

## Review:

**Goldstein, Philip & James L. Machor (eds.), *New Directions in American Reception Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2008). ISBN 978-0-19-532087-9, pp. 379**

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### Abstract

When I first discovered the internet, I was overwhelmed by the sheer wealth of material available, using it to 'surf the web' for information on television shows and films, and first discovering online communities. This was also where I first became aware of this kind of detailed fan activity, and thus my first experience with some of the aspects of reception that are discussed in this book. The internet may be the contemporary initial port of call for many audiences wishing to engage with texts and with each other, but it is neither the first nor the only. *New Directions in American Reception Study* explores both critical and audience relationships with texts with numerous detailed case studies which focus in on very specific types of reception.

Goldstein and Machor's book looks not only to the present but to the past, to the history of both audiences and reception studies itself, presenting a wide reaching range of essays that examine historically located forms of interactions within specific cultural, racial and gender-based groups. The books collaborators approach material dealing with literature, print culture, sites of reception and fandom, with a wide range of case studies, from the internet to hair salons. It is this variety and penchant for examining beyond traditional areas of reception and thinking that makes the book so intriguing. Indeed, they seem to actively seek to question accepted ideas within reception studies and to cast light upon any perceived failures or simplifications of how culture is judged to approach or use texts. All too often it is easy to see generalisations being made about audiences, sweeping statements that suggest any given audience will react in similar ways to a text. By featuring such detailed and specific case studies, Goldstein and Machor have compiled a collection which highlights how the context of any text and its audience are an equally vital aspect for consideration in analysing reception.

The book's first section sets out to discuss the re-theorising of reception studies, questioning the perception of the reader as passive and how intellectual debates are used as means to try and establish 'truth'. A variety of essays also cover audience power, and mount a spirited defence of active audience theories through what can be learnt from its past failures, and a reassessment of Pierre Bourdieu's interpretation of the concept of habitus. Tony Bennett suggests a reassessment of Bourdieu's work, valuing the issues it has brought to light around class and differentiation but also questioning his "central theoretical categories". This is followed by a section dealing primarily in the reception of literary novels and their writers, examining how specific forms of literature were interpreted in certain historical periods and contexts. This includes essays on how a novel like *Native Son* may be read in distinctly separate ways relating to the political and social context of the book's readers and a piece by Amy Blair which examines audience responses to the 1920 American best selling book *Main Street* (Sinclair Lewis, 1920) through fan letters received by the author. This examination of historical audiences reveals how readers formed alternative interpretations to prominent critical ones, influenced by their own social position and lifestyle. Whereas the critics saw *Main Street* as an satirical indictment of the American small-town life, many readers stemming from this background read a positive affirmation of their way of life. Marcial González also contributes a fascinating piece on the idea of authenticity, examining the controversy surrounding the revelation that *Famous All Over Town* author, Danny Santiago was revealed not to be of Chicano origin despite the audiences' assumptions, and how this resulted in negative publicity. Some critics questioned whether the book could claim "cultural authenticity" and described it as a "fraud" or "hoax", despite the author having been immersed in Chicano culture.

The third section of the book looks at print culture in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth-Century with chapters ranging from the appropriation and redistribution of clippings in the Nineteenth-Century, to the notion of 'accuracy' in early Twentieth-Century newspapers in New York, to a reassessment of audience interpretations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a decade after its original publication. I particularly enjoyed Ellen Gruber Garvey's look at Nineteenth-Century scrapbooks which reveals the fascinating and complex ways such materials were engaged with, offering a glimpse of some early examples of audiences also being productive, a potential predecessor to today's fan cultures. Audiences, fans and viewers are the main subject of the books fourth section, with Rhiannon Bury tackling the issue of internet fan forums, including a comparison between fan speculation on *Six Feet Under's* official website forum and an independent fan message board. Her findings, in contrast to the dichotomy that structures American (and to a lesser extent British) approaches to audiences, suggest fans are neither "uncritical dupes" nor "rebellious poachers". Andrea Press and Camille Johnson-Yale undertake a study of the political discussion of customers viewing *Oprah* in a hair salon,

allowing them to evidence the influence of media on every day lives, whilst Janet Staiger examines the interpretations of the film *Kiss Me Deadly* in relation to authorial intention. The book concludes with a section questioning reception studies, with Janice Radway discussing the difficulty in establishing boundaries for studies in the current cultural environment and the problematic way reception studies has to “carve up” the world in order to assess it. Toby Miller then asks us to consider the “malleability” of texts in a discussion that takes in previous essays in the book and suggests a closer look at how material may be differently received in alternative contexts to those usually assumed.

The greatest strength of *New Directions in American Reception Study* is the variety of subjects it manages to cover, and the in-depth analysis and interpretation within specific areas. There are recurring themes through several essays, such as examining the situated and contextual ways audiences appropriate a text and also make judgements on its value and authenticity. This approach can be seen in the essays by Garvey, Bury, Radway, Gonzalez and Blair, amongst others. What these essays highlight is how audience appropriation and reinterpretation is not a modern occurrence, and that ‘textual poaching’ has its routes in the popular media of the past. The essays by Templin, Blair, Staiger and Diepeveen question the different forms of reception a single text can receive, exploring conflicts between critics and a general audience as well as looking at the intriguing phenomena of *refusal* to read a text. What becomes clear throughout these essays is the difficulty in making generalisations in discussing reception and also to appreciate how contemporary culture will inherently influence the study and reception of a text. Editors Goldstein and Machor have brought together an inspiring selection of writers whose essays demonstrate a wide range of approaches, interpretations, disciplines and positions, each contributing an essay that seeks to explore reception studies in a new, unique or different way, expanding the understanding of the field and offering the opportunity to explore the minute detail of reception across historical and geographical contexts.

### **Biographical Note**

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