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Book Reviews

Stevenson, Nick. (1995). *Understanding Media Cultures: Social Theory and Mass Communication.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. ISBN 0-8039-8930-X (Hardback, $69.95); ISBN 0-8039-8931-8 (Paperback, $21.95), 238 pp.

Rowe, David. (1995). *Popular Cultures: Rock Music, Sport and the Politics of Pleasure.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. ISBN 0-8039-7700-X Hardback, $69.95); ISBN 0-8309-7701-8 (Paperback, $21.95), 184 pp.

At the San Antonio NRPA congress in 1995, the opening session of the Leisure Research Symposium focused on relationships between mass media and leisure. It was a timely idea: mainstream social scientists were producing a wealth of books and journal articles on mass media issues, and with relatively little published on that subject in our own leisure journals, the time seemed ripe for cross-fertilization. Little has occurred since that session, though, to challenge the idea that media studies and leisure studies are undertaken in widely separated worlds of academic attention. The two books reviewed here will only reaffirm this conclusion.

Nick Stevenson's Understanding Media Cultures sets out to evaluate cultural theories of mass communication by analyzing three paradigms of contemporary media research: (1) critical approaches focused on the ideology and political economy of mass communication; (2) interpretive approaches about audience/media relationships; and (3) cultural analyses of media technologies. Within each paradigm, Stevenson reviews and critiques a selected set of influential scholars whose writings about mass communication have contributed to an understanding of cultural processes. Included are two chapters on critical theory (one reflecting the British Marxism of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others, and the other discussing the writing of Jurgen Habermas as representative of the Frankfurt school of social research); one chapter on audience research (discussing the semiotic and structural analyses of David Morley, John Fiske, and feminist researchers Ien Ang and Janice Radway); and two chapters on cultural transmission through media technology (the contributions of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan are compared to those of Jack Goody, Anthony Giddens, Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson).

Scholars familiar with the history of theorizing about the mass media will recognize this as primarily a Continental perspective on social theory. It skips over more traditional, empirical media research driven by structural-functional, cognitive, or behavioral theories, the predominant approaches in past research about media uses and gratifications, media agenda setting, public opinion effects, and information processing. Instead, Stevenson picks up the story with postmodernism, a philosophical moment that Critcher (1992)

compares with "...wandering into town to do a quiet bit of window shopping and finding yourself in the middle of a student rag parade. You've no idea what it's about, how long it will last or where it will all end. Besides, everyone seems to have had far too much to drink" (p. 118).

This book is not easy going. It is also not for those who like to skim texts, or those under-rehearsed in reading philosophy of science and social theory. Stevenson aims to "develop an informed debate with those aspects of social theory that have taken the media seriously" (p. 2), and in this regard, he certainly succeeds. His examination of and comparisons among different theories and theorists is an exercise in detailed scholarship, ranging widely across an array of social science disciplines. Within this tapestry, the author weaves several important themes, including relationships between private pleasures and public obligations; the ability of people to participate meaningfully and democratically in mediated worlds; the values of aesthetic cultures; and the manipulation of mediated messages under conditions of globalization. By linking social and cultural habits and actions to economic, political, and ideological practices, Stevenson begins to deflate the myth that "the media form just another leisure activity in late capitalist society" (p. 180).

Without a great deal of outside reading, though, American leisure scientists will probably not easily follow the finer points of Stevenson's arguments. The author presumes a reader's familiarity with not only a broad array of philosophers and social theorists, but also with past traditions in mass media research. Even with that background, readers might find that some sections of the text are dense and abstract. Stevenson deters his audience with never-ending paragraphs (in several places, a single paragraph continues for over a full page), and some sentences seem convoluted and overworked. A certain kind of language and logic is often used in theoretical analyses like these, which is probably why the journal Philosophy and Literature created the Bad Writing Contest for academic prose gone awry. Though Stevenson has apparently not won that contest, one of the theorists he favors, Frederic Jameson, was the first-place winner in 1997. The organization of the text is not entirely helpful in clarifying issues: chapters 4 and 5 deal with media technology, but follow three chapters about mediated messages and mass media audiences. Because messages and audiences depend in part on the mode of transmission, it would have been more reasonable to introduce the book with chapters about technological forms and then follow with the message and audience chapters.

Though some leisure researchers do read critical social theory, most do not seem to be writing extensively about it. We therefore do not find this book immediately useful for most leisure researchers, even though it contains gems of ideas for those persistent enough to read it carefully and turn to primary sources for clarification. The discussion of feminist perspectives on how and why women read romance novels and watch shows like "Dallas" (chapter 3) is particularly relevant to leisure research, as is the evaluation of television as a medium that, while producing a "world without strangers,"

also privileges private amusement over public solidarity (chapter 4). These represent markedly different theoretical approaches to the study of media and leisure than those expressed in empirical studies of media use and functions typically published in leisure journals.

Written about topics which we might legitimately wish to claim as within our disciplinary purview, Stevenson's book offers provocative new directions for leisure research. Nevertheless, it also reminds us that vigorous social theorizing in mainstream disciplines often takes an inordinately long time to translate into practice in more applied fields such as our own. Leisure researchers willing to put the time and effort into reading this book and others in structural, critical, and interpretive social theory will probably be those who make future contributions to understanding media cultures in leisure. Those who continue to study media as simply technological objects used by people during free time are likely to be left behind in the playback loop of discarded media technologies.

David Rowe's book, Popular Cultures, initially seemed like an easier read and a closer fit with current work in leisure research. Alas, a postmodern infatuation with deconstructing the reasons why popular culture is worth studying (couched in appropriate guarantees of uncertainty, reflexivity, sensitivity, and "respectfulness" for the complexity and breadth of the topic) makes most of the introductory chapter simply self-indulgent. Along with 22 different citations supporting the idea that it's appropriate for the theorist to get personal while approaching the theorized, Rowe includes at least half a dozen different explanations of how he defines "the popular" (primarily in relation to what it is not, rather than what it is). Wandering this maze, readers must wait until page eight to actually see what the book is about: "...the social, economic, cultural, political, and ideological dimensions of popular culture...(to provide an understanding) of popular culture production, distribution, exchange, consumption, interpretation and response."

After an introduction, the remaining six chapters of the book examine economic, ideological, and socio-cultural forces surrounding two major forms of popular culture: rock music and sport. Unlike researchers who think of music and sport as simply activities that people experience or watch, Rowe focuses on the symbolic texts and identities of expressiveness created in music and sport cultures, the market production and structuring of these as cultural objects, and the ideologies of interest and power upholding sport and rock music as cultural forms in society. In both case studies, Rowe provides a critical theoretical analysis of the topic and also incorporates data from "interview research" to support his discussion. Unfortunately, he offers no discussion of the specific research projects, approaches, or methods that produced these data. A set of endnotes would have been most helpful in describing this research more fully, as well as in sorting out attributions in the cited comments (Rowe uses capital letters, presumably to indicate subjects' names, but it is unclear whether all those identified as "A," for example, are the same person).

There are several other technical problems with this volume. Rowe's use of undefined or vaguely defined terms, his jumbled sentence structures, and

his assumption that readers have prior familiarity with existing theory in cultural studies, can sidetrack even the most diligent reader. He writes, for instance:

> What I call popular culture should not be confused with rival formulations like folk or mass culture. The former can be best characterized as essentially pre-industrial, pre-capitalist sets of symbolic practices which have been progressively destroyed by the erosion of non-commodifiable and unrationalized forms of culture. The latter concept is essentially chimerical, given its founding assumption that the industrialization of cultural forms and their systems of production inevitably constructs a Pavlovian relationship between addressor and addressee, created out of the manipulative potency of stimulatory, trivialized and inorganic texts (p. 7).

Even if a reader can correctly determine whether Rowe is talking about two or three types of culture, and then identify which of those is the "former" and which the "latter," there are still unelaborated political assumptions hidden behind those other sentences. This is clearly a case for submission to the Bad Writing Contest!

It is unfortunate that Rowe's form makes it so difficult to understand his ideas, because his work is potentially useful for leisure researchers. Music and sport are important components of leisure for many people, and much can be learned from detailed, critical analysis of each. For example, Rowe looks at the growing importance of "spectating" as part of sport cultures and examines why sports spectacles are so important in economic, ideological, and social terms. He also discusses the social relations behind rock music production, as well as the interdependent relationships among audience subcultures, musicians, production companies, radio personalities, and others. Both rock music and sport are introduced as "cultural disciplines of the body...means and forms by which the body is shaped, draped, trained, surveyed, displayed, stimulated, and sold" (p. 100), a compelling and controversial idea, but one that Rowe fails to fully develop.

Rowe does not provide a final, concluding chapter that synthesizes his arguments and ties together the case studies. This is disappointing, because many provocative, under-developed themes introduced in this book need some resolution (even if that resolution is only to suggest areas for future research). His discussion of the creation of the "athlete-worker" and the manipulation of distance between performers and spectators in both music and sport raise important questions about assumed freedom in leisure production and consumption. The idea of a "politics of pleasure" is offered in the title, but remains unexplored and taken for granted through the rest of the book. The opportunity to present more than a cursory look at female-centered views of rock music and sports seems to have been largely overlooked, though sports programming around media presentations of females and other minority groups has emerged as an economic force over the last several years. An extraordinary photo on the front book cover—of an athlete, back to the camera, encouraging a frenzied audience to greater heights of screaming enthusiasm—remains only a silent, unelaborated addition to the text. All these issues could have been addressed in a conclusion that drew

the threads of Rowe's argument together, reinforced his main points, and provided an orientation for popular culture studies and future research.

Rowe's book, like Stevenson's, is described on the book cover as "essential reading" for scholars studying social and cultural theory as well as mass communications. But leisure researchers hoping to gain from either work will likely conclude that both have essentially the same weaknesses: the authors do a poor job of guiding readers less informed in social theory through postmodernist versions of critical and interpretive cultural analysis. Instead, North American leisure researchers may wish to start with other, more approachable work about media and culture, such as the liberal symbolic interactionist analyses of Altheide and Snow (1991) or Meyrowitz (1985). With those as a basis, the critical and interpretive paradigms of Stevenson and Rowe can be placed in a broader, more coherent context.

If the Stevenson and Rowe books do have an immediate value for us, it is probably in their contrast with contemporary thinking and approaches in leisure research. Our scholarly efforts would surely improve with broader recognition and more adventuresome application of contemporary social theory. Though there may be easier ways of learning social theory than reading these two books, we encourage leisure researchers to expand their horizons. Perhaps by forcing ourselves to read complex theoretical and philosophical ideas, we may become the hybrid, enlightened scholars we wish to be.

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