television/Sound" is a reworking of Raymond Williams' concept of the "flow" of television. Rick Altman places television's "flow" into an interaction with household "flow" resulting in some clever revelations regarding the television soundtrack. It is interesting to find Altman, who specializes in the study of the film soundtrack, turning his critical attention to television.

Entry into *Studies in Entertainment* is through an interview conducted by Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow with Raymond Williams. Their itinerary is primarily to examine terms in the history of mass culture criticism, including "mass culture" itself, and Williams' own notion of "flow".

Skirrow is also a contributor in *High Theory/Low Culture*. Her essay "Hellation: An Analysis of Video Games" provides some interesting research into the history of video games, but then makes a silly application of psychoanalysis (via Melanie Klein) upon the playing of the games. She asserts unequivocally that girls do not play video games. A boy who plays is attempting to re-enter the mother's body with fantasy, phallic weapons in order to continually act out his own suicide. Skirrow's successful appearance in *Studies in Entertainment*, and her unconvincing discussion in *High Theory/Low Culture*, typifies *Studies in Entertainment's* general coherency as opposed to *High Theory/Low Culture's* predominantly unstructured babble.

High Theory/Low Culture is a collection which includes both American and British scholars. It comes out of a seminar on popular culture held in 1984 at the John Logie Baird Centre for Research in Television and Film. The Centre's Director at the time was Colin MacCabe, who is also the editor and a contributor to *High Theory/Low Culture*. In his brief preface, MacCabe outlines the three emphases of the collection. They are, that the study of popular culture concern itself

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with politics, and with considerations of gender, and that it not accept the opposition between high art (high theory) and mass culture (low theory). These are essentially the same concerns as *Studies in Entertainment*, but in a less finely tuned form.

MacCabe's own essay, "Defining Popular Culture" contents itself with expanding on these three themes. Yet it also contains the curious claim that semiotic and psychoanalytic critical approaches, admittedly successful in discussing classic Hollywood cinema and much European and American avant-garde film, are not useful in analysing new Hollywood films or any form of television. MacCabe doesn't offer a reason for this proclamation regarding the decline of semiotics. This, however, isn't important because it probably would be no less absurd than his explanation regarding the so-called failure of psychoanalysis:

Could the problem be one of register: that within the still confines of the seminar room or weekend school any text [he cites elsewhere Young Mr. Lincoln and Touch of Evil] can be made to deliver up its sexual meanings, but that in the noisier ambiance of the classroom or the first year lecture theatre, the lecturer suddenly appears perverse as he or she gamely struggles to explicate the dilemmas of castration; the dialectic of having and being suddenly reduced to the pathetic ramblings of a sex-obsessed adult.

It would seem that MacCabe dismisses two critical practices central to cultural studies (and used with great success in *Studies in Entertainment*) because undergrads might think that they're silly.

The weakness of MacCabe's own writing, both in its structure and thought, leads to the suspicion that it is ineffective editing which is responsible for many of the flaws within *High Theory/Low Culture*. Also, one of the most irritating experiences when reading the text is to have one's eye movement stopped on almost every other page by the proliferation of typographical errors.

Another crossover contributor to the text, along with Gillian Skirrow, is Tania Modleski.

In "Feminity [sic] as Mas[s]querade: A Feminist Approach to Mass Culture" she examines the orthodox position of the literary historian, in which mass culture is condemned as a "feminised" culture. She then assesses the works of Manuel Puig, author of *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, and theoretician Jean Baudrillard. Both these authors affirm mass culture for its resemblance to the feminine. Modleski reminds us that the feminine has been alternately denigrated and exalted, and that this latest development must be examined with caution.

Modleski's essay is in the middleground of academic excellence within the collection. Laura Mulvey stands out as the strongest writer with her article "Melodrama In and Out of the Home." Moving easily among critics such as Thomas Elsaesser and Walter Benjamin, she describes the history of the Hollywood melodrama, typified by the films of Douglas Sirk, and how "women's films" developed as a reinstatement of the domestic within films in order to compete with the new form of home entertainment, television.

Elsewhere, in "Hearing Secret Harmonies," Simon Frith starts a paper on the 'issues of experience' in capitalism, moves on to a discussion of "the Barry Manilow problem" and vacillates between wondering how a musical score relates to images in a film, and how music has itself become culturally encoded with emotional values. Frith writes within a semiotic discourse, which he himself apparently does not recognize, for if he had, he might have had an argument somewhere. Not surprisingly, Frith gives social-ism sole credit for blurring the distinction between the public and private spheres without acknowledging more obvious feminist contributions on that score.

Other contributors to *High Theory/Low Culture* are: Laura Kipnis, "Refunctioing reconsidered: towards a left popular culture"; Douglas Gomery, "The Popularity of Filmgoing in the U.S."; Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television"; Andrew Tolso, "Popular Culture: Practice and Institution"; and John

Caughie, "Popular Culture: Notes and Revisions".

High Theory/Low Culture is an indication of the potentially exciting work which can be produced within popular cultural studies. It offers pieces of criticism, historical description, and theory on film, television, and music, as well as a questioning of how popular culture might be defined and taught. *Studies in Entertainment*, however, realizes much more successfully *High Theory/Low Culture*'s aspirations.

Peggy Hill.

**"Show Us Life" :
Toward a History and
Aesthetics of the
Committed
Documentary . ed.
Thomas Waugh. Scarecrow
Press, Inc. 1984.**

Within film theory, which has become increasingly esoteric over the last decade through massive infusions of semiotics, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and narratology, "committed documentary" continues to remain conspicuously "other". Categorically condemned for its alleged naive belief in "objectivity" - in the possibility of an unmediated representation of "reality" - documentary has been exempted from canonical film theory, which finds more tantalizing grist for its mill in disrobing Hollywood narrative and its avant-garde rejoinders. The result has been that, with a few notable exceptions, specific frameworks for analysing documentary have been glaringly few and far between.

The reasons for this absence are complex and overdetermined by the institutionalization of film studies within the academy, with its tendency to theoreticis. If documentary remains unspoken it is because it doesn't fit, proves resistant to analysis by the post-structuralist/psychoanalytic machine. Which is why endeavours to fit documentary into this critical paradigm, such as Christian Metz's argument that *all* film is fiction "from the beginning," can only reduce the specificity of documentary address. The difference repre-

sented by radical documentary practice is that it is characterized by its intentional production of subjects for concrete and referential causes: anti-imperialist, feminist, socialist, lesbian and gay liberation, etc. And despite the obvious mediation of documentary "reality" by cinematic codes and conventions, what is distinctive about our response as spectators stems from our extra-textual knowledge - that those bodies being gunned down, that woman speaking about her experience are *not* fictional constructs but "real" historic events and individuals. To ignore the specificity of this address can only contribute to a dangerous theoreticism and a widening chasm between theory and those consituencies, who all too often appear in film theory as discursive abstracts.

The real task then would not be to submerge documentary analysis into a critical puree nor to leave it entirely exempt from the kinds of considerations developed by contemporary film theory concerning the relation between textual operations and the process of subjectivity and desire. What we could propose is an exchange of questions, a theoretical and political intercourse between radical documentary and film theory. And it just might be on that terrain that a revolutionary subject could be thought.

Tom Waugh's *"Show Us Life" : Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* goes a long way to addressing some of these divisions within film theory. Waugh in fact sees the anthology as intervening to resolve the gap between "the new methodologies developed in the seventies" by film theory and political film criticism "still dominated by *ad hoc* critical principles, outdated conceptual models, and the all-too-frequent substitution of ideological fervor or indignation for solid analysis." The book's project of modernizing political film criticism, however, involves not only the incorporation of new conceptual frameworks but a critical favouring of particular types of political documentary. From Vertov through to Joris Ivens and the new left, Third World and feminist experiments of the sixties and seventies, the films analysed all move beyond an alleged "objectivity" and