

Theory and Practice

Browne, Butler, Bakhtin; Campbell, Cawelti; Fiske and Hartley, Fiedler, Foucault. These are some of the lights of theory that have guided our work in popular culture. Their perspectives are various—from the broad sweep of archetypal content to the tight focus of a particular medium's techniques; from the single eye to the cultural panorama. When we write, we write with theory in our bones, whether or not we see the structure of our thought.

Studies in Popular Culture normally emphasizes specific cases of analysis—a discussion of *Fight Club*; an exploration of Elvis impersonators; R.E.M.'s collaboration with Howard Finster; the Klingon *Hamlet*; the *Left Behind* franchise; the vampires of Joss Whedon's *Angel* series. We take joy in such particular engagement with our popular culture, examining and sometimes embracing it. But on occasion, it is possible to get a better view by taking a step back.

In this issue we present a selection of articles which include not only some of our trademark close analyses, but also essays which must be described as more generally theoretical. Stephen Bates and Anthony J. Ferri give us "What's Entertainment? Notes Toward a Definition." Neither popular culture in general nor leisure *per se*, the term is loosely used—but, as Bates and Ferri assert, if we are to proceed as scholars, we should attempt a shared definition. They propose one with objective criteria, while acknowledging the difficult subjective questions. Among other things, their article provides an impressive review of literature on the subject. It also provokes response: Is passivity a necessary element of entertainment? As I read, I found myself recalling that transition I make when I move from watching a television show simply because I enjoy it, to watching a television show because I plan to write about it—the transition from entertainment to work (however pleasurable). Even when I watch purely for enjoyment, my mind is already actively leaping to note, for example, the closing image echoing the opening, or the writers' play with words, or the music's irony. As Bates and Ferri say, passivity is their most controversial criterion; it is one of the defining traits with which they, as they put it, attempt to launch a conversation.

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson focuses more narrowly, but still on a very large theoretical target: the study of popular fiction. As he notes, our academic productions, various as they are, tend to look at romances, or horror novels, or Westerns—not the category of popular fiction overall. Like Bates and Ferri, Schneider-Mayerson provides a useful overview of related scholarship. He argues that seeing the larger picture will bring "a fresh approach to genre criticism and the relevance of genre itself," while growing a group of scholars who specialize in pop fiction rather than, say, the detective novel in particular or popular culture in general.

Gulnara Karimova's "Interpretive Methodology from Literary Criticism" invites us to apply a grand unified field theory of Bakhtin's carnivalesque—not only to literature but also to popular culture such as *Jackass* and *South Park* (both in television and film incarnations) and to current culture in general. She too draws on the work of many scholars who have applied Bakhtin to popular culture. Her essay straddles general theory and specific discus-

sion (as many good *Studies in Popular Culture* articles do). Lynnette Porter asks us to ponder an event which became part of the popular culture—the 1950s theft of the “Stone of Destiny,” the coronation stone, from Scotland—and the struggles that filmmakers had in their attempt to translate it into popular film. National politics, the popular press, a Hollywood director, and the high culture of certain film festivals come together in a revealing illustration of the complexity of cinematic creation. Carlos Ramet and Bennett Kravitz contribute articles on two very popular novelists whose work might or might not fit under Schneider-Mayerson’s categorization. Ramet writes on Ken Follett’s transformation from newspaper writer to author of fiction, focusing on two of his earliest novels: *The Modigliani Scandal* and *Paper Money*, both from 1976. Bennett Kravitz discusses Michael Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, a novel of an alternative history for the Jews, who find themselves temporarily exiled to Alaska as the “Frozen Chosen.” Against widespread criticism in the popular press, Kravitz defends the complexity of the novel’s themes. Last, we include an article that fits into the classic definition of popular culture; but does it deal with entertainment, in Bates and Ferri’s definition? Carol-Ann Farkas carefully explores health magazines and the ways readers may make use of them. She sharpens her focus by giving detailed analyses of three: the women’s magazine *Self*; *Bicycling*; and *Men’s Health*. Using this selected group, she argues that the way we define “‘health’ and ‘wellness’ is as much negotiated as simply imposed.” And so we return to theory, and our own daily negotiations of terms and experiences.

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