


"The Material and Conceptual Conditions of Life"

I came to popular culture through the study of television—a branch of the drama, part of the great tree of literature (though television is both more and other than literature, of course). But popular culture encompasses more than the study of texts in the traditionally defined senses of the word. And so does this journal. This issue clusters together a number of essays that focus on subjects quite separate from the normal idea of text or narrative. Though two of the essays do examine stories or songs, most of the essays are about topics that former editor Dennis Hall (whom I quote) might have considered “the material and conceptual conditions of life.” The array is quite varied, from fast food, to sex-toy marketing parties, to boy scout badges and radio, to world’s fair press reports, to baby-naming.

For those of us who focus on narrative texts, we may conceive of the world as a narrative created in each mind. It is easy, therefore, to value the narratives originated (and sustained, in the case of some media such as television) by popular culture’s creators. But this issue reminds us that we should explore popular culture (and, always, ourselves) in terms of objects and practices as well. Of course, we may find that when we do so, each object evokes a narrative; every practice tells a story.

In the first article of this issue, Minjoo Oh focuses on fast food—but not in the usual sense of the term. She invites us to broaden our conception and redefine *fast food*, moving through varieties of international food: the term includes not only McDonald’s but, for example, Japanese *ekiben*. Our choices of fast-food eating practices also let us tell a story about ourselves: are we enjoying the contiguities of multiple cultures? If citizens of a developing country, are we proclaiming ‘modernity’ by choosing McDonald’s? This article on “Fast Food Frontiers” surveys an internationally wide variety of options. In the second piece of the issue, “Sexed Appeals: Network Marketing Advertising and Adult Home Novelty Parties,” Dawn Heineken analyzes this modern variation on the Tupperware party with attention to both the economic and sociocultural implications. She points out the narrative of entrepreneurial independence that combines with advertisements of sexual liberation to involve the mainly female sellers of these products—and she describes the financial and cultural limitations in which the “passion” is embedded. Selling might be seen as the center of the next article as well. Kathleen Forni’s “Popularizing High Culture: Zemeckis’s *Beowulf*” does analyze the two different texts-- the medieval



poem and the twenty-first century film; however, it discusses the use of “high culture” to sell a product. Further, it examines the “conceptual conditions of life” in terms of the interplay among the various forces that work on an interpretation of the text such as that put forth by director Zemeckis, writers Roger Avary and Neil Gaiman, and all those who worked with them on this performance-capture film. And considering its many versions, what does constitute the text that is *Beowulf*? The next essay, by Stephen Bales and Charlie Gee, focuses on the press devoted to the 1982 Knoxville World’s Fair, and reminds us that reports in the popular press are indeed significant texts in our lives—though not often consciously recognized as such; and they focus specifically on the cultural reinforcement of certain images of the “Other,” particularly the outsider. In the fifth article, Noah Arceneaux explores an interesting root of radio: the early radio-building work of the Boy Scouts. Their encouragement of these practices especially because of wartime attitudes towards technology as defense is part of the overall historical context that Arceneaux carefully examines. They were, in fact, considered “Paul Reveres,” expected to warn the nation of invasion via their amateur radios. And Arceneaux asks us to contemplate the interplay between users and technology on a broader scale as well. Ron Briley, in “The Legend of Sacco and Vanzetti,” also looks at the interplay between reception and creation. In one of the two essays in this issue which do focus on (though they expand beyond) traditional texts, he discusses the literary, musical, and filmic representations of Sacco and Vanzetti’s legend, with particular attention to the work of Upton Sinclair and Woody Guthrie. But he also asks us to consider the many attempts to find the historical truth of the story in the context of the democratic meaning of the legend. A different kind of meaning-making is the focus of the final essay, Claude “Jay” Smith’s analysis of Americans’ choice of names for our children. He canvasses statistical data on the shifts in naming trends; but he goes much farther in discussing the implications—the motives and consequences—that naming choices may have.

In all, these articles do explore “the material and conceptual conditions of life.” For a text-centric editor (and perhaps some readers as well), they are a reminder of the richness of popular culture studies.

As always, great appreciation is due to those named on the editorial page and the inside back cover of this issue. In addition to the members of the editorial board, we owe thanks to the following for sharing their expertise as reviewers: David Broad, Alex Bruce, David Fritts, Donna Waller Harper, Ananya Mukherjea, John Sutton, and Ed Whitelock.

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