

MEDIA JOURNAL

READING AND WRITING
— ABOUT —
POPULAR CULTURE



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—
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MEDIA JOURNAL

Reading and Writing about Popular Culture

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Preface

There is a scene near the start of Sidney Lumet's 1976 movie *Network*, in which Howard Beale, an aging TV newsman who has gone a bit crazy, urges his viewers to rise from their chairs, open their windows, and shout out: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" As one viewer after another follows Beale's instructions, an extraordinary social transformation occurs. The television audience begins to disintegrate and, as neighbors go to their windows to listen for one another's shouts, a kind of crude community of the angry and dispossessed is formed in its place. In turning toward one another, Beale's viewers immediately shift their status. They are no longer spectators separately attending to television, and because of this they can no longer be sold to advertisers as a commodity. Beale has used television to dismantle the "product" of the television industry, which is not only an audience, but an audience arranged in a certain way—as individual viewers, physically scattered and typically silent as they attend to the images on the screen.

We think that, as writing teachers, we can undertake a similar act by encouraging students to turn toward one another in order to examine and discuss the mass media in its various forms—television, radio, advertising, popular music, film, and fashion. Students come to the university with long experience as part of the audiences for these media. If they share a common culture, it is that of the sitcom, the pop song, and the thirty-second spot. If they have mastered any canon of great works, it is one that includes *The Honeymooners*, *Saturday Night Fever*, and Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. And if there is a culture that, as their teachers, we share with them it is more likely to come from the mass media than from history or literature or art. Attending in class to this common culture can thus offer us a chance not only to urge students toward a more conscious and critical appreciation of the

media but also to suggest the sort of power and insight that study at a university can offer them.

This book offers some materials for teaching such a class. In it we ask students to do three main things: (1) To keep a **media journal** in which they reflect on the uses they make of the voices and images of popular culture; (2) to **read and respond** to the work of other media critics, to test their own views and experiences against those of the writers included in these pages; and (3) to try their hands at **writing media criticism** themselves. All three kinds of work ask students to find and write about texts from the media culture around them, to think critically about what they see and hear on their television sets and radios, in magazines and newspapers, on city streets and shopping malls, at the movies and concerts and clubs. To put it another way, we feel that a book like this can only provide *some* of the materials for a course on writing about popular culture, that the remaining materials must always come from the media themselves and the experiences students have with them. Our aim is not to inculcate students with certain critical methods or terms, or to introduce them to the academic study of popular culture, but to offer them opportunities to rethink and write about their own experiences with the media, to come to their own understandings of our common culture.

We have tried to put this book together in a way that encourages a varied and eclectic use of the materials in it. We felt that the best way to do so was to focus not on categories of analysis but of *experience*. And so we have focused each of the chapters in this book on a common way of using or interacting with the media: keeping in touch, escaping, forming connections with celebrities, feeling hyped, reading the meanings of places and objects, identifying with certain kinds of music, and the like. These, of course, are by no means the only locations or categories available for cultural criticism. And individual teachers will want to move through them at different paces and in various orders. We offer them simply as useful points of entry, places to get started in thinking about our culture, ways into the critical conversation.

Most of the chapters in this book are divided into three sections:

- A media journal assignment that asks students to write informally on some particular aspect of their experiences with the media. Students might be asked to read or speak from their journal entries in class, which can also serve as starting points for longer or more formal writings.
- Three or four readings by critics dealing with similar issues or experiences. Each of these readings is followed by brief questions that ask students to come to their own terms with the text, to write out and thus clarify their understanding of what they have read.

- Questions for writing criticism that ask students to make use of what they have read in their own work as writers—to apply, extend, or point out the limits of particular ways of looking at the media.

We imagine that different teachers will use these materials to build courses that vary widely in focus, pacing, and tone. One might choose to base a course on the media journal assignments alone; another might work more to engage students in dialogue with the readings; yet another teacher might strive to join the two, to have students move from experience to analysis, journal writing to criticism. In the last chapter of this book we offer a number of projects in criticism, assignments that require both research and writing and that are suitable for a final paper or term project.

In choosing the readings for this book, we have tried to give a sense of the many kinds of work now being done both in and outside the university under the rubric of “cultural studies,” including the writings of literary theorists, TV critics, rock journalists, feminists, philosophers, ethnographers, cultural historians, political essayists, semioticians, and many others. What these writers have in common is a tendency to inquire into the meanings of things that are often thought not to mean much of anything at all: tape players, weather reports on TV, blue jeans, supermarkets, *Playboy* fold-outs, soda commercials, and the like. And what we looked for in selections was, first of all, writing that we liked, that we found in some way interesting, lucid, compelling, witty, or original. But we have not chosen these texts simply to be admired or imitated. They are meant instead to be argued with, talked back to, resisted, revised, reread for a purpose, made to serve the ends not only of their writers but of their readers as well. The writing assignments that follow ask students not only to use these readings in interpreting other media texts but also to draw on their own experiences in responding to what they read. Indeed, much of the “material” that we ask students to draw and comment on here comes from their own encounters with the media—and so their experiences and ideas are central to this book as we have imagined it. Our hope is that these assignments and readings will help them interrogate their own histories with the media and to create new meanings from them.

This book is the result not only of the collaboration between the two of us but of the support from our families, friends, colleagues, and students. We thank the reviewers who made valuable suggestions: Lee Jacobs, University of Connecticut; Donna H. Winchell, Clemson University; Eva J. Winkle, St. Petersburg Junior College; Kathleen L. Bell, University of Central Florida; Robert L. Root, Jr., Central Michigan University; Lori Nielson, John Clifford, University of North Carolina/Wilmington; James Seitz, University of Pittsburgh; Robert Thompson, Syracuse University; William Costanzo, Westchester Community College; Geoffrey Sirc, University of Minnesota; Joseph Janangelo, Loyola University of Chicago; and David Bartholomae.

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Introduction

Reading Culture

"To write this stuff, you have to read like hell and watch a lot of television." So says Matt Wickline, a comedy writer on the staff of *Late Night with David Letterman*, explaining how he gets ideas for Letterman's jokes and routines. Those of us who, like Wickline, were born after World War II have probably been raised on popular culture. We're likely, that is, to have watched a lot of television, seen a lot of movies, heard a lot of pop songs, glanced at a great many ads. As college teachers and students, we are now also asked to read continuously, seriously, and widely. This combination—media culture plus a habit of reading—can be a powerful one, not only for comedy writers but for critics. And that is what we ask you to become in this book: critics of the culture that has produced David Letterman, the Beach Boys, James Dean, and microwave popcorn.

To consume the products of popular culture requires no instruction. We already know how to watch television, operate a tape player, scan the pages of a magazine, or go out to the movies. But criticism differs from consumption. A critic is concerned with appreciating, understanding, connecting, and talking back to the media. A consumer simply uses the products of the media—for enjoyment, for information, or as part of a daily routine. There would be nothing wrong with this if the media were not also trying to use us. But as audiences for the mass media we are often quite useful to others. When we're watching the evening news, or flipping through the pages of a magazine, or listening casually to the radio in the morning, we are part of the production of a valuable commodity—a mass audience that can be

packaged and sold to advertisers. Ordinarily we think of packaging as something done to products. But we ourselves are packaged when, for example, *Rolling Stone* advertises itself as a good place to reach the “young spenders,” those 18-to-35-year-old college-educated men and women whose buying habits its advertisers wish to shape. To live in a culture where the mass media are heavily commercialized is to be on the receiving end of innumerable acts of packaging and persuasion—of attempts to convince us to accept this image or that notion of ourselves. And so car commercials sell us on speed, power, freedom, and mobility; movies sell us on action; sitcoms promote particular notions of family life; magazines present beauty, glamour, and fame as worlds we might inhabit. Often these propositions are harmless; sometimes they can be fun, or even inspiring. Some of them we may wish to accept as true—or at least as important to ourselves and our dreams. Others we might revise or transform for our own purposes. Yet others we reject. And still others we may protest and seek to change. But this sorting-out process begins with criticism—with an awareness of what our culture is saying when it talks to us through the mass media. This is what “reading” culture is all about.

By *reading*, then, we mean something more than simply lifting information out of books or articles. To read a text or event is to do something to it, to *make* sense out of its signals and clues. And so, for instance, a poker player reads the faces of the others around the table; a quarterback reads the defense arrayed before him; a professional guide on a rafting trip reads the river and its (possibly treacherous) currents. Reading is thus not something we do to books alone. Or, to put it another way, books and other printed surfaces are not the only texts we read. Rather, a “text” is anything that can be interpreted, that we can make meaning out of or assign value to. In this sense, all culture is a text and all culture can be read. Advertising slogans can be read, but so can the images in ads. Song titles can be read, but so can the singer’s attitude. We can “read” a movie for the messages it is sending us. We can “read” a TV show for the values it promotes. Machines can be “read” for the ideas or propositions they embody. Reading, in this sense, is an intentional act—it is to have a certain purpose in mind in examining an object or experience. It is to be on the lookout for something. What sort of thing to look *for* is part of what we hope to teach you in this book.

Reading is also often an act with consequences. It is not neutral but *interested*—in the sense of being engaged, involved, committed. We read to size things up, to form our own ideas, to decide where we stand, or whom we want to stand with or against. “To read is to undo,” says Mark Crispin Miller, a critic of television.¹ What he means, we think, is that all texts, and perhaps especially the texts of a commercial culture, are trying to “do”

¹ *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 19.

things to us or with us. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of advertising, which is trying to get us to buy something. But even texts that seem to do nothing more than entertain can also be seen as trying to get us to buy certain images of ourselves or our world.

Consider a television game show like *Jeopardy*. We can watch it just to pass the time, or we can play along by trying to answer the questions with the contestants. We can also read *Jeopardy* as a text. That is, we can ask what sorts of claims the show might be said to make about the world and also what claims it makes on us as its viewers—what it tries to get us to accept or believe. We might notice, for instance, that *Jeopardy* celebrates a view of knowledge as the simple ability to recall random and disconnected facts—and we could then begin to ask why we find this mastery of trivia so entertaining. Or we could grant that there's always a certain joy in knowing the right answer to a question, however foolish or inane it may be, and we might then try to connect this pleasure to patterns of schooling that stress the memorization of facts or to the experience of being routinely bombarded with vast amounts of (mostly useless) information nearly every day of our lives—as we move from the morning paper to the car radio to billboards and magazines and memos and junk mail and supermarket displays to finally the TV and the news at eleven.

In thus looking at the products of popular culture as *texts*, we can start to subvert the intentions of their makers and to replace them with our own. This is not as unusual as it might seem. Products are often used in unexpected ways by the people who buy them: Recipes and formulas get changed; texts get misread on purpose. Safety pins become earrings; the knees of blue jeans are intentionally ripped; sweatshirts are worn several sizes too big. Bart Simpson shows up on T-shirts as an African American. TV ads and sitcom jingles are parodied; soaps are talked back to. The faces of celebrities become masks on Halloween; homemade dance tapes segue wildly and happily from pop to funk to rap to rock, violating all marketing categories along the way. Yet this skeptical knowledge of (and pleasure in) the voices and images of our common culture rarely finds a place in college classrooms, which means that it also rarely gets questioned or pushed or changed. Instead, our lives are too often divided in two—with friends, family, work, clothes, music, movies, TV, magazines, advertising, and almost everything else on one side, and academic study on the other.

Keeping a Media Journal

Our aim in this book is to overcome that split, to make the media culture outside the classroom one of the things that gets talked about inside it. The best way to do this is to begin with experience—that is, with ways in which

the media figure in our own lives. And so we decided to organize this book not around types of criticism or forms of media but *categories of experience*—or common ways of using and interacting with the media. Throughout the book we ask you to reflect on what you do with the mass media: the shows you watch, the movies you like, the music you enjoy, the ads you see, the news you hear, the performers you admire, the habits and routines you've developed over time.

In most courses offered at a university, the challenge is to assimilate new material, to master new knowledge by becoming familiar with its uses. In this book, we ask you to engage in a kind of reverse process: to begin with the familiar territory of your own experience and to make this experience seem new or "strange." By "strange" we simply mean "in need of explanation" or "worth thinking (and writing) about." The challenge here, then, is not to master unfamiliar material but to "read" familiar experiences in a new or productive way. This means noticing things you have always done but rarely questioned—habits and preferences, likes and dislikes, important moments and recurrent patterns in your use of media.

To help with this process, we often present you with lists of questions you can ask yourself to investigate the media's place in your life. Not all of these questions will seem relevant to you; not all will produce interesting results for your own thinking and writing. That's to be expected. The point is not to answer them all, the way you would in a standardized exam, but to use the questions you find in this book to improve your own understanding of media experiences. That means selecting the questions that seem most interesting or relevant to you—the ones that best illuminate your own experience. After all, a question in a textbook is itself a "text" that can be read in a variety of ways. The best way to "read" the questions in this book is simply to seize on those that cause you to think or suggest a new way of looking at things.

As a way of noticing and reflecting on your media experiences, we recommend that you keep throughout the term a **media journal**—a notebook in which you jot down ideas, work out your responses, record your observations, and generally conduct the intellectual work required of you by the assignments in this book. (It is possible to keep this notebook in electronic form—that is, on a computer disk. But it is probably just as easy to make it a handwritten exercise. Either way, the journal should be useful to you, and organized according to your own working style.)

The journal is intended to accomplish three kinds of tasks. The first, and most structured, involves a series of **journal assignments**. These are thinking and writing tasks, presented at the beginning of each chapter. Most of them ask you to reflect on your own experience with the media. For instance, almost everybody uses the media in some way to "keep in touch" with people or events, and, conversely, just about everyone also uses the

media to “escape,” to be entertained or distracted. So those are two categories of experience we ask you to think about and write about in your journal. Others include feeling hyped or pressured by the media, connecting with celebrities, identifying with a certain sort of music, and watching TV. The journal assignments are built around questions we ask you to ask yourself. Keep in mind that it is not necessary to answer all the questions—just those that get you thinking.

Another task for which your journal will be useful is **keeping files**. By “files” we mean, essentially, lists of observations and ideas that you may want to draw on in your writings and in classroom discussions. If you keep your journal in a notebook, you may want to set aside a few pages for each of your file categories. Or if you work on a computer, you may want to set up a separate document for each one. But there is no right or wrong way to keep such files; the point is to record significant aspects of your media experience for possible use throughout the term. Here are some ideas for lists you may want to create and add to as the term proceeds. These are only suggestions. The actual categories you develop will have to grow out of your own experience and working style.

- **Incidents from memory:** Important moments in your life when the media played a key role.
- **Firsts:** Moments of discovery when you first realized the power or joy of a particular medium or media experience.
- **Favorites:** Lists of performers, films, shows, songs, books, and images that have developed some sort of hold on you.
- **Strong reactions:** Particular encounters with the media that moved you deeply, or changed the way you looked at things, or caused you to feel outraged, or otherwise disturbed you in a way that may be worth examining
- **Questions to yourself:** Things you don’t understand, or would like to explore about your own history with media or your current habits and preferences.
- **Comments from others:** Things friends, acquaintances, interviewees, or classmates have said that struck you as interesting or in need of exploration.
- **Routines:** Habits you may have developed in your use of the media, or recurrent patterns that show up when you examine how the media enter into your life.

In addition to your journal assignments and files, you will probably also want to respond to the **Questions for Rereading** in your media journal. These are reading tasks we ask you to undertake after you have read through the essays in this book at least once. In most cases these questions

ask you to do something to or with the author's text—to take notes, make a list, or apply your experience to what is said in the piece. We suggest that you do so in your media journal. Answers to the **Questions for Rereading** are meant to be discussed in class. That means, of course, that you should bring your journal with you whenever your class meets. You may often find that what is said there will prompt you to add some new notes or observations to those already in your journal.

Keep your journal in whatever form suits you. Again, some people write their entries in a notebook they carry with them from place to place, while others type theirs on a personal computer. The point of journal writing is to jot down your thoughts and observations, not to write a finished or elegant essay. We think that you will soon find yourself speaking from these notes in class, that you will use them in contrasting your own experiences and ideas with those of the critics you read, and that you will also draw on them in drafting your own more formal writings.

Writing Criticism

In addition to keeping a media journal, we also ask you to read and respond to the work of other cultural critics, to match your experiences and test your ideas against theirs. What we looked for when selecting the readings for this book was, first of all, writing that we liked, that we found in some way intriguing, lucid, compelling, witty, or original. This does not mean that the writings presented here are easy. Quite the opposite. In trying to stretch the boundaries of criticism, such pieces often prove as difficult as they are interesting. The **Questions for Rereading** ask you not just to understand what the authors are saying but also to use what they have said to clarify your own experience with the media and popular culture. You are again asked to use the readings in the sections on **Writing Criticism** that conclude each chapter. Here, we usually ask you to do two things: (1) To draw on what you've read in interpreting some other media text; and (2) to go out and do what the critics presented here are doing, to engage in the kind of criticism on display in the essays you've read.

You will find that such work rarely ends up with answers that are clearly right or wrong. Instead, the aim of the critic is to form his or her own stance toward a subject in relation to what others have thought and said about it. The readings in this book are meant as provocations for such criticism, to get you to think through and reinterpret your experiences as part of our media culture, to become a more skeptical and attentive reader of its many voices and images, to become a critic yourself.

Criticism begins in looking at something as a text—as an object to be given meaning, interpreted, handled by your own intelligence. Often the