

The Cutting Garden: Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis and Reception Theories of Audiences or Fans.

Third wave feminist, Magdalen Celestino's "The Cutting Garden" (1999) occupies, in the words of the artist, "an indeterminate space" between the "real and the artificial world,"¹ in which Raymond Williams' (1981) term, "cultural materialism"² comes into play. Williams views cultural materialism as constitutive of a material process of production that includes a theory of specific practices and means of production, including art, technology, and communication media. Celestino's garden awakens the viewer to the first cutting, the first cultural materialist experience that occurred in the biblical garden of Eden. In doing so, Celestino's text contradicts Northrop Frye's (1957) assessment of the relationship between the Bible and poetry, and in Celestino's case, sculpture, in Western society: "Biblical typology is so dead a language now that most readers, including scholars, cannot construe the superficial meaning" of a work of art that "employs it"³.

Celestino draws upon the myth of oneness with self, with the "Other," and with the divine—pre-fall—and then of the punishment for exercising this selfhood in contravention of the ruling elite—expulsion. God, as the first gardener, becomes the first great cutter, the destroyer of harmony that divides "The Cutting Garden" into two parts. Celestino fulfills the role of the artist by offering an "oppositional"⁴ reading of contemporary society that renders transparent one aspect of its underlying ideology and the fracturing of humanity from nature that pervades our everyday existence.

As Althusser (1970) reminds us, "Ideology represents the imaginary

relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence”⁵. Celestino’s sculpture represents a medium in which to explore her “imaginary relationship” to her “real conditions of existence.” Primarily, Celestino’s representation of a hierarchical world, filled with inequalities and strife, come to life in her depiction of bleeding female genitalia imposed on phallic imagery. The feminine wound continues to rupture, along with the masculine (psychoanalysts would read this wound through the lens of Freud’s theory of “castration anxiety”). Celestino, however, writes in her “Introduction” that the “red sutures,” the signifier of the signified, female genitalia, actually represents “healing” and comfort from the ravishment caused by the “artificial world”⁶ of capitalism. This paper concerns the artificial world in which we try to make sense of our individual and collective everyday, imagined reality, or of our private and public lives filled with ambiguity, consequences, and restrained liberties as in Celestino’s apt metaphor for our own cutting garden, especially in regards to the methodologies I am about to examine, for these methodologies cut both ways.

Specifically, this paper offers an examination of North America’s two main foci of cultural approaches to communication research, both in its reliance upon textual analysis of mediated texts, such as Celestino’s, through qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis and reception theories of audiences. I shall argue that although reception theory levels accurate criticisms against critical discourse theorists for largely excluding the audience from participation in the reading or decoding of texts in its reliance upon textual analysis, the latter is still of great worth. Ironically, reception theory’s criticism of discourse analysis appears to be

directed more at decoders of texts, rather than at encoders who exclude the audience from the production process, or from what Barthes' (1961) refers to as "the source of emission, [and] channel of transmission"⁷. Nevertheless, discourse analysis is still of merit in flushing out not only the manifest, but also latent meaning(s), interwoven within texts that reflect the broader social context of an audience, both of a public and private nature.

The strength of quantitative discourse analysis is its ability to empirically search out the codes and structures within society, through analysis of media content, as well as ethnographic studies, among others. Qualitative discourse analysis, however, differs from quantitative analysis in its subjective approach to decoding, or reading, a text. Barthes' emphasis on "arbitrary" meanings within a text that are free for the reader to determine also comes into play; yet, the freedom for the reader to choose his/her interpretations of texts is also guided by the mediated analysis of other secondary sources that are within a framework of interconnectedness to other texts (referred to as intertextuality), and so on. Derrida's (1972) belief in there being nothing outside of the text, or as Barbara Godard (2003), in citing Kristeva, frames it: "the subject as text,"⁸ reveals that the text for Derrida and for Kristeva, although with differing vantage points, is multi-faceted and highly complex; but that all texts, including postmodern readings on the part of subjects, are mediated by and through the text—whether of a bodily or linguistic origin.

In turning to contemporary views of the audience, discourse theorists can be seen as representing two separate, but not exclusive, spheres. For example,

Norman Fairclough defines media reception largely by the tension between the public and private lives of audiences⁹. The various, unique, life worlds of the individual audience member, each with his/her own ethnic, socio-cultural, economic, religious, gender, sexual, and political bias, offer challenges to both producers of media and to analysts of mediated texts, whether of a quantitative or qualitative analysis. Focus groups, opinion polls and the like, attempt to get inside the head of individual audience members within a postmodern “epoch” that views all identities as fluid, complex, and multiple.

Homogeneity is now replaced by heterogeneity, including the audience that Andrew Wernick (1991) characterizes as members of contemporary “consumer culture”¹⁰. Craig Calhoun (1994) refers to post-modernity’s ambiguous identities as drawn on by producers of mediated texts in order to ensure identification with their heroes¹¹. Add to this, John Fiske’s (1989) view of popular culture as a “site of contradiction”¹² that is comprised of “a huge variety of social groups and subcultures all held together in a network of social relations in which the most significant factor is the differential distribution of power,”¹³ and what is discovered is that the audience, removed from being able to directly intervene in modes of media production, are left largely to decide for themselves which media, under what circumstance, they will pay attention to, and which and in what way they will oppose. Enter Stuart Hall’s (1973) “preferred readings”¹⁴ of American ideology. While I understand that Hall’s work relates to an individual’s “preferred readings” of his/her dominant culture, I find it useful to stretch his

concept to include fictional characters' responses to the reality of contemporary society through their portrayal in the respective media.

As an example, I wish to offer a brief qualitative analysis of Martin Ritt's Hud (1963), a cinematic adaptation of Larry McMurtry's Horseman Pass, By (1961). The mythic significance that violence enjoys within America, as a new and improved Garden of Eden, erupts in the film's anti-hero, Hud (Paul Newman). Hud represents not only a man in revolt against what he considers to be an "oppressive father," but also a man/cowboy/son in revolt against the traditional western. Hud seeks rebirth through a violent overturning of the old in place for the new, the modern, that better suits men of his temperament, representative of the transformations occurring within the 1950s and the 1960s.

America's belief in the supremacy of the white male over all "others" reaches a breaking point in Hud who embodies the ideology and mythology of the western genre. Hud epitomizes the new man, or son, in America who throws off the values of his elders in revolt against oppressive systems that would impinge upon exercising his right to full autonomy. He becomes a type of monster, self-absorbed, ruthless, racist, sexist, cynical, crude, hard-drinking, and heartless. As such he is intolerable to those around him. Ritt (1974) agrees with Hud's father in the film, Homer, who denounces Hud:

You don't give a damn! You don't care about people! You just live for yourself—and that makes you not fit to live with [. . .] You've got all that charm going for you, and it makes the youngsters want to be like you. That's the shame of it, 'cause you don't value nothin', [. . .] you keep no check on your appetites at all. Men of your sort have come to be the heroes of our age.

To which Ritt adds: “I don’t think he does give a damn”¹⁵, much to the chagrin of film critic Pauline Kael (1963), as cited by Carlton Jackson (1994): “‘You never give a damn’ actually ‘tells us nothing, and its just this gap (of why) that, had it been filled, might have made ‘*Hud*’ a great picture instead of a good one”¹⁶.

Kael adds to my argument by stressing the need for an exploration into the psyche of Hud and men like him in order to better understand how such a void becomes reality and how this void is negotiated in their everyday lives. It is this point that McMurtry and Ritt make in developing the character of Hud to be a “prick” that truly does not care about others within a culture that was growing increasingly skeptical about its authority figures.

In keeping with the doctrine of individualism, coupled with a concern for beginnings that discard the past to make way for the new “voices” of America, R. W. B. Lewis (1955) notes how the desire of nineteenth century American writers consciously brought to the forefront their culture’s unconscious identification with the American myth. The American myth centers on the new Adam, pre-fall, within their new Garden of Eden: “The significant fact is that the literal use of the story of Adam and the Fall of Man—as a model for narrative—occurred in the final works of American novelists, the works in which they sought to summarize the whole of their experience of America”¹⁷. Part of the new, innocent, pre-fall Adam, as informing America’s founding ideological masculine construct (of course, Eve was present with Adam—she came second, and has ever since). Adam was granted the power of the Logos; as such he became a prototype: “a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes.

America, it was said insistently from the 1820s onward, was not the end-product of a long historical process [. . .] it was something entirely new”¹⁸. Lewis, in citing Emerson’s “epochal remark,” states: “Here’s for the plain old Adam, the simple genuine self against the whole world”¹⁹. Strangely, Emerson chooses the adjective of “old” to describe the “new” Adam in America; presumably referring to Adam, pre-cutting, or pre-expulsion, from the Garden of Eden.

The obsession with newness demonstrated in the nineteenth century works of Hawthorne, Melville , Henry James, Whitman (among others), as discussed by Lewis, centers on present-mindedness, what later Harold Innis (1951) would decry as a negative feature of contemporary society²⁰. The old does not belong with the new, according to nineteenth century American writers, nor does it belong in Hud’s era. So too is the past, including his father’s ways, obsolete to Hud. Hud becomes an extension of American ideology’s belief in the power of the “new-Adam,” and of progress that sees land, not as a garden to be tended, but rather as a garden to be raped for monetary gain. Indeed this cutting into the garden by men like Hud speaks to the growing crisis in masculinity that centers on always having to prove oneself over and over again. Hud’s eyes, like his forbearers, are focused on the now and on the future. Hud steps into his father’s shoes, gladly, eagerly, as he attempts to embody the pre-fall Adam given power to rule over all the earth, and the post-fall Adam who must find a way to do so in a garden gone bad.

The need for an exploration into the psyche of Hud points to the necessity of qualitative analysis to include an analysis of the text’s popularity with its

audience. Many critics glossed over the text's popularity with the audience that reflected their growing rebellion against authority figures, especially by the Beats of the 50's and the Hippies of the 60's. There was almost no resistance to the Korean War of the 50's, only to the Vietnam War of the 60's and early 70's. In the 50s the resistance would have been to the McCarthy era. This lack of historicizing the text's production and its reception highlights the dialectic between qualitative analysis and reception, or audience, theory of mediated texts. By examining the text's production and reception we gain a deeper understanding of its time.

Hud epitomizes the myth of "the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation," from that of the role of loyal son subservient to his father and country to a man bent fully on self-actualization. Hud's regression, or aggression, towards his father and country resembles a primal reaction to the perceived threat of authority figures that would block Hud's ability to pursue material gain. Historically, rebellion against external obstacles to self-actualization, within the American western genre, often results in "*regeneration through violence*"²¹. In this regard, Ritt (1976) views Kael as misunderstanding the political unrest growing in the States that is expressed by Hud's popularity with the public²². This is Ritt's point when he says to Abraham Polonsky during an interview in 1976 that Kael's "political knowledge [and] political commitment is nil"²³. Kael and Ritt, regardless of their political leanings, skim over the woundedness of Hud who embodies America's ideology of the right to might. The void within Hud continues to go

unexamined by the critics and director, who call for, yet fail to deliver, a convincing discourse of Hud's complexity.

We must, however, resist embracing the arrogance that would have us dismiss the factors that contribute to Hud's sense of disloyalty and lack of regard for others that stems partially from his loss of a father-figure with whom he can respect. In contradiction to Ritt's criticism of Kael, Newman (1991) touches on Ritt's and the casts' ignorance of the cultural milieu of the text's production when commenting on the paradox of Hud's persona and his popularity with the public:

"We fucked up. We laughed about this." "Hud," Newman said, was given all the[:] "external graces; he was good with women, he did all those macho things, he wore his pants right, he was a womanizer. But we thought that the fact that he was basically rotten at the core would be the distinguishable feature. What we didn't realize was that all of the other things overwhelmed that single flaw and he came away a folk hero. Yes, they (audiences) couldn't stand the old man, but they loved Hud. We just made a mistake. We thought people would turn away from him. He betrayed his neighbors [. . .] he would betray anybody, but he apparently was a part of the American Dream"²⁴.

Ritt, similar to Newman, was astounded by Hud's popularity with the audience. After much thought, Ritt superficially attributes Hud's appeal to his embodying both charm and callousness:

Most effective bastards are like that. Otherwise they're not very effective. He had to be very attractive and very charming. The things he had to do—you know a man finally by what he does, not by what he says or how blue his eyes are. So if Hud continues to do as he does throughout the film, he must wind up a heel, despite the fact that he's terribly attractive²⁵.

Ritt, in building on his surprise by the audience's favorable response to Hud states: "[W]e got a lot of cards on [Hud] that said to me, 'Hud is right.'"²⁶. Years earlier, Ritt (1983) astutely informs another interviewer that the success of Hud

stems from the youthful segment of the audience's identification with its anti-hero: "The kids were very cynical; they were committed to their own appetites, and that was it. That's why the film did the kind of business it did—the kids loved Hud. That son of a bitch that I hated they loved. So the audience makes a film their own—it depends what's going on at the time in the country"²⁷. The power of reception theory of audience, or fans, can be seen in the fact that Ritt's surprise, concerning Newman's appeal, is ill-founded. If Ritt truly had his finger on the pulse of his audience he would have realized that his audience's identification with Hud transcended mere selfish indulgence, or an intrigue with stardom, in terms of their embracing the anti-Vietnam War movement in the States.

Evident in Hud's popularity is the importance of empirically defining audience, or fan, interpretation of texts. Such an endeavor, however, is highly problematic and usually regulated to an examination of revenues: box office sales in the case of films; newspaper circulation; television ratings; subscription and best seller lists, among others. As we have seen, Ritt astutely sums up what an audience does with a mediated text: "the audience makes a film their own—it depends what's going on at the time in the country"²⁸. By beginning my paper with a brief discussion of Celestino's text and by concluding with one of Ritt's, I have in a sense made their texts my own.

The attempt to understand audiences, either as readers, spectators, or consumers, along with, and not at the expense of the respective text, is a worthy and needful joint enterprise in decoding the culture of the text's production and reception. In so doing, William's (1958) understanding of "culture," as including

“the ‘tending of natural growth’”²⁹ of the individual and society comes to life as we gingerly attend to our respective “cutting gardens.”

Notes

- ¹ Celestino, Magdalen. The Cutting Garden. Toronto: Susan Hincks Gallery, March, 1999.
- ² Williams, Raymond. Culture. London: Fontana, 1981. 208-209.
- ³ Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957). Foreword by Harold Bloom. Princeton: Princeton Paperbacks, 1990. 14.
- ⁴ Hall, Stuart. “Encoding/Decoding.” Culture, Media and Language. Eds. et al., Stuart Hall. London: Hutchinson, 1973. 128-38.
- ⁵ Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)” (1970). Mapping Ideology. Ed. Slavoj Žižek. London: Verso, 2000. 123.
- ⁶ Celestino.
- ⁷ Barthes, Roland. “The Photographic Message” (1961). Image, Music, Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Noonday Press, 1988. 15.
- ⁸ Godard, Barbara. “Feminism and Semiotics.” The Semiotic Review of Books, 13:2 (2003): 1.
- ⁹ Fairclough, Norman. Media Discourse (1995). New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. 8.
- ¹⁰ Wernick, Andrew. “(Re)Imaging Gender: The Case of Men.” Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology, and Symbolic Expression. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991. 48-66.
- ¹¹ Calhoun, Craig, ed. “Social Theory and the Politics of Identity.” Social Theory and the Politics of Identity. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1994. 12.
- ¹² Fiske, John. Understanding Popular Culture (1989). Cambridge, Mass: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990. 120.
- ¹³ Fiske, Television Culture. London: Routledge, 1987. 309.
- ¹⁴ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding.” Culture, Media and Language. Eds. et al., Stuart Hall. London: Hutchinson, 1973. 128-38. See also John Fiske’s article “British Cultural Studies and Television.” Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism. Ed. Robert C. Allen. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina, 1992. 284-326.
- ¹⁵ Mae, Ina. “American Film Institute Seminar: Conversations with Martin Ritt” (1974). Reprinted in Martin Ritt: Interviews. Ed. Gabriel Miller. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. 14.
- ¹⁶ See Pauline Kael, The Current Cinema, New Yorker 39.166 (8 Jun 1963) as cited in Carlton Jackson’s Picking up the Tab: The Life and Movies of Martin Ritt. Bowling Green, Oh: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994. 73.
- ¹⁷ Lewis, R. W. B. The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955. 6.
- ¹⁸ Lewis 5.
- ¹⁹ Lewis 6.
- ²⁰ For further insight into Harold Innis’s critique of contemporary society, including its space or time bias, see The Bias of Communication (1951). Foreword by Marshall McLuhan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982; and Empire and Communications (1950). Rev. Mary Q. Innis. Foreword Marshall McLuhan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.
- ²¹ Slotkin, Richard. Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998. 12.
- ²² Polonsky, Abraham. “Dialogue with Martin Ritt and Abraham Polonsky” (1976). Reprinted in Martin Ritt: Interviews. Ed. Gabriel Miller. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2002. 46.
- ²³ Polonsky 46.
- ²⁴ Jackson, Carlton. “Paul Newman, interview, Westport, C. T., 3 Jun 1991.” Picking up the Tab: The Life and Movies of Martin Ritt. Bowling Green, Oh: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994. 75.
- ²⁵ Mae 14.

²⁶ Davis, Ronald. "A Conversation with Martin Ritt" (1987). Reprinted in Martin Ritt: Interviews 168.

²⁷ Ritt, "American Film Institute: Dialogue on Film: Martin Ritt" (1983). Interviewer unknown. Reprinted in Martin Ritt: Interviews 66.

²⁸ Ritt, "American Film Institute" 66.

²⁹ Williams, Culture & Society: 1780-1950 (1958). New York: Harper & Row, 1983. xiv.

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