BOOK REVIEWS

Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture

John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner

Ray B. Browne, the Director of the Popular Culture Center at Bowling Green University, wrote recently that "the winds of change that swept across America during the sixties finally breezed through academia and blew the dust off some of the concepts of ... the ideal educational curriculum." (Symbiosis: Popular Culture and Other Fields, 1988, p.i.) As Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture shows, those same winds swirl about many parts of the world. In the eight chapters of this book, tri-authors Fiske, Hodge, and Turner breeze through the pub, homes and gardens, the beach, unemployment, shopping, tourism, monuments, and the Australian accent as examples of popular culture that give us a "reading" of what it means to be Australian. The results are mixed: on the positive side, Myths of Oz is often charming, informative, and insightful, on the negative side, it is at times pretentious and contrived.

Australian society seems to provide an ideal vehicle for the study of popular culture because so many Australians seem intent on defining themselves outside the circle of elite culture. An overwhelmingly suburban society that identifies the pub and the beach as its primary social centers outside of the home, Australia makes a ritual out of going on the dole and prides itself on a raucous accent (the equivalent of which in England and the United States would be a Cockney or Brooklyn one). Australians selfconsciously pursue an image as the most working-class culture in the world of English-speaking nations. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner implicitly show throughout, however, that the Australian working-class culture is not that of a subservient English butler or American porter, but rather that of a Liverpool soccer fan or a New York taxicab driver. It is a proud, aggressive culture that wants to be "popular" rather than elite because it equates popularity with social democracy. Also, of course, the apparent brashness of Australian popular culture is one way Australians have of telling the world that they are not English. It’s an old story—sad but true—that none of us in the former English colonies can easily shake insecurities about our own culture’s inferiority to the mother country. The United states went through fifty years of insufferable bragging after the American Revolution to try to prove to the world and most especially to itself that its literature and culture deserved respect. Poor Canada in the post-war period has been trying to shake off inferiority complexes for three nations, England, France, and the United States. Canadians and Americans, therefore, will almost intuitively share an affection for some aspects of the Australian popular culture this book describes.

The negative parts of Myths of Oz need never have been: this makes them doubly unfortunate. In an effort to appear sophisticated and profound, the authors clutter
their charming material and analysis with some extraordinary examples of useless jargon, pedantry, and sophomoric conclusions. When describing the role of outdoor canopies over patios, they state, "here nature and culture are brought into a different balance--the covering reflecting distrust of the weather, the tables and chairs indicating a comfortable assurance of its docility" (41). Many people would not attach this much interpretive weight to the Australian's good sense to keep their heads dry during the rain. Neither does the authors' claim that "the ritual of the Bar BQ is as formal and culture-created as a high-church mass" (43) ring quite true. Another claim, that houses "from previous periods.. come to signify the past" (46) seems to be on more secure ground but it might be a point better left implicit. This type of verbal claptrap is evident in dozens of places throughout the book. Intended to dress up a good book, it has the opposite effect and in places turns into a near satire on the social sciences. On balance, however, the positive overcomes the negative: *Myths of Oz* is too much fun and too intellectually stimulating--particularly for Americans and Canadians--to be ruined by these annoying lapses.

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*Emotional Effects of Media: The Works of Hertha Sturm*

The Graduate Program in Communications at McGill University began publishing a series of booklets titled *Working Papers in Communications* in 1981. Since then, the series has given teachers and graduate students in various communication studies programs around the country some valuable, low cost, and handsomely presented publications on a variety of issues in the field. These publications have proven to be very important for those communication studies colleagues who seek up-to-date, in depth, and easily accessible communications media related information. It was a pioneering adventure which has had admirable results, although more such publications should have come out of McGill's graduate program on a regular basis.

The latest booklet in the series titled *Emotional Effects of Media: The Works of Hertha Sturm* which was put together by Prof. G.J. Robinson, is a testimony to the scope of these publications. As the editor explains, the publications were established"...for the purpose of giving researchers in the field an outlet for work in progress, for its exchange with colleagues in related disciplines, and to provide reasonably priced classroom materials for teachers in Communication Studies." (Robinson, 1987, p. 60) This booklet effectively fulfills this premise.

*Emotional Effects of Media: The Works of Hertha Sturm* is an excellent source of information and a must read for researchers in the communication field.