

The Other Reader

JOSEPH HARRIS

Let me begin with two readings of advertisements. The first is by a student in a university writing course:

The DuraSoft's commercial opens with a man's voiceover, similar to the Calvin's voice, which is slightly feminine and artistic sounding. The man is reciting his own prose about the woman of his dreams as she is shown floating down to earth: "... like an angel dropped down from heaven . . . with eyes as brown as . . . bark." Then he pauses, "No, that's not it." The sound of a film rewinding is heard as she re-ascends back up into the clouds, all in a choppy fashion. He then says: ". . . with eyes as violet as the colors of a child's imagination." The beautiful dream woman then stares directly into the camera with very unnatural, almost glowing blue-violet-colored eyes.

While the overall look and sound of this commercial is very pleasing to the senses, an educated and aware person sees it on a deeper level. The purpose of the DuraSoft commercial is to sell colored soft contacts to women. The way the commercial achieves this is by making the viewer (read woman) want to be as beautiful and desirable as the dream woman seen and described in the ad.

While this ad is soothing to the eyes and ears, and, to a degree, fires the imagination, it is actually propaganda specifically aimed at impressionable young women and insecure women, who have become that way with the "help" of the same medium. . . . At the end of this ad, the man's voice says, "DuraSoft Colors Contact Lenses. Gives Brown Eyes a Second Look." How sad that is. According to this ad, those of us not "blessed" with blue eyes must now change our eye color to be considered attractive. And the saddest part of all is that most people aren't even aware of it.

And here is Leslie Savan writing in the *Village Voice* on another DuraSoft ad, this one targeted more directly at black women:

In one TV spot, three pretty women—two white, one black—frown into mirrors. The black woman is ethnically correct ("good hair," looks like Lisa Bonet), but she's as sad as her eyes are deep brown. "There's someone special inside you, and DuraSoft Colors contact lenses can change your eye color to hers," a female voice-over says. Now bejeweled and glowing with emerald eyes, our black lady is ogled by a guy—as she gazes off into the sunset, savoring her (\$200-\$300) secret. . . .

Women of all races seem eager to unleash that special someone imprisoned by their irises. . . . The light ooh-la-la, purchasable fun of henna, fake eyelashes, or dotted nail polish that women can reimagine themselves with has always been a little burst of wildness, a temporary freedom from the physical self. That's fashion and fad. But it's hard to distinguish the difference between remodeling the self out of boredom and remodeling out of desire to become another. (56)

In one sense, there's not much to argue with in either of these readings. As both writers are quick to point out, the aim of advertisements is indeed to sell things, and they usually try to do so by suggesting that you will somehow be happier or prettier if you buy what they have to offer. The writing in both pieces is lively, fun, and accurate. And each does a nice job of showing how the DuraSoft ads play on (and add to) the ways women in our culture are made to feel anxious about how they look. (Though, I'd argue that this sort of criticism has become so easy and familiar that most of us can do it pretty well without giving it much thought, which is perhaps one reason why the writings here of a college student and a professional critic seem so much alike.) What troubles me, though, is how each writer seems to describe not her own response to the ad but that of some *other viewer*. And so while my student speaks indignantly and eloquently in the name of those "impressionable young women and insecure women" who are taken in by the DuraSoft spot, she also hints that she is among those "educated and aware" viewers who see it "on a deeper level." Similarly, Savan notes the eagerness of "women of all races . . . to unleash that special someone imprisoned by their irises," while at the same time implying that there are still a few of us left who can make that hard distinction between "remodeling the self out of boredom and remodeling out of desire to become another." In short, neither is fooled, though both think that others are.

The problem, of course, is finding those other dumber viewers. Our society is saturated with ads. Everyone sees through them; no one is immune from their appeal. If we want to understand anything about how they work, we need to unravel this paradox. Instead, most writing on advertising treats the viewer as either a skeptic or a shill. And so, for instance, John Berger writes that advertising "is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be" (132). But it's hard to imagine Berger himself falling for such a scam. And, similarly, when Mark Miller writes of a TV spot for Shield soap that its "strategy is not meant to be noticed," we know immediately that here is one viewer who has not been taken in (48). But who has?

A Discourse of Alarm

I don't mean to side here with advertisers like Hal Riney who argue that since "people today are advise," there's nothing really to worry about (qtd. in Miller 49). My point is that before we can have effective criticism of advertising, or of any other part of popular culture, we need to admit that all of us respond to it in ways that are often at once both pleased and skeptical, amused and doubting, open and resisting. What won't help is speaking in the name of someone who fails to see what we do, or who falls for things that we don't.

And yet this is often precisely what happens. For instance, a few years ago, I asked a group of university students to come up with a magazine ad they found interesting or compelling and to write a piece that told why. A week or so later we sat in class and talked about two of their responses: one poked fun at the macho Americanism of an ad for Hero cologne; the other mocked the tacky fantasy of a layout for Forever Krystal perfume. The students were happy, this was easy stuff, they felt in the know. To a person, they had decoded my assignment as meaning: show me how you see through this ad. I looked around the room and counted eighteen pairs of jeans and eighteen pairs of running shoes. (I was the only exception, with my proper academic penny loafers and baggy corduroys.) How is it, I asked, that nobody here is taken in by advertising and yet we all dress alike? Can we find a way of talking about the effects ads have not on other people but on ourselves? And then our conversation, which had been going so well, began to falter.

We have few models of what such talk or writing might look like. What we have instead is a long tradition of speaking, usually in tones of consternation and dismay, about the effects popular texts could have on some other reader. We can trace this discourse of alarm back to the worries of Socrates and Plato that many of the Homeric verses they themselves are able to quote by heart might have a corrupting influence on lesser men, could in fact turn them into cowards or religious skeptics, and thus that all but the most “austere and less pleasure-giving” poets would need to be banned from their ideal city (*Republic* 398b). Similarly, a central aim of modern literary studies has been to get students to resist the (supposedly) coarse pleasures of popular culture in favor of the more refined ones offered by art—as can be seen in Matthew Arnold’s concern with domesticating the tastes of the “bawling, hustling, and smashing” populace of his day (451), and later in the worries of F.R. Leavis about the threats posed to “culture” by “mass civilization.” Since then there has been no lack of critics from Theodore Adorno and Dwight MacDonal to Laura Mulvey and Guy Debord to talk about how the mass media continue to fix the spectator (that is, other spectators) in a state of critical apathy and listlessness. And many current postmodern or leftist critics are just as presumptuous. A salient case in point is E. Ann Kaplan, who claims in *Rocking Around the Clock* to account for how “the institutional practices [of MTV] construct subjects to the tune of 28 million” (29), without feeling a need to talk with any one of these “subjects” personally, or to explain how she alone among them escaped the hegemonic clutches of music television.

One response to such moralizing has been to argue that the actual readers of popular texts are in fact far more active and resistant than they are often assumed to be. While this is in many ways an appealing stance, it still places the critic in the odd position of describing how someone else reads a text with the result that it is often not clear how *the critic* reads it. My hunch is that the responses of such “other readers,” however well or sympathetically

described, will almost always turn out to be less complex and interesting than those of the critic him or herself—so that, even at its best, such criticism is apt to run into the kind of problem faced by Janice Radway, whose *Reading the Romance* is a rare attempt to document some of the ways popular texts actually get read by “ordinary” people.

To do so, Radway interviewed some frequent readers of romance novels (or Harlequins) about “their own working definition of the genre . . . and their preferences for particular kinds of romances, heroines, and heroes” (13). Radway has been criticized for relying too heavily on the responses of a single master reader, a bookstore employee who also puts out a newsletter about romances; but that’s not my worry here, since even if this charge is accurate, her lone informant is still one more than most critics have ever consulted. My concern is with what Radway *does* with the responses of her informants, with the relation she sets up between their ways of reading and her own. The troubling thing is that, after showing how the women in her study see their reading of romance novels as a way of contesting and escaping the demands placed on them as wives and mothers, Radway still feels compelled to note that

while the act of reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse [of the romance] itself actively insists on the desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role by portraying it not as the imposed necessity that it is but as a freely designed, personally controlled, individual choice. (208)

In other words, they’ve missed something. And so Radway’s stance is perhaps not so different from my student’s or Savan’s, for like them she sees dangers lurking in popular texts that the readers she speaks for do not. It is little surprise, then, that she ends her study of the romance with the pious hope that there will someday be “a world where the vicarious pleasure supplied by its reading would be unnecessary” (222).

In their own texts, each of these writers, from Plato and Arnold to my student and Radway, presents a figure of the critic who can read (and often even enjoy) popular works without being injured or seduced by them. Yet each doubts that others can do the same, and so ends up arguing for a kind of censorship, or at least for a better world where the pleasures such texts offer are no longer needed (like sexless views of heaven). A deep anti-democratic impulse, a kind of fear of the mob, runs through such writings. Those other readers can’t be trusted. Their responses need to be trained, domesticated, disciplined. And, in the meantime, they need to be guarded against the influences of popular and thus suspect texts—from things like imitative poetry in Plato’s time, or serial novels in Arnold’s, or television in our own.

In “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” Stuart Hall distinguishes between a kind of scholarship that looks at the particular ways a culture is lived

and experienced by the individuals in it, and another whose aim is to uncover the ideological forces that structure and determine those experiences. While the first approach tries to see how the forms of a culture are taken up and revised by the people in it, the second looks instead for those ways in which that culture might be said to be “speaking through” the voices of such individuals (42). As teachers and critics, we clearly need to keep both emphases in mind. We need, that is, not only to listen closely to what “ordinary” people tell us about what they read and watch and listen to, but also to push against their usual modes of interpreting, to look with them for alternative ways of understanding our common culture. The problem, though, as I see it, has once again to do with the relations between these two kinds of work. Bringing the voices of ordinary readers and scholars, or of students and teachers, into anything like a reciprocal exchange (in which both sides of the conversation are able to affect the views of the other) proves something easier said than done. What often happens instead is that the structural or ideological analysis of the scholar subsumes the views of the ordinary reader, so that while the concerns of certain groups do get “spoken for” in some kinds of criticism, the actual words of non-academics rarely find their way into the writings of even the most political critics. And even on those odd moments that they do, they are usually positioned in ways that give them little power or authority.

And so, once again, the problem with *Reading the Romance* is not so much that Radway fails to listen to her informants, but that her own closing analysis discounts what they have to say, reduces their ways of reading to merely a “partial protest.” The comments of her informants, that is, don’t seem to have much influenced *her* view of the romance, and the reading she offers of it in her last chapter—in which she argues in solid if predictable academic fashion that such novels reproduce the values of patriarchy—often seems less to respond to their concerns than to correct them (209-22). But what if Radway had begun with her own ideological reading, and then tried to show the sorts of pressures these other non-academic readers brought to bear upon it, the ways their views of the romance forced her to revise her own? That is, can we imagine a kind of criticism in which the comments of ordinary readers (or students) function not only as material for the writer to work with and explain—as examples of what she herself has to say, perhaps, or as illustrations of the problem she wants to address—but also as checks against the bias of her own reading, as statements of views she must in some way respond to?

Listening to the Other Reader

It is here that work in composition can powerfully inform that in cultural studies. Teachers and scholars like Mina Shaughnessy, Shirley Brice Heath, Mike Rose, and David Bartholomae have begun to offer us ways of reading student writings not simply for the errors or gaps they may reveal but also for

the logic of the positions they are struggling to develop—a sense that is often hard to discern due both to the inexperience of many student writers and to the set of expectations that guide our readings of their texts. One of the projects of composition has been to revise those expectations, to find new ways of reading texts that are still in early or formative stages, or that seem written in odd or unfamiliar idioms. To put it another way, the comments of the “other reader,” however unformed or clichéd these may sometimes seem, have long been given a kind of serious attention in composition that they have rarely been offered elsewhere. (Indeed composition is the only field I know of where student writings are regularly the focus of scholarly articles.) This habit of attention can be of some real help, I think, in trying to understand how non-academics read popular texts.

Let me give an example. One of the recurring themes of much writing about soap operas is that such shows vicariously fill needs that are otherwise left unmet in the lives of their viewers, and thus serve to “reconcile her,” as Tania Modleski argues, “to the meaningless, repetitive nature of much of her life and work in the home” (97). Such phrasings reveal a common image of the soap viewer as a housewife or woman with a low-status job, who, unlike us, often finds it hard to distinguish clearly between reality and the “mass-produced fantasies” of TV. Consider this exchange between soap critic and fan, which appears near the start of Ruth Rosen’s “Search for Yesterday”:

For some viewers, the world of the soap and their own daily lives begins to blur. Early in my research, I encountered one such fan. At a local supermarket, I picked up *Soap Opera Digest*, a magazine that offers weekly synopses of soap plots and articles about the stars. The cashier, in her late teens, quickly spotted the magazine that I had hidden between the detergent and the broccoli. Its cover featured a couple from ABC’s popular soap, *General Hospital*. As she rang up the items, the cashier commented, “I think Grant and Celia will work it out, don’t you?” Stunned, I nodded. She bagged my groceries and continued her monologue on Grant and Celia’s marital problems, offering suggestions and advice. Imperceptibly, I had slipped into the curious world of the soap opera. The cashier simply assumed that I too was a “resident” of *General Hospital*’s fictional Port Charles. (43)

Rosen goes on to explain that she can “understand the feelings” of such viewers because once, some fifteen years back, she had been confined to a hospital bed (that is, temporarily an invalid), and had found some solace herself in watching *General Hospital*—though she has of course since then recovered (both physically and intellectually, it would seem) and is now at most only “an occasional abuser, not a confirmed addict” of soaps (43). But far stronger than her empathy for those still hooked on soaps, though, is a set of class antagonisms that separate her from such fans. Note how Rosen describes the cashier first as “quickly spotting” the magazine she has so discretely “hidden,” which the young woman then “assumes” might give the two of them something to talk about—a faux pas that leaves the critic “stunned” as the cashier launches obliviously into a “monologue” while

bagging her groceries. Note too how Rosen persistently reads everything this young fan says or does as a sign of her lack of sophistication. But isn't it at least possible that she might have meant "I think Grant and Celia will work it out, don't you?" in a kind of laughing or knowing way, as an ironic comment on the inevitable progress of such TV romances? If Tania Modleski had said the same thing to Rosen, how would she have interpreted it? And why is reading *Soap Opera Digest* so very different from reading literary criticism or biography? Would Rosen have been stunned in quite the same way if it had been a Viking Critical Edition the cashier had noticed, and if she had used that as a pretext to talk about, say, the marital problems of Vrosnky and Anna as if they were all "residents" of nineteenth century Moscow? And even if we were to accept her unflattering sketch of this young woman, wouldn't this still raise the question of why Rosen picks as her prototypic viewer of soaps someone who seems so foolish and naive? (My own experience is that many academics, professionals, and college students also watch and talk about soaps regularly and that about half of these viewers are men.)

What most strikes me here, though, is how little Rosen feels she needs to say about this woman. We are told her age and class ("the cashier in her late teens"), and quoted *one sentence* of her remarks, from which we are then expected to derive the tone and gist of the rest of her "monologue on Grant and Celia's marital problems." Rosen seems to assume, that is, that we already pretty much know what this young woman is able to say before she even begins to speak—and thus that there is little need for us to attend to her actual remarks. But what if we refused to suppose this? What if we assumed instead that fans of soaps are likely to know things about them that we don't, and that our job, both as teachers and critics, is to find out what these are, to help them articulate these sorts of alternative knowledges? And what if instead of representing these "other viewers" of pop culture with a single sentence, a casual comment in a supermarket line, we listened to their remarks at length and with some real care? Here, for instance, is an excerpt from an essay written by a first-year student at the University of Pittsburgh that shows her taking what seems to me a rather sophisticated sort of pleasure from the soaps. After beginning her piece by talking about her commitment to various soaps—taping them, talking about them with friends and family, reading *Soap Opera Digest*, watching the annual soap awards—she goes on to say:

I do not believe that soaps are very realistic. It is very difficult to try to take them seriously. For example, don't you just love it when the women wake up in the morning with hair and make-up perfect. Not even a smudge on their face and not a piece of hair out of place. What beauty queens! But you have to admit it is always interesting to see which man they will be sleeping with this time. I do not think it could be the same man two nights consecutively. Almost impossible!

I find it amazing how the characters get around so fast. One minute they will be at a business meeting, and the next they will be at dinner. Soaps always seem to take place inside, it is very rare to see the outside world. What kind of transportation do they use

to get around?

I think that time is important, and you would not believe how fast the children grow up. One day they are born, and three months later they are five years old. Wow, how time flies! And at Christmas time, Christmas day always seems to last for four days. Yes, how nice, but so strange.

Another thing I find humorous and hard to believe is that everyone on soap operas knows each other. Is the town that small that it only consists of those thirty or forty people? I bet if you sat down and figured it out, every one of them could be related in some way or another. It is so hard to keep track of who used to be married to whom and who had an affair with whom, etc. . . .

So here is a fan who, far from experiencing some sort of blurring between her own world and that of the soaps, actually seems to delight in their *conventionality*, in the ways they distort and exaggerate the events of everyday life. From this point in her piece, she goes on to detail the twists of some particularly bizarre plot lines (a special pleasure of many soap fans), and then concludes by saying:

Most of the time when I am sitting there watching my soap, I find myself laughing because it is so unrealistic. I feel relieved that I do not have their overwhelming problems. Maybe other viewers feel the same way. I am just glad that life is not a soap opera.

While one could perhaps read this ending as evidence of the power of soaps to “reconcile” their viewers to the status quo, I think it very hard to read the piece as a whole as coming from someone who has taken up fantasy residence in another world. This writer is not Rosen’s young cashier. If anything, she is something of a formalist, whose main pleasure in the soaps seems to stem from observing their (often absurd) narrative ploys. Whether many “other viewers feel the same way” as her, I don’t know. But I am inclined to put more stock in her account than in the supposed responses of the “housewives” that other critics claim to speak for. And, in any case, my aim is not to determine if her views are somehow more authentic or typical than those of Rosen’s cashier, but to suggest that, if we bother to look for them, we are likely to find that the responses of actual viewers to soaps are not as easy to predict as many critics seem to think.

Cultural Criticism in the Composition Class

The college writing class is only one of many places where we might look for such accounts of how ordinary readers deal with popular texts. The sort of ethnographic work done by Radway is another useful source, as are newsletters, fanzines, club materials, letters columns, and the like. But as I’ve tried to point out in talking about Radway, there is still always the question of what to do with such accounts once you have them. As writing teachers, we are trained to read the comments of ordinary readers with more generosity and care than they are perhaps usually given. Also, we are well-placed to get more accounts of how such readers deal with popular texts, since we can ask our students to write about them. But the request needs to be made in the right

way, since if it's not, we're likely to get yet more pieces on the supposed responses of "impressionable young women" and the like. You have to articulate a reaction before you can either celebrate or criticize it. We need then to set up classrooms where students can talk about their responses to popular texts as mixed rather than simple, where they can write as people who are at once rock fans *and* intellectuals, who watch old sitcoms *and* read criticism, who wear levis *and* look skeptically at advertising.

One way I've tried to do so is through having students look at the uses they make of popular texts in forming their own self-images or identities. The idea driving this work is that identity rises out of identification, that we define who we are by whom we choose to stand with and against, and thus that in an electronic culture much of our sense of self is shaped by (or set against) the voices and images of television, radio, movies, pop music, fashion, advertising, and the like. For such a course to work, it is vital that students don't get the sense that there is some sort of party line to be either mimicked or resisted, and especially that they don't feel required to adopt an adversarial stance towards their own culture, to side somehow with the university and against the media, but rather that they can write of the pleasures as well as the problems they find in popular texts.

Thus instead of asking students to interpret a series of pop texts that I have selected beforehand, I usually ask them to read the work of various critics and to test their ideas against the evidence of texts—ads, cars, buildings, clothes, celebrities—that they themselves choose to write on. The goal of such work is not simply to have them "apply" a certain interpretive method, but to point out its uses and limits, to extend or revise or argue against what a particular critic has to say. And so, for instance, I've asked students to offer a reading of a television show that either adds to or causes problems for Alexander Nehamas's claim that "television rewards serious watching" (158). At other times I've had them draw on the method and vocabulary of Judith Williamson in analyzing the workings of an advertisement, not in order to determine what the ad "really means," but to see what her approach might be said both to reveal and to obscure. I've had them send away for and analyze fan club materials in order to respond to what John Caughey has argued about the "imaginary relationships" people create between themselves and celebrities. And I've asked them to pick a text—a magazine, a television show, a rock song—and then define the sort of viewer or reader it seems to address, at first using Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of *Playboy* as a model for their work, and then doubling back to assess what the strengths and limits of such an approach are. The specific assignments and readings change from term to term. Their point stays the same: to offer students some chances to work with and through a number of ways of reading our culture, and, in doing so, to begin to define their own places in it.

In the process, they may also learn something about the sorts of power and insight that study at a university can offer them, much as we can learn, if

we care to, from the alternative practices of reading they bring to the classroom. Nina Schwartz has argued that we need to help students draw on the various sorts of “inappropriate knowledge” they have all acquired, to make use of the things they know about the workings of schools, fraternities, families, workplaces, pop culture, and the like, but which they often are unable to talk about because we offer them no place or occasion to do so. We can all gain much when they do, for when students start to tell us what they know about our culture, it means they are no longer the sort of “other readers” whose responses critics must worry about and speak for—but people we can listen to and learn from.¹

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Notes

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