

## Culture



# John FROW and Meaghan MORRIS (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 269 pages

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## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

John FROW and Meaghan MORRIS (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 269 pages.

by Benjamin Amaya

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*Australian Cultural Studies* is an engaging introduction to a field that is not well known in North America. This should not continue to be the case, as the book provides access to a variety of perspectives relevant to current debates on society and culture well beyond the Australian shores. The reader's introduction, by editors Frow and Morris, provides a useful background to the recent evolution of the field. The British tradition of cultural studies, under the lead of theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, was the main formative influence on its Australian counterpart. An extensive body of work emerged from this foundation, incorporating, as in North America and Britain itself, conceptual frameworks and research strategies taken from post-structuralism, feminism, semiotics, and critical theory. On the other hand, a distinctive feature of the Australian production is a close relationship to extra-academic debates. An example of such involvement is the critical concern with the construction of a post-colonial nation found in a good part of the essays included in the reader.

The book is divided into five parts: "Representation Wars"; "Aesthetics and Everyday Life"; "The Uses of Popular Culture"; "The Politics of Publics"; and "The Practice of Place." The following paragraphs outline essays from these sections. For reasons of space, the essays included in the review are the ones that do not require a lengthy elaboration on their specific Australian context.

### "Representation Wars"

In "Malaysia, Embassy, and Australia's Corps Diplomatique," Suvendrini Perera analyzes the way in which a high-level diplomatic effort at the 1991 Commonwealth Summit introduced representation to international relations in the South Pacific. In "Bad Aboriginal Art," Eric Michael considers the case of Australian Aboriginal paintings intended for sale in the international market. The essay underlines the problems of quality evaluation and price setting related to the notions of authorship and artistic practice that inform the paintings; these notions are very different from what is customarily assumed in the systems of production, circulation, and exchange of non-Aboriginal art.

### "Aesthetics and Everyday Life"

Helen Grace's "A House of Games: Serious Business and the Aesthetics of Logic" discusses the relations between the apparently opposed notions of "value" and "utility," cogently arguing that modern management increasingly relies upon aesthetic categories. "Art and commerce... have considerable overlap in the manner in which knowledge is produced and circulated: largely through aesthetic means and artistic devices" (p. 73). In a further example, Grace points out the use of simulation games in management as a trend that challenges previous definitions of utility in classical economics. The discussion offered on Huizinga's and Callois' concepts of play expands the background of the field explored by Grace. It should be mentioned that study of this area – nowadays an almost exclusive concern of management researchers – may have important consequences, such as presenting a challenge to rational-choice theory. Besides rare works such as Grace's, signs of

interest in the extra-rationality of economic behaviour have recently been missing in the social sciences and humanities.

### **“The Uses of Popular Culture”**

In “Homage to Catatonia: Culture, Politics and Midnight Oil,” McKenzie Wark presents the case of the peculiar place of the rock group Midnight Oil in Australia’s cultural and political scene. The author “runs back and forth between the business of music and the business of criticism” (p. 100), analyzing the synergy between popular music and the musical industry. Wark argues that the relationships between music and audience should not be simplistically attributed to “manipulation” nor “simulation”; multiple compromises and adjustments operate between the industry and the musical practices of the population. Peter Garrett, Midnight Oil’s lead singer, is characterized as an “organic intellectual” who combines Australian features with the agendas of the social movements of the 1970s. Wark finds striking analogies between the critical commentary accomplished by popular artists and the work of cultural criticism; both are forced to negotiate the turbulent waters of power and industry.

Adrian Martin’s “In the Name of Popular Culture” establishes a distinction between “pop” and popular culture, defining the former as “the acute self-consciousness of mass culture and its consumers,” and the latter as “the intellectual study of popular forms,” noting that “in a leisure-driven society... even the pursuit of fun has a certain manic grimness about it... as never before, consumers are moved to identify themselves as representations of ‘we the people’ who demand only to be entertained by those objects labelled entertainment commodities” (p. 137). Martin takes issue with the influential work of John Fiske, who sees political contestation in a myriad of consumer practices, stressing, instead, the pertinence of the Critical School’s political economy of culture. A quote by T. Adorno on the continuous transmutation of utopia into boredom as a constitutive feature of consumer society appropriately reinforces this critique.

### **“The Politics of Publics”**

Virginia Nightingale’s “What’s Ethnographic About Ethnographic Audience Research” offers a critique of John Fiske’s prescribed route for cultur-

al studies: the combination of ethnographic and semiotic approaches. In Nightingale’s view, the match between the two is still premature, as cultural studies seem to live “a confusion between the descriptive and classificatory work of ethnography with the interpretive work possible once cultures are seen as metaphors for texts (p. 151). Therefore, in audience research studies, despite the fact that the techniques used are ethnographic, this is not the case for the overall research strategy. The consequences of such selective use are a “co-opting of the interviewees experience by the researcher, and its use as authority of the researcher’s point of view” (p. 152). According to Nightingale, the “bricolages” that communities effect on the complex institutions of commercial television are qualitatively different from the identitary arrangements operating in other ethnographic targets such as youth subcultures. The ethnographic study of audiences requires, then, analytical innovation and triangulation of sources. This can be accomplished by the use of public records, interviews, participant observation, and statistical surveys, as well as the consideration of recent developments in anthropology such as the inclusion of multiple ethnographic voices and multiple intended readerships.

In “Invisible Fictions,” John Hartley challenges the notion of a television criticism conceived as a form dependent upon national “essences.” Against this view, he argues that “it may even be possible to see in impurities not a problem but a fundamental criterion for cultural studies” (p. 163). For Hartley, instead, the impure phenomenon that is television is delimited by “fuzzy” boundaries, and oriented toward increasing internationalization. In his view, television institutes a “paedocratic regime of leisure” sustained by the fiction of a standardized audiences; in such a regime, viewers are addressed as children in the interest of profit and corporate survival.

### **“The Practice of Place”**

In “The Practice of Place,” probably the most innovative and thought-provoking part of the book, the authors probe the links between historical commemoration, national identity construction, and everyday life through the analysis of sites, discourses, and images. In “History on the Rocks,” Tony Bennet examines the memorial site of Australia’s colonial-penitentiary foundation.

This commemorative emplacement has been recently transformed into a historical tourism park. "The Rocks... now furnishes the locale for the development of a sanitized and mythical past which, in its commitment to eradicating all the marks and signs of the area's settlement that cannot be harmonized with its glittering façade... functions as an institutionalized mode of forgetting. The Rocks supplies the site for an encounter with an idealized and fabricated past which has been substituted for, and made possible by, the erasure of those marks which bear a testimony to the real and contradictory complexity of the area's history" (p. 225). Bennet analyzes the rhetoric of national foundation that underlies the current policies of Australian multiculturalism, providing material suitable for comparison with Canada and other "settler" ex-colonies.

In the small town of Tenterfield, where Sir Henry Parkes made a Historic Federation Speech in 1889, thus marking the foundation of the Australian state, a motel stands, conveniently named after the orator. This represents the point of departure for Meaghan Morris in "At Henry Parkes Motel." Morris narrates her own transit along the routes of commemoration, nation-emergence, commuting, and tourism that intersect at this "customized" establishment. Morris takes a nearby chain motel as a counterpoint against which the Henry Parkes is individualized, both by its historical reference and its suburban home aesthetics. Morris addresses time and space in this exercise by the use of different tempos and perspectives of reading. These are deployed to deal with the fact that "the trouble with a motel as a site of analysis is that... motels in fact demolish sense-regimes of place, locale and history. They memorialize only movement, speed, and perpetual circulation" (p. 243). On this base, Morris unfolds the categories of acceleration, transient status, and the transformation of "places" into "space." She argues that in Australia, a doubtful distinction exists between mobility and home, as displacement and endless "progress" constitute the primary habitat of the population.

Conveniently located at the end of the book, as if marking the border of the unexplored, stands Lesley Stern's and Kevin Ballantine's "'Cup City': Where Nothing Ends, Nothing Happens." This essay consists of reflections on a series of photographs of Freemantle, on the Western Australian coast, where an "epic event" was held in 1986: the

America Yachting Cup. However, the images do not depict any yacht, jet-setters, nor details of the competition. Instead, they show the empty horizon of the sea, a skyline of glittering buildings, banal interfaces of concrete, sand, and trees, as well as casual renderings of locals. These pictures "suggest an air of languid immobility. Space prevails over people – the latter are hanging around as though waiting for something to happen. They are awkward in their desultory vigilance. These photos do not invoke spectacle, excitement, suspense." (p. 277). Stern defines this essay as a subtle "subversion" of the commercial epic of the Cup, taking full grasp of its metaphorical implications: "Can we fill these images with all the plenitude that the void, the empty heart of Australia, has to offer?" (p. 277). Besides the intrinsic worth of providing an overview of the varied landscape of cultural studies in Australia, the book merits an attentive reading for two main reasons: a) it incites to compare and correlate sociocultural phenomena between Australia and other countries with similar historical trajectories; and b) it provides students and scholars outside the field of cultural studies – particularly anthropology, the sociology of culture, and communication studies – with the possibility of effecting a stimulating detour in which often familiar theoretical guidelines are applied to different objects, contexts, and debates.

Kenelm BURRIDGE, *In The Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavours*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1991, xvi + 307 pages; appendices, notes, bibliography and index.

By James A. Boutilier

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This is a profound and thoughtful book by a profound and thoughtful man. *In The Way* is a distillation of years of reflection on the inner logic and the inner dynamic of the missionary process. Furthermore, it is an attempt to understand the character and motivations of missionaries that caused them to embark on their courses and animated their labours.

Why the title? There is nothing delphic in the choice of words. Missionaries were in the way. Their endeavours were all too frequently provocative, threatening existing orders and calling upon individuals and societies to do the nearly impossi-