

Peter Nagourney

English Department, Wayne State University
Popular Culture Association Annual Meeting, April 1980

Anything but Literature: Ideology and the Study of Popular Culture

Is it curiosity, coincidence, or conspiracy that 84% of the presentations at this year's Popular Culture and American Culture Association Annual Convention are concerned with media phenomena? At this convention scholars and critics will study literature, magazines, and comics; film, television, and radio; music, art, and a few other media outlets in order to better understand our culture. The remaining 16% of the essays will be attempting to make inferences outside the frameworks and influences of these severely mediated sources in the popular arts. This division of attention is worth considering in some detail, for there are interesting' consequences involved in each choice.

Since in studying Popular Culture we are involved in a self-conscious activity, reflecting upon those elements in our surroundings which we feel best reflect upon ourselves, we have a tendency to treat as Popular Culture only those activities which involve acts of self-consciousness. These media phenomena so dominant in this week's programs all reflect self-consciousness either in subject and style, or, at the fundamental level, in the conscious choices audiences must make to participate in the imaginative realities each medium conveys. Even those who would reject claims that they read or view contemporary media with anything more than escape in mind must still have made initial active decisions to read, to view, and to listen as ways of filling leisure time. Our popular arts tend to be leisure arts, and as part of the entertainment industry in America they constitute suitable subjects for scholarly speculation, whether our concern is with the cultural artifact itself, as with film or literature, or with the activity surrounding the artifact's production, as in concern with, say, the Academy Awards as cultural ritual, or with the biographical and bibliographical materials associated with literary texts.

Literary texts, in their creation and in their re-creation, by readers, constitute the most self-conscious of all media, and it is not surprising, then, that studies of literature compose a full 40% of the presentations at this convention. The reasons literature is so attractive in the study of Popular Culture are not difficult to find, although my views may not coincide with other theories for the dominance of literary studies which usually point to the academic affiliations of the concerned scholars. Literature is popular as the

object of our studies for reasons which involve general cultural prejudices, plus some methodological fallacies most students of literature prefer not to confront.

The general cultural prejudices which favor literature as privileged source of insight into culture begin by admitting the highly mediated nature of this resource, but then elevate this characteristic into a primary merit. This is especially the case with elite, or high, literature, which is generally believed to somehow incorporate views of the ideas and issues of a time which are deeper, clearer, and more perceptive than those available in the minds and writings of ordinary citizens. They, poor souls, lack the heightened powers of insight and communication which fortuitously combine in great authors. By studying the works of the great, we somehow are informed, perhaps enlightened, and maybe even elevated by their great artistic achievement. Or so goes the argument, a sort of Great Books rationalization.

The extent to which our views of the past, by which we judge the veracity and verisimilitude of these literary masterpieces, are themselves formed by similar literary masterpieces, frequently the only other source for detail, whether real or imagined, is not often considered. And if we do accept the full argument from genius, which suggests that through powers of extraordinary creativity, a literary artist can mold materials to transcend the limitations and clichés which bind lesser creators, we might then question the extent to which these transcendent works are able to accurately or adequately reflect the quotidian concerns of their author's surroundings. The persistence of metaphors and descriptions of the great author as divine, or inspired and possessed by a muse, may reflect such suspicion that true genius may be irresponsible as history.

However, this is merely a minor part of the attraction of literary studies as cultural indicators, and in this discussion I won't even consider the arguments against elite literature for being dominated by white, male, sexist values. The central attraction of using literature as source for cultural studies lies in the coincidence of format between data and finished study. Only in literary studies is the form of the text the identical form of the information we seek: literature deals with and is constructed out of organized, ordered, coherent, value-laden, ideological goal-directed, language-based materials, the very materials which, in slightly different arrangements, will themselves constitute our reports upon literature. This is obvious, but nonetheless extraordinary. Commentary upon music may take a form which is musical, as in one composer's variations upon the theme of another, or verbal, at which point only will it be truly considered a commentary. An artist creating art based upon the work of another artist is still being an artist, and becomes a commentator only when the ideas are expressed in words. The loose languages and vague vocabularies of music and art criticism, however,

demonstrate the extreme subjectivism of these trans-disciplinary interpretations; these commentaries essentially masquerade as what they never can be, behind ideological boundaries and obscurantist jargon.

The literary critic or social commentator is never mistaken for an artist when commenting upon literature, yet is still employing the very tools which enabled the literary artist to create valued texts. This coincidence of medium can be seen as responsible for strong temptations to use materials taken directly from the literary text as reflections upon the realities the text is imitating: the historical fallacy, the intentional fallacy, and similar cautions attempt to warn critics of inappropriate inferences from literary sources, but they don't deal with greater pressures for inappropriate inference created by the language itself. And of course any false inferences of this sort ignore the question of how artistic demands may have led authors to create quite value-neutral texts.

Further attractions of literary texts as cultural sources reside in the materiality of books as tangible items, able to be located precisely in time, capable of documentation, enumeration, and evaluation in all incidental details of relative success as commercial objects, cultural phenomena, loci of influence, and so on. Literary texts are also easily recoverable by the historian: however much bibliographers may play with questions of textual variants, it is relatively easy to view or own any text and thereby possess the complete system under consideration. This self-contained quality is extremely attractive when studying an area:

phenomena, loci of influence, and so on. Literary texts are also easily recoverable by the historian: however much bibliographers may play with questions of textual variants, it is relatively easy to view or own any text and thereby possess the complete system under consideration. This self-contained quality is extremely attractive when studying an area: with literary products there will be no loose ends in our data bank.

Finally, the coincidence of format and the suitability for quotation make literary texts appear to be great repositories of significant and convincing data to support whatever views an enquiring investigator wishes to reinforce. When our very best ideas can be supported by verbatim quotations from recognized works of literary merit it may never be necessary to question the representativeness of the source, or the original intention and use of the text under consideration, or even the extent to which our ideas, now being supported by the texts, themselves derive from our original readings of these literary texts or from works themselves influenced by, or deriving from, these or more common sources.

Two questions arise from these observations, although they can only be mentioned here. The first concerns what goes into the archive of accepted texts and asks who makes these ideological decisions; the second concerns what happens when a specific quotation is extracted from a complete text to be used as moral maxim by individual readers, and asks how these selections are made. America's not infrequent book burnings and library censorings suggest ominous answers to the first question; the citation networks for homilies and aphorisms institutionalized in popular periodicals, on radio shows, and especially in television formats point toward the centralization of the public's sources and restrictions upon ideological free will in reference to the second. Our collective consciousness derives not from mass assimilation of communal culture, but from reluctant choices among the available cultural clichés.

If genius, then, by its uniqueness, may tend to exclude its productions as source for cultural data, and by its influence may involve circular reinforcements, perhaps we might find solace in the possibilities of cultural inference from the works of less talented writers. It might be remarked that the less talented an author, the less successfully all the parts of the literary creation will be integrated into any independently successful artistic unity; there are great possibilities for inference suggested here. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, an 18th century English author, and, incidentally, Henry Fielding's cousin, recognized this when she wrote:

Perhaps you will say I should not take my ideas of the manners of the times from such trifling authors; but it is more truly to be found among them, than from any historian; as they write merely to get money, they always fall into the notions that are most acceptable to the present taste.

(The Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, quoted by Q.D. Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public [London, 1932], p.82)

This kind of argument might easily serve as justification for popular culture studies of non-elite literature (over 80% of the literary studies here). All literature is mediated, but genre-bound and formula texts allow less space for eccentricity, and the pressures of publishing tend to select for conventionality and timeliness. When we read the popular texts of a time we imagine we can recreate, in our contemporary response, the leisure-time choices of the original audience. Because the language structure and use remains fairly constant from generation to generation, despite massive cultural changes, the illusion that reading a historical text today recreates the reading by the original audience - which involves an illusion that we are even reading the same text -- is all too easy to sustain.

What are the limitations of these approaches? Unless our concern is restricted to documenting particular practices of literary form, any attempts to present literary creations as anything more than artificial and arbitrary sign systems immediately raises serious difficulties. Attempting to connect and correlate literary texts with nonliterary concerns, whether sociological, psychological, historical, political, economic, or otherwise, presumes upon the limits of literature to reflect beyond itself. No literary text, however realistic, fact-bound, or responsible, can pretend to reflect life, or, more specifically, to reflect anything but the limited kind of life whose illusion can be evoked within the pages of a book. Literature as a construction of language is therefore limited to the properties of language, and cannot exceed the limits of language-bound reality; any experience which cannot be put into words cannot be part of literature. This dependence upon words is thus a severe limitation of literature's potentials to strictly self-conscious and language-based activities. Anything outside the realm of coherent, linear, grammatical, orderly language is unrealizable within literary texts. Some authors can go as far as to attribute ineffable experiences to certain characters, but having faced these limits the text must of necessity shift to that which can be successfully codified in written form. Second, literature will be limited to those texts which meet the formal requirements of individual genres, and will tend to suggest that the kind of lives possible within the text, because of their coherence and unity, are the lives possible outside the text. The protagonists of detective fictions, for example, manifest a convincing substantiality creating the illusion of plausible and recognizable life, but of course the probabilities and coincidences of the literary universe are arbitrary control mechanisms nonexistent outside fictional realms. These generic expectations impose constrictions upon the scope of representation which are difficult to recognize, because the nature of fictional realms is their illusion of totality, of conceptual completeness, of convincing mimesis. Third, literary realities are further constrained by the censoring mechanisms of contemporary cultural and ideological frameworks, more specifically the decisions of editors, censors, and publishers, decisions which regulate both what kind of materials are published, and what sorts of stylistic and substantive materials appear within works accepted for publication.

To treat texts so severely restricted by epistemological, formal, and political constraints as representing external societies must be an act of faith. Even the faithful, however, should hesitate when the further mediations imposed by the limitations of authorship are added to the more impersonal limitations mentioned above. Each author creates because of, or in spite of, or within the boundaries of individual prejudices -- on the level of belief; of intellectual abilities - on the level of conceptualizing; and of stylistic skills -- on the level of actual word choice.

Students of literature rename the aggregate of these restrictions "individual style, and from this focus deal in a positive way with the distortions and limitations of individual

consciousness. This convenient reframing of the severe mediations in any literary text is a convenient and harmless illusion within the boundaries of literary study, but as soon as inferences attempt to connect text with society cautions must be made.

In a curious way the sophistication of specialists within literary fields allows literary texts to be used in so many irresponsible ways. The student of literary theory is alert to the cautions against inference in each possible area of the literary field. Concern for the reader invokes warnings against the affective fallacy; concern for the author suggests the intentional fallacy; focus upon the referent brings up the genetic or historical fallacy; and study of the code raises the heresies of paraphrase and translatability. Appropriate cautions are usually made to avoid these methodological pitfalls, but destabilizing the truth-claims of literary Inference is usually accompanied with an elevation of the pseudo-empiricisms within some other discipline, such as history, or psychology, or politics, this elevation based upon the naivety of the specialist in the second discipline. The oversimplifications of methodologies and theories in each of these fields, which pass for intellectual frameworks when used by literary scholars, are both charming and deadly. However, the need to center and stabilize any analysis is great, perhaps necessary, and if one's own discipline is unable to resist the strictest intellectual proddings, then secondary field will appear to resist them, and will therefore suggest a safe ground upon which to construct our assumptions. The historian thinks nothing of drawing from literary texts for evidence to support historical conclusions, removing passages from context in a way no trained student of literature would ever consider responsible. However, that same student of literature, evoking the forms of psychoanalysis, Marxism, feminism, or similarly non-literary disciplines, may make equally irresponsible excisions and attributions.

The most self-conscious users of multiple disciplines frequently have worked out satisfactory rationalizations for the transference of data from one area to another, but these arguments rarely meet the objections of specialists in the secondary discipline. Many psychoanalysts, for example, despair of successfully psychoanalyzing and understanding a person who spends hours a week with them for years; but literary enthusiasts of this discipline feel perfectly confident to perform that analysis upon individuals long dead who appear before them only in selected literary and biographical fragments.

Examining literary texts with the study of Popular Culture in mind Immediately shifts all literary questions to sociological ones, and thereby liberates from the constraints of interdisciplinary rigor all methodological restriction. In summarizing these restrictions here, as the limits of the multiple mediations of any work of literature, and suggesting how they intersect with the self-consciousness of all media studies, I can only begin to

observe how the focus upon literature as the text for popular culture studies commits scholars and critics to inevitable and even necessary irrelevancies and abstractions. Literature is not life; the study of literature is not life; the study of literature is not the study of life; and the study of the study of literature is neither life nor the study of life. With this, I believe, I have said enough.