

Review

Battling with Bourdieu

Claudio Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. ISBN: 0-226-04342-8 (pbk). 243pp.

Danielle Fuller & DeNel Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Beyond The Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture*, London: Routledge, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-415-53295-2 (cloth). 349pp.

Here are two quite excellent books. On entirely different topics – the first concerned with one particular audience at one particular Argentinian opera house, the second addressing the rise of the phenomenon of the ‘mass reading event’ – they are linked by two things: by an interest in bringing some cultural studies-inflected audience research questions and methods to bear on forms of legitimised ‘high’ culture; and by a rich and intelligent debate with the legacy of Pierre Bourdieu.

Claudio Benzecry explores in fascinating detail a special set of audience members at the Colón Opera House in Buenos Aires. The Colón’s history as Argentina’s prime house is materially relevant. Its fourth tier – relatively cheaply priced – is inhabited by a collection (the word is important) of people who take a particular, and particularly obsessive, interest in opera: in the music, in the performers, in the set design, the costumes, and the ambience of the theatre. Benzecry was conducting an ethnographic investigation of the people, and the place of opera in their lives. His starting point was an assumption that Bourdieu’s categories for thinking about high culture would apply without remainder. But as he studied them, he found features quite antagonistic to Bourdieu’s account. First, they absolutely refused a relationship of distance. The whole point of the considerable sums of money they spent, buying (season-)tickets for the Colón, pursuing performances and particular performers to other venues and cities, was to catch the will-o’-the-wisp of a completely immersive experience. This would overwhelm them, reduce them to silence – even, unable to applaud for a little while at the performance’s end. This experience was rare, but it was the whole point of the enterprise, and the considerable sacrifice.

Second, these people were simply not interested in ‘cashing in’ any symbolic capital that they might accrue through their participation. They held amongst themselves vast bodies of knowledge and expertise. They read and evaluated reviews. They carried within them a detailed repertoire of past performances. But they hardly shared these, except in the moments before and after a performance. And largely, they hid their predilections from their friends, workmates. And rather than deploying their critical grounding, they are just as likely to seek out performances where they will not know what to expect, as this man exemplifies (in what Benzecry nicely calls an example of ‘over-informed practice’):

I keep going to the Colon, despite its current quality, because I want to see new works. [...] This year ... *Quichotte* sent me over the moon because I knew absolutely nothing about it. So to me it was like when Verdi premiered his work or when Wagner or Donizetti presented their operas in Prague, Budapest or Paris. I didn’t want to listen to anything at all; I was an absolute virgin. I didn’t even read the story. I knew only the composer: that’s it. And, when I saw the opera unfolding, I just loved it. Loved it! But the key was not to know anything. (p.134)

What Benzecry tries to do is to draw into the open the nature of their engagements with the venue, and the performances. He explores the ways they manage their pleasures – and how they deal with their powerful sense of disappointment, verging on doom, that opera in Argentina is in serious decline. And the book springs a surprise. Having described in great detail the ways in which this group of opera fanatics hermetically surround and protect their pleasures – all of which suggests that these are people stepping outside the boundaries of symbolic and cultural capital altogether – he picks up on small clues and cues in some of their answers, to draw out a way in which their allegiance to this sealed experience does in fact resonate with a very particular politics: one grounded in Argentinian history, but with wider international dimensions as well. The very ‘suspension of reality opera brings to their lives’ (p.162) is continually threatened by the intrusion of various kinds of politics which tarnish its purity.

I did have one moment of frustration with Benzecry’s book, one which I must admit arises from a connection with my own research. Benzecry makes visible the doubled aspect of these fans’ responses to opera: they know so much, and have such developed systems for classifying and evaluating; yet they want to set aside that knowledge and that capacity to judge in the pursuit of that utopia of immersion. I wonder at the management and achievement of this. I found a similar phenomenon in researching audiences for the emergent system of livecasting or ‘alternative content’ (the transmission into cinemas of live events such as opera, ballet and theatre). There, too, it was tied to antagonistic reactions to changes taking place in the patterns of cultural provision. But I have been struck by the tensions involved in doing these two things: simultaneously (as one of my respondents put it) controlling the experience by holding oneself ‘distant’, and at the same

time ‘drifting trance-like into their world’. Doing both these is surely strikingly difficult – and holding it out as the ideal requirement is strange indeed.

Fuller and Rehberg Sedo present the main findings of a UK project to study the rise and operation of Mass Reading Events (MREs): that is, different kinds of sponsored reading events, including things such as the USA’s *Oprah’s Book Club* and the UK’s *Richard & Judy Book Club* phenomena, the national *Canada Reads* event of 2006, and various more localised events in cities such as ‘Liverpool Reads’, Bristol’s ‘Great Reading Adventure’, and Seattle’s ‘One Book, One City’. Their book systematically compares the rise and evolution of these kinds of events in the USA, Canada and the UK, exploring the political and economic forces which differently structured them in the three countries. They take account of the ways in which publishers oriented to them, seeing great opportunities for themselves if one of their authors was chosen. And they are very alert to the controversial nature of these events, with authorised professors of literature and high culture spokesmen dismissing them as cheapened versions of ‘proper’ engagements with literature. This leads, to my eye, to a very interesting combination of Bourdieuan with cultural studies approaches, in the depiction of ‘resistant readers’ being those who reject these ‘popularisations’.

Their research is a combination of political-economic investigations of the publishing and broadcasting industries, along with exploration of the drivers behind the cultural interventions to promote book-reading; and interviews with both the producers of and participants in these MREs. And in tackling the circuits between these, Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural fields’ does good service in giving them a vocabulary and a way of thinking about how these operate.

There is no question but that this book opens up a substantial development of the last two decades, one which has not only reconfigured in significant ways the cultural place of book-reading, but also shifted the workings of the publishing industry. It is also good to see book-readers becoming a focus of research in their own right, outside broad social histories. One issue which I found repeatedly arising for me with Fuller and Rehberg Sedo’s book was its use of the term ‘community’. Although at one level they are clearly critical of claims around ‘community-building’, there is a sense that they take as obvious people’s uses of the term, to relate what they feel they gain from participating in an MRE. For example, they quote one woman talking about what prompts her to get involved, and gloss her comments with the following:

Connecting with strangers or acquaintances (and scholars of print culture) validates Mary Lynn’s “feeling for books” and, in particular, her sense that sharing reading experiences with a loosely connected community of readers is “what it’s all about”. (p.233)

Yet the striking thing about even this quite abbreviated quotation (and I did, I admit, find frustrating their tendency to provide conclusions with less attention to evidential base) ends with the words “but I wouldn’t recognise them if I passed them on the street”. They do say

that their research suggests that people don't gain much in the way of actual new friendships, through their participation in OBOCs. But what they may do to people's *interpretive* and *imagined* communities remains much less considered. (A related point might be made about Benzecry – it would have been good to hear his thoughts on the kinds of community which his Colón fans constitute, and how these operate to produce patterns of judgement.)

I also found strange the acceptance with virtually no comment the equation of book-reading with the reading of literary fiction. Even if a restriction to fiction is taken as read, there are many kinds of genre fiction which will never get a look in, in MREs. Yet one could in principle imagine a mass reading event around a crime fiction, or a fantasy fiction. The lack of cultural clout these have is presumably the reason. But the unacknowledged 'special place' that particular kinds of literary fiction have is surely worthy of some thought.

These kinds of critical thoughts are not intended to detract from my overwhelming recommendation of both these books. They deserve to be very widely read, not least because of their splendid clarity, their richness in observations and ideas, and for the sheer fact that they do bring audience research perspectives to bear on areas of culture which are hugely underexplored.

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