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Critical Industrial Practice

Branding, Repurposing, and the Migratory Patterns of Industrial Texts

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This article examines the integral, reflexive, and critical functions that industrial texts play in contemporary corporate repurposing, cross-collateralization, and branding. More than simply practitioner discourses, the article takes as its object what it terms the "low theoretical" tendencies found in "deep" industrial texts to better understand the critical-theoretical competencies and marketing imperatives behind the textual practices of the new media conglomerates. The article reconsiders the tripartite model offered by Fiske and Gripsrud, by showing how secondary and tertiary television texts persistently migrate toward primary textual status in the current American multichannel flow. A close examination of industrial textual practice (programming events, network branding [the NBC 2000 campaign], station IDs, making-ofs, video press kits, promo tapes, TV-web synergies, and ancillary marketing) shows how the industry theorizes its presence in moving image form, even as it teaches the audience at home by publicly circulating (sanctioned) "insider" knowledge about the televisual apparatus.

Keywords: branding; repurposing; production culture; media convergence; industrial theoretical competence; textual analysis; media conglomeration; practitioner communities; liminal industrial rituals

Confidently taking the initiative in matters of government policy, Fox and the National Football League (NFL), without apparent irony or reluctance,

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declared the 2002 Super Bowl a "national holiday." The pregame show that followed this announcement bonded the muscled bodies of pro football players in slow-motion montage with the sacrificial firemen and heroes of the World Trade Center disaster. A phalanx of former presidents from both parties then mouthed chunks of the Declaration of Independence together with former star and activist Jim Brown, lineman and Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Jim Marshall, and quarterback and conservative congressman Jack Kemp—all to the accompaniment of a swelling Aaron Copland elegy. By the time Irishman Bono flashed open his jacket to reveal an American flag at the end of Fox's U2 half-time show—an ecstatic multimedia spectacle verifying uniform political consensus—viewers had witnessed an unusually explicit disclosure of commitment and cultural-political prowess by both government and the entertainment industrial complex. The recombinant but unequivocal message at work here melded masculinity, nostalgia, and political power with a "newfound" American confidence in Manichean justice and retribution. And all of this was punctuated by comforting commercial spots that naturalized consumerism as a fundamental part of the American way of life. This was high noon for the cross-mediated culture industries, one of the most prominent opportunities for producers, ad executives, stars, writers, researchers, aging ex-jocks, and announcers to showcase the industry's critical acumen and intellectual stature as reluctant—but earnestly capable—historians and political scientists.

Few could argue, in the face of this showcased moment of consensus, that these programmed "texts" had no effectivity or instrumentality; that their producers had no agency; that televisual forms were anything other than the very means of exchange that tied industry to culture, at least, that is, on important matters like the "war on terrorism" and professional football. After all, there on-screen was socially progressive Bono rebranded as flag-waving U.S. patriot, simultaneously operating under E-Trade's corporate, on-screen, sponsoring logo, which in turn tied U2 and the N.Y. Fire Department to Wall Street as part of "E-Trade's Superbowl Halftime Show." Operating alongside this mélange were Britney Spear's commercial spot performances that pastiched the *entire history* of Pepsi's corporate rebranding of American as an avenger against the "evil axis," which in turn operated as part of Fox Network's and the NFL's joint rebranding campaign of themselves as unofficial but important and de facto parts of the United States federal government. It is easy to recognize the instrumentality of televisual forms and the agency of textual producers at moments of high crisis like this one. It is perhaps less easy to recognize the same kind of effectivity and agency and industrial logic in the ubiquitous flows that characterize most programming day parts. In such flows—that is, pro-

gramming outside of crisis or televised national ritual—producers and critics alike tend to compartmentalize power and industry and audience and text into entirely different registers and public spheres. This segregation tends to be shortsighted, as I hope to show, and blind to the industrial logics of televisual texts.

A series of events in 2002 suggest just how integral issues of power, politics, regulatory policy, and economy continue to be in film and media studies. The uninterrupted green light given globalized intermedia conglomeration by the Bush administration, the relaxation of network-station ownership restrictions by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the emergent and ubiquitous nationalism forged (through studio and network "consensus") to support the new and boundary-less war on terrorism, and studio efforts to manage global internet-movie-DVD piracy (even as the same studios shift their own assets, labor, and production capabilities off-shore) all underscore the increasing centrality of the government-sanctioned corporation in managing the contemporary mediascape. Studying mere media texts in such a climate might seem like an odd and disengaged pursuit. As this journal has convincingly argued (Miller 2001a, 185; Miller 2001b, 92), textualism and the screen studies attending it have led media studies into an unfortunate explanatory and heuristic cul-de-sac.¹

This call for course correction in the field, in the name of political economy, media policy, and cultural citizenship, is perhaps a logical and overdue response to initial commitments made by those who established and legitimized the critical studies of television—as a field—in the 1970s and 1980s. Agenda-setting, field-charting works by Horace Newcomb (1974, 1976, 1987) and Robert Allen (1987, 1992), for example, were compelled to establish institutional beachheads that isolated and sanctioned critical textual analysis as a legitimate methodology with advantages that went beyond those offered by contextual analyses, general political models, and the social sciences.² Perhaps more than any other, John Fiske (1987) articulated a model of text and ideology that most fully conflated power with the televisual text. In proposing alternative methodologies, like sociospatial analysis, subsequent theorists have continued to dichotomize "economism and textualism" (Hay 2001, 212). Such proposals make a point to critique the view of "televisuality" as a "hypervisual aesthetic" and a mere "symptom and paradigm of postmodernism" (Hay 2001, 210, 225). Yet these same critiques ignore earlier arguments that the televisual was *not*, in fact simply formal, aesthetic, or postmodern but was, rather, an institutional and industrial activity; one that was fully imbricated in the play of cultural and social power in the United States (Caldwell 1995) and in the geography lessons and critical spatial practices of industrial culture (Caldwell 1998, 1999).³ It is perhaps time to move beyond the polar, binary thinking that

caricatures textual analysis as empty and aesthetic, and therefore antithetical to political economy and policy.

As I hope to suggest in the pages that follow, it is difficult to explain the current world of conglomeration, deregulation, repurposing, and globalization *without* fully acknowledging the extent to which textual production—and the analysis of texts by industry—stand simultaneously as corporate strategies, as forms of cultural and economic capital integral to media professional communities, and as the means by which contemporary media industries work to rationalize their operations in an era of great institutional instability. Accounting for these functions means looking at television texts that circulate beyond and below the on-screen programs that many textual critics isolate for analysis.

My argument here is that the tripartite specter outlined earlier (of conglomeration, deregulation, and globalization) can be productively understood by examining what I term the “critical textual practices” that media corporations deploy to realize those industrial goals. The WB show *Popstars*, the HBO/Miramax series *Project Greenlight* and film *Stolen Summer*, and the choreographed rebranding strategies used cooperatively by the vigorous corporate coalition (Fox/NFL/U.S. federal government-PepsiCo/E-Trade/U2) during the February 2002 Super Bowl telecast all demonstrate two factors: first, the economic and ideological value of textual permutation and volatility in the age of repurposed content; and second, the ways that the industry critically comments on itself even as it steps back to theorize on the formation of culture and the significance of media in that formation.

In some ways, WB’s *Popstars* is the ultimate multipatformed media property. It simultaneously serves to provide consumers with television programming, CD and music production, web sites, interactive media, concert venues, publications, buzz grist for *Entertainment Weekly*, and access and participation (on a worldwide basis) for aspiring *Popstar* applicants, wanna-bes, and participants.⁴ Other series, like MTV’s *Making the Band*, have also followed this formula into a third season and ostensibly allow viewers to watch a pop cultural phenomenon as it emerges (albeit prefabricated rather than “discovered”) into multimedia stardom. *Project Greenlight*/*Stolen Summer*, on the other hand, was launched as a contest for unknown but aspiring screenwriters/directors “with an edge.” Backers Miramax studios, Ben Affleck and Matt Damon—employing an ideology that linked lottery, Sundance, and gen-Y mythoi with the chance to be a “player” in the new culture industry—awarded first-timer Pete Jones a million-dollar budget to lens his screenplay and feature film *Stolen Summer*. HBO then covered every blow-by-blow of the disaster that followed behind the camera for its weekly prime-time series *Project Greenlight*. Far more than a “making-of,” HBO scored a major hit with the on-the-set soap

opera. The result: a weekly melodrama involving endless displays of production and directorial incompetence, cathartic raging, infighting, interpersonal jealousies, backstabbing, firings, and studio and executive damage control.

By the time *Stolen Summer* premiered to mixed and unenthusiastic reviews at Sundance in January 2002, the lessons were clear: First, the traditional aesthetic hierarchy had been turned upside down: AOL/Time-Warner’s cable net HBO succeeded in making ancillary content the *main* event, with theatrical film exhibition but an afterthought. Second, the marketing and management arms of the conglomerate had effectively and publicly deployed their own critical competence (and their grasp of complex, multimarket media productions) through the process. Ostensible “stars” Jones, Affleck, Damon, and others gradually faded under the shadow of the higher-ups: Miramax’s quiet but knowing executive aesthetes who pulled strings, and the professional coverage and implicitly insightful screen analysis offered by HBO’s quality corporate brand (“It’s not television. It’s HBO”). In the age of multipatformed media content, corporate media brands do regularly function as both auteurs (who choreograph and organize the televisual spectacle) and critical analysts (who ably mine the backstory behind-the-camera, and presentational secrets of their content—as content).

Web/TV-film hybrids (like *Popstars* and *Project Greenlight*) and the convergent digital technologies that set them in motion have now become de facto trading grounds not just for commerce and consumption but for industry authorship as well, in ways impossible to imagine during the era of network dominance. While the heightened aura of “behind-the-scenes” perhaps made sense in an era of relatively scarce access (when high-walled studio back-lots guarded the production world and its incubation of film and program texts), textual generation in a digital world of “making-ofs,” DVD “director tracks,” DVcams, Powerbook editing, and CD/DVD burners puts everything in front and on-screen; everything in an electronic foreground where migrating texts refer endlessly to other texts. This article reconsiders the tripartite model offered by Fiske (1987) and Gripsrud (1995) by showing how what they term “secondary” and “tertiary” television texts persistently migrate or travel toward “primary” textual status in the current American multichannel flow. A close examination of industrial textual practice—programming events, network branding practices (including the NBC-2000 campaign), station IDs, making-ofs, video press kits, promo tapes, and ancillary digital media—shows how the industry theorizes its presence in moving image form, even as it teaches the audience at home by publicly circulating insider knowledge about the televisual apparatus.

At the National Association of Television Programming Executives (NATPE) 2000—a major industry market for syndicated TV programming—a pantheon of traditional syndicated program producers (Tri-Star, Paramount, Fox, Buena Vista, King World, and others) alternately sparred and courted a phalanx of new dot-com media suitors. Everyone on the trade floor knew that convergence somehow required going to bed with NetFlix, but no one really could articulate how such alliances could guarantee cash flow. While hand-wringing greeted the sheer force of recent conglomerations between heavies like AOL and Time-Warner, few producers could confidently articulate how TV program texts would weather their impending couplings with digital. In the current, deregulated world of the multichannel flow and the global distribution of television programs, the very notion of what comprises a program text has become problematic—and it has become problematic in ways that go beyond postmodern accounts of “intertextuality” (Jameson 1983; Lyotard 1984; Foster, 1985; White 1985; Stam 1992).⁵ As discussed earlier, academic television studies have historically made a habit of segregating “contextual” research (media production, industry, political economy) from “textual” analysis (semiotics, narratology, critical studies). A growing number of works, however, have productively challenged this kind of segregation.⁶ In the North American context, this bifurcation of the field has been mirrored institutionally in ways that affect how knowledge about television is reproduced in and by universities. Although cultural studies have promised in some ways to bridge the gap between the two camps, context/industry-centered programs grounded in the tradition of broadcast communications and the mass media seldom stray into the hermeneutical confines of text-engaged television research programs that have emerged from the tradition of cinema studies.⁷

This working split perhaps made some sense when the three American television networks comprised a fairly unified “mass” medium but seems shortsighted given marked changes in the presentational manner and guises of many recent program forms. And while narrowcasting and niche marketing used to apply mostly to the U.S. situation (where many homes now have 100 digital cable and satellite channel choices or more), the ideal of “endless choice” has become a driving corporate principle in the international arena as well. Multinational corporations (Viacom, Newscorp, SkyTV, AOL/Time-Warner, etc.) are also moving to open up television markets in nations that traditionally limit media choice through centralized governmental regulation. Granada Television, the BBC, and Murdoch’s enterprises have all scrambled to “help” China diversify and niche its massive, potential audience. In the current industrial mode, stylistic heterogeneity (and frequently some iteration of what used to be a

distinctively American ethos, multiculturalism) now comes packaged with multichannel delivery. An array of investments in these traits—and especially the corporate “tiering” strategies that make niching and economies of scope profitable—also make renewed critical engagement with notions of the television text both problematic and necessary.

These recent trends position textualism as an institutional rather than formal phenomenon and suggest (1) that critical research would benefit from closer attention to the industrial logic of many new program permutations; (2) that many current textual formats are, in fact, overt and explicit institutional performances of context; and (3) that TV’s industrial discourses can also be viewed as plays of cultural competence and critical-theoretical engagement. The transmutation of text and context that I broach above, therefore, places in jeopardy another favored intellectual split: between theory on one hand and production on the other. A close examination of the wealth of industrial icons, texts, and rituals used by TV production “culture”—my broader project—suggests that producing communities (groups of practitioners commercially and socially linked by affinities of competence and modes of production) are also characterized by an ongoing process of critical, aesthetic, and theoretical deliberation. Far from being a proprietary province of, or zone for, academic researchers, then, theorization has become a public and on-screen property of the industry as well. I use this term *theorization* advisedly, for assigning critical-theoretical ability to industry can be distasteful to academic culture on any number of levels. Yet, the practices I broach here fit well the kinds of definitions of theory that circulate in film studies—of theory as either (1) inquiry into generalizable propositions about the meaning, forms, and significance of film and media⁸ or (2) ongoing, critical, and reflexive analysis by industrial practitioners that takes apart and tries to make sense of media making in more provisional and less totalizing ways.⁹ While this activity might be viewed as a form of “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983) or “allegorical machinery” (Boon 1986), others have addressed it as “low theory” (Caldwell 1993, 1994) or “lay theory” (Seiter 1999).¹⁰ This proclivity by the industry for deconstruction and reflexivity I term *critical production practice*, a term that I have borrowed and adapted from Phil Agre’s (1997) AI-derived notion of “critical computing practice.” Television researchers would do well not to ignore the ways that these forms of industrial theoretical inquiry—of the media by the media—work to constrain meanings and navigate pleasures for viewers and consumers of electronic culture as well.

Industrial Textual Practice

“Far from being writers . . . readers are travelers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields

they did not write, despoiling the wealth . . . to enjoy it themselves" (Michel de Certeau, quoted in Jenkins 1992, 24).

In what has become a kind of critical orthodoxy, de Certeau and Jenkins are celebrating the resistant reader by describing his or her activity as a kind of "poaching." However, if one substitutes "television producer" for "readers" in de Certeau's text, the accolade is just as appropriate. But how can one talk of a network producer (who poaches) as a form of impertinent resistance? The pages that follow, therefore, examine two more general issues that inform this specific question: the cultural migrations of industrial texts and the liminality of industrial practitioners. First, the tripartite textual taxonomy proposed by Fiske (1987) and refined by Gripsrud (1995)—with discrete primary, secondary, and tertiary textual designations—seems needlessly limited when one considers the rich array of discursive and low-theoretical forms that traverse and now define the continuum between industry context (traditionally thought of as technology, economics, production) and the viewer's television screen (the entertainment program). If the television industry has mastered anything amid recent and rapid changes in delivery and technology, it is in its ability to flood both production *and* viewer cultures with multiple, secondary, and tertiary production texts. The making-ofs, promos, demo tapes, DVDs, video press kits, syndicated entertainment strips, and show business reports—my focus here—are both quasitheoretical discourses *and* therapeutic exercises; meant as much for industry practitioners, insecure affiliates, acquisitions directors, and merger-minded CEOs as anyone else.

Second, an analysis of the *on-screen* versions of these secondary and industrial texts—ground out daily by promotional engines and marketing imperative—reveals that the audience ritual/activity paradigms celebrated by critical theory and cultural studies in recent years are also very much at work in industry. Theories as different as "poaching" (referenced above), "resistance" and "counter-readings" (Fiske 1987), and "liminality"—elaborated by Victor Turner (1986), Newcomb and Hirsch (1983), Dayan and Katz (1992), and Lili Berko (1992)—have all helped activate an audience earlier deadened or elided by communications effects study and formal-textual analysis. But while these concepts have helped correct the pessimistic list caused by earlier top-down ideological studies of television, as heuristic ballast they also tend to obscure the rituals of culture and identity that occur daily on the industrial horizon. Industry practitioners continually "poach," regularly "negotiate" identity, and frequently navigate change through "liminal" identity rituals.¹¹ Like the Papuan singing, Mardi-Gras, or carnival, professional media production cultures establish liminal spaces and ceremonial rituals intended to exist outside of everyday time, to suspend normal expectations of cause and effect, and to exist between past and future. This subjunctive rather than indicative

temporal register allows communities extended, ritualistic opportunities for cooperative, what-if reflections on change and identity. Pitch sessions, trade shows, industry summits, network-affiliate meetings, and advertiser "up-fronts" for the fall programming seasons all serve these functions for the television production industry. They provide heightened opportunities for alliance or consensus building in the face of industrial change or economic instability.

The circulation of critical-theoretical icons and texts by the industrial participants is an integral and catalytic part of these liminal rituals, professional interactions, and industrial formations. It is also a fundamental component in the way industry makes sense of itself to itself and thus navigates corporate uncertainty. A fuller account of these industrial rituals and interactions is offered elsewhere (Caldwell 2004a, 2004b) and is beyond this article's primary focus on *textual* practices of industry. Yet, it is worth noting that the kind of critical deliberation that I've postulated occurs in a range of formats and venues: iconographies, technical designs, mediated users manuals, trade narrativizations, and industry-wide ceremonial gatherings. The culture of production continuously reflects on and monitors the field, its privileged practices, and its influential trends. All of this is done in an attempt to find, leverage, and profitably rationalize new and (until now) undervalued edges of professional practice. With an obligatory mandate to continuously fabricate diversity and difference, the 500-channel universe (an official fantasy of contemporary multinational media corporations) has even found a way to grind "speaking from the margins"—a tactic of resistance for the disenfranchised—into its corporate myth of manifest destiny. At least in the fiduciary scenario of postnetwork cyberspace envisioned by the corporate sphere, then, bell hooks meets Viacom, and Viacom wins.

Little can be gained, however, by viewing these cultural and theoretical rituals by industry (because they are profit driven) as mere, immediate, or inevitable forms of "recuperation."¹² Viewing industrial poaching as pre-emptive strikes against rogue appropriators reduces the activity to the sadly austere menu of familiar binaries (dominant/subjugated, inside/outside, good/bad); polar dichotomies presupposed in earlier theories of the culture industry; and the ideology of mass culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944/1979). The industry is far more than a hardened corporate bunker bent on homogenizing dominance or choking off change. Totalizing theories of inevitable recuperation merely give to the industry more determining authority than it has or deserves. Practitioners are also audiences, and knowledge circulates in both directions. *Industry encoders are also simultaneously decoders*, their lived experience decoding culture on a daily basis necessarily informs each act of production coding. There are openings then, many of them, in the continual processes of industrial navigation and low theorization. I would argue that the circulation and

merchandising of theoretical knowledge in the multichannel world actually creates great instability, and this instability opens up all kinds of possibilities—less for clean forms of resistance from the outside perhaps than for actions on the inside meant to disrupt, alter, or precipitate corporate crisis. As anyone who has taught media theory for a significant amount of time surely knows, the vast majority of university students who now learn and master semiotics, continental literary theory, postcolonial theory, feminism, or cultural studies end up working and circulating in the corporate world. To continue to view that world in monolithic terms—from a position of academic (and therefore clear cultural) privilege—stands as one of the worst forms of critical disengagement.¹³ Setting aside for a moment the intraindustry textual practices examined here, even a cursory look at on-screen consumption by audiences today suggests the great degree of critical-theoretical instability and ideological volatility being managed by the media brands. For these reasons, a more systematic understanding of the secondary texts and industrial theorizations examined here may also suggest possibilities for resistance and opportunities for change in what many have termed the postnetwork era.

A Taxonomy of Migrating Texts

Industrial textual practice can be usefully mapped onto a wide range of moving image forms that are produced and circulated in and around the production of TV's primary texts: the programs. The analysis that follows traces this range of textual formations through three broad registers: (1) as industrial theorizing practices that are embedded inside of broadcast and cablecast prime-time shows; (2) as secondary theorizing practices that identify themselves as secondary but that appear on-screen nevertheless as part of the schedule of primary program texts; and, finally, (3) those secondary but on-screen theorizing practices that circulate apart from the orthodox constellation or schedule of primary texts, in ancillary venues and electronically mediated forms. I use the terms critical and theorizing practices—rather than the more singular and bounded term *theory*—to clarify that practitioners seldom reify this mode of generalizable self-inquiry into an autonomous discipline as academic theorists do. Rather, media practitioners daily employ textual and screen analysis (critical practice) and more generalizable interrogations of methods, purposes, and meanings (theorizing practice) as integral components of their production and management strategies. Critical, theorizing practice, as I use the term here is not simply knowledge or thought production either, for while any community produces knowledge and thought, many avoid (or lack the means or capital to formalize) the *second register of analysis* (e.g., the kinds of critical deconstruction afforded by making-ofs) or the *third register of reflection* (e.g.,

the generalizable self-inquiry ubiquitous in trade shows summaries and trade publication editorial columns) favored in media practitioner cultures.¹⁴ The schema of critical, theorizing practice that I have outlined for industry here (and describe in the taxonomy that follows) fits well with the workmanlike, epistemological modesty and definition proposed by Bordwell and Carroll (1996) for "middle-level theorizing" (p. 41).¹⁵ Yet, I also hope to give some historical context to the practices and suggest (modestly) how these practitioner phenomena are tied to the kinds of bigger philosophical and ideological questions that Stam and Miller (2000, xvi, xvii) propose.¹⁶

Anyone who has witnessed infantile on-set tirades, dysfunctional interpersonal relations, the exploitation of contract labor, or regressive sexual or racial politics in a media organization may question the intellectual authority I seem to have assigned specialized production communities. Yet, such things also characterize many university departments and do not necessarily justify attributing to the academy the reductive and determining authority to rotely produce ideology or false consciousness. The issue of politics and power—especially in the relation between academic theory and industrial theorizing practice—is an important factor, one that I will return to later with regard to specific practices in this taxonomy.

I begin my survey by considering critical textual practices now fairly common in programming departments (stylistic exercises as special episodes, programming events), move in the next register to consider secondary theorizations (news tie-ins, network branding, making-ofs), and conclude in the third register with a consideration of ancillary textual forms (video press kits, TV-web sites). A survey of these works makes it clear, as I hope to show, that industrial textual theorizing (about television by television) is characterized not by any essential formal or generic quality but by their very fluidity; by their offscreen/on-screen mobility; by their "travel" between secondary, primary, and tertiary states. Any explanation of the industrial or cultural logics of these on-screen theorizations must, therefore, also take into account and reckon with the migratory behavior of such texts.

Prime-Time Pedagogy: Stylistic Exercises as Cultural Negotiations

In outlining a taxonomy of ways that contemporary TV texts negotiate and migrate, and as a point of reference, I begin with a fairly basic form and an early example of cultural mediation by television: a late 1960s show that self-consciously showcased (and so commented on) production style, in special episodes, to make sense of cultural change.¹⁷ One of the best ways to understand industrial textual practice, and the stakes involved in low

theory, is to consider how industry has postured and reflected on one issue that has been near and dear to the heart of the production culture itself: the notion of style in general and the concepts of *art* and *cinema* in particular. An extensive examination of American television programs in the 1950s and 1960s that dealt explicitly with the notion of art, style, and high culture demonstrates two recurrent prime-time tropes (Caldwell 1995, 32-72). First, the avant-garde and high culture were consistently conflated with various cutting-edge aberrancies, sexuality, race, and deviance. Second, these issues were frequently mapped onto a middle-American moral geography that placed the aesthetic threat/lure in the East (New York and Europe in the 1950s) and in the West (Los Angeles in the 1960s). At first glance, an episode of *Dragnet* entitled "Blue Boy" (produced by Jack Webb and Mark VII Ltd. for NBC, 1967) appears to traverse the latitude of this aesthetic/moral geography. At another level, the episode looks to be just another opportunistic exercise in pop culture appropriation by prime-time television when Sergeant Joe Friday philosophizes to his partner as they bust an out-of-control party of aesthetes: "It's weed." A closer look suggests, however, that the show is also a very public ritual whereby the production enterprise incorporates, justifies, and adopts an acute form of alternative video production style. Following Geertz (1983), we might consider this an exercise in the industry thinking not just about the specter of counterculture and hippiedom but about its own style as well.

Although *Dragnet* has been described as a prime-time bastion of law-and-order conservatism (Marc and Thompson 1992, 136), such a view fails to account for the negotiated change that the series experienced during its run.¹⁸ The center of the show's dramatic world is explicitly identified with the normal, moral, nuclear family in the suburbs. They, like their surrogate parental Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) detectives, are disciplined in a world of blacks-and-whites and grays. The spatial model and conflation of art and aberrancy recurrent in 1950s and 1960s television has shifted, however. The typical East-to-West, Europe-New York-Heartland-Los Angeles axis has been inverted to a vertical dimension: Dragnet's familial suburbia carpets the flatlands down-below, while aesthetic degeneracy lurks up above in the Hollywood hills. In this episode, Hollywood itself has become the flame that draws the prodigal son/moth to hippiedom, abstract art, and hallucinogens. Although Detective Friday and his partner ultimately fail to save the rebellious poet from self-destruction, the show offers no simple, predetermined condemnation of the drug culture.

Produced for the fall season following the infamous (and no longer underground) "summer of love," the episode can actually be seen as a very earnest kind of educational film; a prime-time tract that bends over backward to "teach" the family group and its children at home the taxonomies,

myths, and dangers of illicit drugs. Such topics were, by late 1967 after all, the subject of mass magazine headlines and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) agenda topics.¹⁹ The over-the-top ironies seen here in postmodern retrospect mask the fact that the episode is loaded with useful health and hygiene tips about marijuana use and LSD. On-camera "lab experts" are asked by Friday to explain such things as part of the plot. Their concerned, high-speed, scientific minilectures appear like encyclopedia entries *packed desperately* into several one- and two-minute scenes. The net effect is a kind of user's guide for parents needing to catch up on the counterculture drug lingo now circulating around the neighborhood.

The show as a whole, then, is less a knee-jerk write-off of the drug culture than it is a very serious attempt to react, to navigate, and to explain it in acceptable terms. Art gives middle America those terms. In a bizarre (a)historical amalgam—that conjoined the avant-garde, paint-eating abstract artists, back-tracked recorded music, and 1950s "beat" poetry—even the knowing production staff is charged with negotiating the threat stylistically. Unorthodox red and green gels—parrotting the underground film look—shade these deviant cast-offs from the middle class in hot dayglow colors. Long before *MTM* and *Lear*'s "serious" sitcoms in the early 1970s, therefore, *Dragnet* tackles serious topics of social relevance. Long before *MTM*, *Dragnet* explicates and teaches the audience at home. As a rather conventional sitcom, *Dragnet* mediated knowledge about Hollywood, the youth culture, and style for those who would shortly don counterculture in more acceptable forms and consumer goods: bell-bottoms and love beads. This, in essence, was modern art 101, film appreciation, and high school health class rolled into one, a rather conventional example of how the production community functions as a mediator and cultural navigator, producing hand-holding program texts for the audience at home. But the mediation is clearly two-way: deviant cultural practices also provide Mark VII Productions—noted for its rote, low-budget, factory-like conditions—with the terms needed to rationalize, codify, and normalize its own tentative venture into innovative production method. The explicit, verbal-moral message may have been reactionary, but the industrial performance posed the show as vanguard. Even *Dragnet* can be seen as a very public portrait of the production culture, a display through which practitioners visually conjectured on the relationship between production and culture.

Programming "Events": Fabricating a Cutting Edge

Two decades later, in the pantheon of elite, signature producers that characterized 1980s American television, none was more visible than Stephen Bochco. Bochco became, in fact, a kind of poster boy for television

critics and winning producer-writers everywhere whose shows never elicited the same network-blessed risk-taking attitude that Bochco's network *Medics* had bestowed on him in 1981 with *Hill Street Blues* and in 1986 with *LA Law*. Trades and journalists everywhere were running with the story that *CopRock* would be Bochco's ultimate artistic work. Bochco was cutting edge, and *CopRock* would "push the stylistic envelope" further than ever before. This was to be the golden age of network postmodernism; its quality trump card over lowlier cable programming.

Yet, driven by a furious marketing campaign that predetermined the series and theorized its aesthetic effects for the mass audience in advance, the show when aired was finally greeted with befuddlement and then derision. Its signature hybridity reached critical mass, and the show went down in flames. In effect, the show's premise—a direct outgrowth of the pitch aesthetic and writing by committee that now dominated Hollywood—went straight to the audience in the spring and summer, without the messy complications of actually having to first broadcast the series.²⁰ An hourlong urban cop drama was cloned as an ensemble musical, then lathered with all of the high-production value quality and pop culture references that the prestige production cadre could muster. Petite dramatic hooks led to testosterone-driven Steadicam and cinematic flourishes which led to bizarre multilevel scenes in which fictional characters, "real" leather-clad, middle-aged actors, headlining composer Randy Newman, and below-the-line studio musicians all grooved the same showcased beat. The show's overdetermined signature relevance—a meditation on the city, race, and society—all went out the window as viewers scratched their heads. This, apparently, was what happened when Hollywood paid white WGA screenwriters to write black rap music.²¹ The high-concept series did, in fact, mark a key point in the aesthetic trajectory of Hollywood television. Economic recession and reality TV were emerging on the heels of late 1980s signature relevance, and *CopRock* exposed marketing as the real basis for both screenwriting and programming. Marketing overdetermined the show as a recombinant genre; it marked the economic stakes that drove Hollywood television's risk taking in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and it proved that screenplays are also business plans. *CopRock* stands as a wicked twist on Stuart Hall's notion of an oppositional or counterrading—with little of the kind of radical politics that Hall had linked to counterradings. The critical-marketing establishment had prefabricated (and preemptively delivered) a critical apparatus for interpreting the new series—with Bochco defined (in terms of aesthetics and lifestyle) as a resistant avant-gardist and *CopRock* defined (in terms of street politics) as Gangsta-Rap. Explicit oppositionality was the very public pretense that organized both the show's overdetermined marketing campaign and its narrative form.²²

News Tie-ins

Even a moderately conscious viewer during sweeps week has surely noticed the ravenous appetite that local affiliates have for linking their news coverage with network programming in order to create televised events.²³ While this kind of linkage and exploitation may horrify serious journalists, the practice is much more than simply a sensationalist stunt or a callous exploitation of some handy and late-breaking human tragedy. News tie-ins to dramatic programming and network stars are so widespread that they should be considered one of the dominant genres of local television news.²⁴ Tie-ins, furthermore, clearly fit the parameters I have sketched out for low theory: even as they work to strip off the network sweeps audience for affiliate benefit, they actively and publicly work to mediate knowledge about the television industry for the television viewer.

When the KNBC/Los Angeles anchors loaded up their 11:00 p.m. sweeps week news show with multiple tie-ins to the number one hit show *E.R.* that they had just broadcast in May 1995, they were not simply scavenging for quick-fix notoriety. By following numerous *E.R.*-driven station-break promos with news segments about *E.R.* (including one on lead actor and heartthrob George Clooney; one on quintuplets that played the part of a newborn on that night's episode; and one on *E.R.*'s "import-auteur" for the evening, director-provocateur Quentin Tarantino), the news folks were actually constructing and celebrating a mega-Hollywood family in the minds of viewers. Launched to fame by *Reservoir Dogs* and the then current, marquee-grabbing *Pulp Fiction*, Tarantino, of course, was *the* cult director of the year. Tarantino was Cannes, trash culture, bad boy, and high Hollywood rolled into one. But here, in KNBC's chatty tie-in, Tarantino not only ambled deferentially through KNBC's television lot, but his casual aw-shucks response to reporters revealed that this was a simple man, one who loved television in general and *E.R.* in particular.

The real function of this kind of mediating text is that it capsizes one of the most dominant high-low hierarchies entrenched in Hollywood. The formally dressed, coifed, and always composed news anchors are benumbed that the off-the-wall Tarantino—known to others as a hotshot, cutting-edge film auteur—would actually jump at the offhanded chance to direct television and that "their" *E.R.* was, in fact, his favorite show. "It was nothin'," he suggested bashfully, "a few director's comments here and there." This pose of self-deprecation left it to others in the audience to pick up Tarantino's stylistic trademarks, including a two-foot metal construction rebar left impaled in the heart of a patient, a bloody gurney-based image that dominated the center of the scene. The real stars in the reconstruction of Tarantino and his rebar were, of course, local anchors Moyer and Lange, in control in the studio, able to cite cult films, and graciously willing to accept

Tarantino's homage to television. They are, apparently, connoisseurs of "hip." Even as cutting edge is ground into their mediating textual material, these star-anchors inflate local news to national proportions: a network family—*yea*, even Hollywood itself. There are obvious benefits to this kind of forced symbolic and institutional merging. News tie-ins, even as they analyze and teach the audience at home about the structure of the industry, are not complete lies, for there are very real economic and legal relationships between the corporate entities in Hollywood that these news impresarios theorize about. Such figures are trying to convince themselves even as their corporations navigate complicated, real-world production relationships.

Network "Branding"

When Cable News Network (CNN), Music Television (MTV), Lifetime, Black Entertainment Television (BET), and other cable networks opened up channel competition in the early 1980s, the networks publicly and smugly disavowed the threat. Secure in their tripartite world, the networks failed to appreciate one of the real lessons of the new cable networks: that brand name identification would become a network survival tactic in the decades to come. Visual logos inserted in cable programming came to function as essential footholds in the multichannel clutter—for general cable channels like USA Network and for yuppie boutique niches like VH-1 and Lifetime. While keyed-in logos on C-Span continue to have the expressive presence of a surveillance camera ID, other cable networks—especially those associated with Viacom—have made the logo far more than a direction or channel choice marker. MTV in particular turned its logos and IDs into a videographic performing platform and a polyvalent sign that could endlessly hybridize with the seasons. By commissioning a succession of artists, designers, and claymation artists to push the MTV logo to its canonical limits, the network's visual brand finally emerged as a programmed feature, as an overdetermined stylistic and cathartic ritual, maintained at clockwork intervals. With corporate identity now tied explicitly to specific artists, the network was choreographing its identity with both taste culture conventions and excessive intentionality. These frenetic videographic logos eventually included volleys of rapidly mutating MTVs that reenacted the entire history of Western art—from the Paleolithic period to post-postmodernism—in mind-numbing ten-second bursts. The "aesthetic," then, not only ruled cable's industrial habit, but it could also be perceptually inhaled in the time it took for the viewer to find the remote.

Talk of the need for effective branding is now commonplace in industry forums and publications. The "boutique" digital media companies that

have helped make the new Hollywood (by providing the majors with the technical means to achieve stylistic individuation via contractual outsourcing of graphics, animations, and special effects) now complain of the formidable economies that come with being distinctive but small.²⁵ The Hollywood majors, Warner Brothers, Disney, MGM, and others, simply have more muscle when it comes to establishing quality brand recognition in the global media market. This brand imperative is fueled in great measure by the growing sense that there now is simply not enough of an audience to go around, that is, not enough to share (profitably) with all of the competition.

Identifications/IDs: Kick-Starting a Network-Affiliate "Family"

The smug confidence of the networks about their initial prowess in the multichannel flow eroded to the point of crisis by the mid-1990s. With drastic loss in market share, the three major networks now needed a way to make not just audiences but industry members aware of the power and benefits that came with the network "family." The networks were in a state of crisis, with prognostications of demise or merger forming a steady rhetorical flow in the trades. In 1995 and 1996, NBC counterattacked by borrowing President Bush's much maligned "thousand points of light" myths. Research showed that the traditional four-letter station call letters were simply too complicated for most viewers to remember. The response? Local stations *owned* by the national network were to drop the K's and W's nationally (as in KNBC, Burbank) and adopt the NBC plus channel number (NBC-4, Burbank) as a simpler designation and common logo. Nationally aired station/network IDs broadcast during this time that focused on local *affiliate* stations, however, show the full extent to which anxiety about the network's future ruled the corporate enterprise.²⁶ As the camera scans a graphic map of the country in one set of spots, hundreds of points of light mark the network's "214 affiliates nationwide, including KJRH-2 Tulsa, Oklahoma." This campaign, not illogically, followed soon after the much publicized abandonment of CBS by a number of longtime affiliate stations—network-affiliate "traitors" as it were—who opted for the rising fortunes and hipper programming of the newer fourth network, Fox. NBC's celebration and symbolic construction of a network family, then, can be seen as a kind of preemptive corporate strike, as industry damage control, aimed at vigorously reasserting the aura of network authority and quality. Not since the 1950s had the networks had to work this hard to teach viewers *and stations* about the *benefits* of national network affiliation. These kinds of mediating video texts, then, also function as shorthand corporate reports for

anxious affiliate stations that may have considered jumping ship. The top-down model of prestige programming—which includes Hollywood television and network news—regularly promises to guarantee the welfare of the affiliate family members, broadcasting out in the provinces.

The kind of aggressive, and heavy-handed, damage control evident in these spots came as part of a broader range of marketing innovations. NBC had also induced consent on the part of program producers to include the NBC logo “inside” scenes from aired programs themselves. This gambit amounted to a very clever sort of blackmail since program producers for years have complained that license fees from networks were never fair, that is, never paid for the actual cost of program production. These costs were ultimately only covered through later syndication revenues that went directly to the producers companies. NBC here was subtly forcing its partners to erect televised billboards inside episodes that NBC had not fully paid for. Apparently, the long-term financial prospects of NBC were both significant and enough in jeopardy that program providers realized that their fates were ultimately affected by the health of the network that first launched them. By eliminating commercial breaks between shows and by asking for network IDs within diegetic scenes, the network could promise greater viewer carryover from show to show. Program providers could certainly appreciate this—if the networks “hammocked” them between strong, proven shows. But the real lesson of these programming moves lies in public consciousness that the fates of program producers, the network, and the affiliate stations were all very much intertwined. Both the network “family-of-stations” ID campaign and the tactic of intradiegetic branding with logos stand as very public ways that television mediates and negotiates changes, even as it mollifies insecurities in the industry.

Video Press Kits/Network “Makeovers”

In a quintessential moment of feigned nonpartisanship, *Today Show* host Katie Couric announced that viewers were about to see the network’s “most dramatic makeover ever.”²² Visual evidence that something *had* changed in the aesthetic ways that the major networks did business came in the segment that followed, which summarized NBC’s 1994 campaign to overhaul its corporate logo and identity. The makeover also initiated a proliferation of intermediary video forms, all designed to drive home and publically “manage” the overhaul in the audience’s mind. NBC’s marketing machine simultaneously flooded the programming world with intermediary texts that both legitimized and analyzed their new look and attitude.

The once staid and venerable NBC commissioned cutting-edge artists—what they termed as “the biggest names in design and animation”—to

draft, engineer, sculpt, and animate the look that expressed its newfound attitude. Mark Malinberg, computer-artist guru behind the cyberfilm *Lawmower Man* fused the network with Grateful Dead electronics. David Daniels—“bad-boy” artist to perky host Katie Couric and A-List director of music videos and claymation spots for Honda—touted his network offering, or what he called “psychedelic meatloaf in motion.” Resurrected 1960s pop art castoff Peter Max repeatedly grooved about the free reign that enlightened NBC had given him to express himself. Painter Joan Gatz, in turn, stepped forward to render the network’s logo with a form of electronic impressionism.

The darker side of postmodernism came in full force as well, in the form of J. J. Sedelmaier and John Kricfalusi. Sedelmaier spun his logo from the brain-numbed animated “slacker” aesthetic of *Beavis-and-Butthead*. Kricfalusi, originator of the *Ren and Stimpy* flatulent aesthetic in cartoons, toyed with the interviewer even as he explained to the network audience his vision of the network peacock: “Colorful things come out of his butt.” To bring the bad-boy, cutting-edge master code of the corporate makeover full circle, NBC awarded broadcast exhibit to two nonprofessional artists who pushed the envelope with computer graphics cranked out on their Macintosh computers at home. The lesson was clear. The audience was bad, but the *Fortune* 100 NBC corporation was “badder” still. Even as Kricfalusi confessed disingenuously that “I don’t know what hip is” (yet another update of Andy Warhol’s “I don’t care” aesthetic), NBC was showing that it was now, in fact, the empire of the hip. No self-doubt was even needed.

Internet/Intertexts: “Value-Added Entertainment”

One of the prime ways that the industry now mediates knowledge about itself for the audience is through an array of internet sites (web pages, bulletin boards, online chat sessions, etc.). These sites provide, for those surfing the net, a wealth of ostensible *insider* material: interviews with cast and crew, production stills to download (something that studio marketing departments would never take the time to send as hard copy to casual or even interested viewers), and “cyberchats” with program producer-writers like the *X-Files*’ Chris Carter. Although complaints by fans against the major brands regularly circulate in reference to their attempts to control or censure or shut down unauthorized web sites, many shows like *X-Files* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* have actually acknowledged that they solicit input from fans on scripts and characters. These contributions provide script fodder to fold into future episodes. Producers at Fox, for example, noted in 1997 that they had hired two young women in their twenties who had no writing credits or experience in the industry to write screenplays. Their

hiring was based entirely on "spec scripts" that the authors had e-mailed to the producers' office via the internet.²⁸ No longer secured by the physical moat that traditionally separated industry from viewer, many shows now seek out and hunt down the viewer in cyberspace rather than vice versa. In both "official" and "unofficial" internet forms and fan sites, then, knowledge about television shows are regularly negotiated by the industry through industry-audience computer interfaces. This industrial solicitation of knowledge from the viewer, and subsequent acknowledgment of viewer input on the air or on-screen, makes online low theorization far from a disengaged form of analysis. This is deconstruction outside of the academy, low analysis that actively alters the subject, the primary text, being analyzed. If structuralism abolished the viewing subject and poststructuralism abolished the originating author/producer, then net-based television resurrects and resuscitates both, electronically coupling audience and producer.

Even if the electronic sites produced by the studios make less money than they cost to develop, executives continue to justify them as forms of "value-added entertainment." That is, even if series-related web sites, CDs, or interactive games do not turn handsome profits, they still function to intensify the quality demographics that exist for shows like the *X-Files*, *Friends*, or *Alias*. By animating an existing audience via consumer activity, ancillary electronic texts add value to the original series, thereby allowing producers and studios to take increased ad revenues to the bank.²⁹

Faux Theory/Faux History

Contemporary television does not just theorize the cutting edge, the hip, and the interactivity of fandom. It also presumes to have the intellectual muscle to deconstruct *academic* media theory as well. Rolled into the "Bradymania" multi-industry revival phenomenon in 1995, and aired in conjunction with *Brady: The Movie* release, Viacom's Nick-at-Nite crafted a fake thirteen-part series entitled *The Brady Chronicles*. This was both an explicit parody of the much touted Ken Burns aesthetic of quality documentary showcased by higher culture PBS and a jabbing deconstruction of media academics that analyze television. A wise and paternal narrator's voice—borrowed from PBS's long-running zoological *Nature* series—outlined the striking similarities between the ideological worlds of the Brady family and the Civil War. The Nick-at-Nite staff writers made analytic linkages that evolved from the surreal to the outrageous. American historians, sociologists, and media psychologists all took on-camera turns unmasking the show's many cultural enigmas. Yes, it turns out the *Brady Bunch* did engage feminism, counterculture politics, and nation building, all through

their "therapeutic" vision of "healing" for America. Sure enough, there on-camera were the architectural blueprints of the sitcom's studio sets, revealing a twelve-step stairway as a determining metaphor (twelve-step therapy, that is), a figure that helped the series negotiate the marked "cultural upheaval" during the period.³⁰ Christopher Lasch meets Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), meets cultural studies, in this half-hour industrial display of theorization *about* media theorization.³¹

More than just jokes or blank postmodern pastiche, these ironies had a bite, suggesting that the program's production staff also came to the table with a competent knowledge of media studies. The staff brought to the episode, in Bourdieu's (1984) terms, an excess of cultural capital, an overload that made even PBS's higher culture Burns aesthetic seem minimal and impoverished. *The Brady Chronicles* on a children's, faux-nostalgic cable network was far more sophisticated stylistically, and theoretically, than the centered, genuinely nostalgic subject and the minimalist, stylistic sensitivities of the "higher" PBS taste culture. Viacom's facility with hip deconstruction, cultural history, and critical parody—now apparently unremarkable parts of mainstream television—inverted the hierarchy of standard Gansian taste cultures (Gans 1974). In this prime-time act of theorizing interrogation, Burns and PBS were positioned as Kantian and restrained, trapped as they were by the centered subjectivity, cohesive formal unity, resolved narrative form, and distant intellection of a higher taste public. *Brady* and Nick, by comparison, were poststructural and carnivalesque—constantly decentering the text, exposing fault lines, and baring contradictions (in the ways that "deconstruction" has been formulated).³² At the same time, *Brady* and Nick foregrounded the textual excess, multivocal messiness, and dialogism of the analyzed text (in ways reminiscent of Bakhtin).³³ This commercial industrial display of critical reading—complete with a skewering of the excesses of critical intellection—came as a sort of dystopic epiphany for me. I recognized my indictment by *Brady* and Nick, for *The Brady Chronicles* turned out to be a bad dream about conference papers that I have presented. The Viacom corporation was doing a cultural studies reading—and doing it better than the serious patriarchal historians enjoined by PBS for almost any one of its quality nonfiction series, including those by Burns. No one else in the broadcasting/cable spectrum at this time was targeting or taking apart the Burns phenomenon—or a logocentric PBS for that matter—in order to expose the ideologies that propped them up. The political ramifications of this sort of prime-time behavior are, of course, an important issue. This dimension is worth pursuing in more detail, but only if one takes seriously the industrial importance of textualism in the corporate sphere, especially with regard to the function of branding strategies in the new cross-sectoral, multimedia conglomerates.

Proliferating Contexts/Traveling Texts

No longer is promotion a secondary tactical device; it is now a primary marketing function enabling competitive positioning of stations, networks, and systems in their markets. . . . Promotion is the indispensable tool for creating and exploiting differences.

—Eastman and Klein (1991, 3)

My historical sweep through the lowlands of industrial theorizing may seem somewhat distasteful for any who still consider this proliferation of contextualizing texts as mere promotional schlock spewed from television promotional engines by impresarios of vested interest. Yet the evidence is extensive: one of the main tactics of the industry³⁴ is now to carpet the population with intermediary texts, recombinant “programs” that manage the meanings of shows, that take on the mantle of critical analysis in order to mediate and contain knowledge about television for the viewer.

Consider, by way of summary then, the intellectual directions these low-theory permutations take and the challenges they present for media theory. At one level, *Dragnet* fulfilled a rather conventional role. Its *diegetic texts* frequently acted as forms of *prime-time pedagogy*, in this case amalgamating health-hygiene-penal discourses in a way that would have made both Foucault and production personnel proud. *CopRock*, by contrast, proved that *marketing texts* can achieve the status of prefabricated *master codes* that “write” program texts. This result is a logical outgrowth of the current era in which the industry is driven to develop series via the two-minute, high-concept, spoken “pitch.” Promo and demo tapes—far more than calling cards—function both as stylistic and conceptual user’s manuals and as *liminal sites for television’s technical cadre*.³⁵ The E.R./Tarantino stunt showed that *news texts can function as aesthetic ballast*, capable of capsizing traditional high-low aesthetic hierarchies (cinema vs. TV) in ways intended to increase audience share. The development of cable logo strategies demonstrated that *brand name texts* have become *essential market share footholds* in the multichannel clutter. NBC’s frantic “don’t worry, be happy” reconfiguration of the “network family,” through its national ID campaign, showed that *identifying texts can be used as corporate therapy*; functioning as short-form, subliminal, stockholders reports, even as they allay the insecurities and fears of fence-sitting, undercapitalized, regional affiliates.

The NBC-2000 network makeover can, finally, be seen as the quintessential “take-no-prisoners” approach to television marketing—premised as it was on the possibilities of an endlessly mutating industrial text. Consider the ways that this campaign to negotiate change was hybridized from a single source. A promo piece and interviews were filmed on production lots, to be used in video press kits, and promotions to print/journalists. The same

elaborately lit and meaningfully composed footage (far different from the mundane, unmotivated Betacam video material that makes up most *Today Show* segments) was then sent to New York for the morning talk show, where its narration was stripped off and substituted by host happy talk. Couric intervened as the show’s (and network’s) on-screen aesthete. She simultaneously allowed viewers at home to vote, thus connecting the newfound, bad-boy, cutting edge corporate bohemian with traditional network populism. The actual slate of commissioned makeover IDs was also distributed to each affiliate station for broadcast—as IDs—together with the explanatory (background) segment. The background, making-of analysis on videotape and the photographic stills in the press kit came as a bonus, then, and could be used by any show or publication that would print or broadcast the material. As a result, the on-camera artist interviews were also circulated as video fragments that could be ground into the show business reports, entertainment magazines, and first-run syndicated strips of other companies. These prepackaged video press kits ended up surging through the multichannel environment even as they endlessly mutated.

But the permutating marketing texts did not only create video fodder that could be graphically ground up in postproduction and dispersed across the spectrum. An even wider set of appropriations was set in motion when NBC’s mediating texts explicitly boasted about their unabashed connection to the vanguard origins of the commissioned artists. References to MTV, the creator of *Lawmower Man*, *Ren and Stimpy*, yeah even the 1960s in general—made all of these phenomena seem like the province of NBC. Out-right deception notwithstanding, therefore, this kind of industrial-textual self-nominating tactic allowed staid NBC to be the much hipper Viacom and MTV; this despite the fact that the NBC network had absolutely no historical relationship to the vanguard world of cable and its market-proven cutting edge. This, then, represents the ultimate migratory appropriation. Video fragmentation in ancillary venues gives way here to an extensive kind of symbolic appropriation and dispersion through the industry. This form of low theory then, actually works more like a semiotic cluster bomb. Why actually produce television’s avant-garde, when you can anoint yourself with it by electronic association?

While many may see my schema of mutating, negotiating texts as a simplistic updating on or (worse) mystification of the traditional tools that any first-year graduate student historian masters to do research (a consciousness of the differences between written, moving-image, primary, and secondary sources)—it is also clear that such mediations are far more than archival grist for the truth-bound academic researcher. All of the industrial-textual types that I mention are, in a very real sense, public phenomena and simultaneously provide both entertainment screen time and backstory/context for the active decipherment and engagement of the viewer.

Television studies must see such mediations for what they are: not simply products of political economy but endless permutations of pro-gram and industry; objects for analysis easily as rich as the thirty- and sixty-minute chunks of generic TV programs that have garnered the lion's share of critical attention from historians and critics in the past.

In what some have termed the "postnetwork" age, televisual analysis emerges as much in the industrial bridge building as it does on the screen. Even the 500-channel myth (with its notion of same-scale, x-/y-axis, menu choices from a day-part lineup) fails to acknowledge that low-theory mediations take place on a kind of z-axis, one that advances toward the audience in real time. Each channel niche choice comes with an onslaught of mobile and mutating marketing texts. These industrial mediations do not only form the pipeline and create the conditions for choice. They also circulate electronic flack in and around the program. What traditionally has been ghettoized as context—a province typically reserved for serious historians—has now become for viewers featured, on-screen, entertainment across the channel spectrum. Why and to what end viewers seek out backstory and industrial knowledge are cultural questions that merit more attention.

Access *Hollywood*, *Entertainment Tonight*, Hollywood business reports, local news stunts, network makeovers, and online producer cyber chats show that marketing is both the programmer's god and one key to skilled viewership. The frenzied synergies that were and are promised in the on-hyped alliances between television and dot-com enterprises suggest that the degree of textual permutation, and the pace of textual migration, will increase rather than decrease. Nonfiction heavies like CNN and the Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN) off-load masses of ancillary info in their dot-com digital texts that are now internationally among the most trafficked on the net. Auteur producer-writers like Chris Carter (of *X-Files* and *Millennium*) and Frank Fontana (of *Homicide* and *Oz*) publicly cultivate the mystique that they regularly raid fan sites for narrative and textual fodder—and then play out inside jokes from fandom in prime time. Pitch.com does not even hide the fact that it serves as a starting point for textual authorship. MTV toys with the possibility of disinformation on its cult TV series in the "10-Spot," even as ostensibly disgruntled Viacom employees illicitly post "insider" information about the same shows on fan sites (Hastings 2001). The launch in 2000 of Lifetime-challenger Oxygen Network for women came complete with Oxygen.com, a digital site that allowed viewers to share narratives in multimedia form alongside network hosts who in turn make their own frank personal disclosures. TV-net interfaces have now become de facto trading grounds for analysis, in ways impossible to imagine during the era of network dominance. Textual generation in a digital world of public postings and faux

anonymity puts everything in front, everything in an electronic foreground where migrating texts refer endlessly to other televisual texts. In a world where producers (encoders) also inevitably function as audiences (decoders) that are rewarded for successfully deploying interpretive competencies, two shifts among others have occurred. First, critical marketing practice has become a preeminent textual engine both for the cultures of production and for cultures of reception. Second, industrial-theoretical competencies have emerged as a recurrent, public benchmark of corporate performance. Both shifts serve well the vertically reintegrated world of contemporary media conglomeration, a world that needs to manufacture semiotic diversity even as it, in the guise of convergence, guards the bottom line with rational economies of scale.

Industrial textual practice and industrial theorizing should matter to media studies scholars, and not because such things have somehow usurped the critical high ground or hijacked the analytic initiative away from scholars. Rather, these practices provide the very ways that modern multimedia conglomerates function at three levels—internally, industrially, and publicly—to fulfill the goals of stockholders and management. Internally, they produce a form of aesthetic capital (one that is both symbolic and material) that can be amortized across numerous newly conglomerated corporate entities. As the possibility of a mass audience fades, and as production costs skyrocket beyond the budgetary abilities of a single company, corporations must cross-collateralize any new content development based on the company's ability to release and repurpose that content for as many ancillary venues and markets as possible. Hollywood, after all, mastered Enron accounting practices long before the age of convergence television. This textual-virtual-accounting economy (a world that favors international coproductions, barter deals in syndication, and the flexibility of contract labor) enables profitable media synergies even in the (sometimes cash scarce) economy of repurposing. Migrating, permutating texts provide conglomerates with this form of endlessly reiterative content/capital.

Industrially, these textual theorizing practices can also flexibly function to "rebrand" and "co-brand" conglomerates. No longer able to attract audience share (as house brands like CBS, NBC, and the BBC did in the era of government sanctioned and regulated oligopoly), the new conglomerates must counter the ever fragmenting effects of new technologies and competitors by quickly "morphing" corporate identities to attract (and to contract with) new affiliates and consumers. This constant reaggregation—of niche content producers, technology companies, networks, and distributors—into profitable new totalities is celebrated as "consolidation" in trade publications. But far from the monolith that such a term implies, the new entities conglomerate not by unifying niche companies via bricks and mortar.

Rather, they aggregate by "tiering" a wide range of niche taste cultures within the same corporate-semiotic family or umbrella. The various secondary texts examined above (that migrate to primary status and that deconstruct other texts), essentially work by critically *segregating* content in the viewers' mind. By cultivating notions of aesthetic *distinction* in this way, tiering provides the aura of difference that is so fundamental in making economies of scope profitable. This then is both the genius and irony of consolidation. Conglomerate profitability works in part by critically theorizing the responsiveness and value of fragmenting (and thus individuated) tastes.

Publicly, and finally, industrial textual practices serve to rationalize (in two senses of the term) the work worlds of convergence television. First, they provide a metric and logic to the industrial mode of production (ground rules that help order the volatile industrial landscape). The cross-collateralized textual economy described above (and as it is discussed and developed in trade discourses) helps provide this rationality, by allowing investors and corporations to value and thereby capitalize selected media enterprises and new projects. Contractually reaggregated and newly networked affiliates provide predictability in the design of marketing plans and in the projection of profits—both of which are crucial in the risk-defined and failure-prone world of content development. But industrial textual practice also provides another kind of rationality that MBAs are less likely to admit to. Showbiz reports, making-ofs, video press kits, ancillary digital forms, and digital video discs (DVDs) now all (ostensibly) reveal the mode of production, as well as glimpses of competing interests and proprietary "secrets" behind content development. These mediated forms of rationality are more than simply indications of generational and educational changes in an audience (a view that assumes increased media savvy, cultural capital, and aesthetic sophistication on the part of viewers). Critical, mediated self-disclosures like these secondary textual forms and genres function *institutionally* in several ways: (1) as "critical proofs" verifying that some other (referenced) primary text is viable or profitable, (2) as staged company confessions demonstrating that content participants are aware of the contextual and social issues that animate them, and (3) as "legitimizing mechanisms" that normalize the very industrial changes that I have outlined above (conglomeration, market segregation, reaggregation, and tiering).

After finishing a "soft" story in February 2002, for example, that meekly questioned the impact of recent acquisitions by the AOL/Time-Warner conglomerate that employs him on CNN, Jeff Greenfield ironically commented that he would probably soon get a chastising call from his bosses once he was offscreen and back in his office. The anchor and Greenfield both had a good laugh at the prospect. The real effect of the interchange,

however, was that it served as a wink, wink/nod, nod to the audience, a comforting acknowledgment that those inside the conglomerate know well the industrial changes afoot and that they have those developments well covered and in hand. Such disclosures are now unremarkable parts of many evening newscasts and typically appear as brief business-like acknowledgments that prove journalistic honesty and critical distance ("meanwhile today, GE, the parent of NBC..."). As with making-ofs, show business reports, and special backstory DVD tracks, such disclosures can also, however, come across like those of a used-car dealer: they intend to prove honesty and reliability, but they do so in an overdetermined (and so vaguely suspect) way.

These forms of industrial critical theorizing, then, do broadly affect opinions about media policy and politics since they attempt to show that the critical and analytic interrogation of industrial change is being taken care of, and taken care of competently, by those inside the conglomerates and inside of the very free market that FCC Chairman Powell now says will guarantee media democracy in the digital era. In this way, industrial theorizing and textual practices do matter. At times they function as sanctioned, if unfortunate, substitutes for critical analysis from the outside. Yet such practices also set in motion a very familiar critical language with which to debate and challenge media, one developed by scholars and critical theorists and one now competently deployed by a younger generation of media practitioners and producers who have had some contact with critical and cultural studies. Broad-based critical competencies offer provisional and tactical opportunities for taking advantage of industrial volatility in ways not envisioned (and far from controllable) by those in the boardrooms. Rather than look at these trends as bastardized forms of deconstruction or illegitimate forms of theory or a CliffsNotes brand of intellectualism, it seems far better to recognize that theorizing and reflexive interrogation have simply been adapted and modified for a different work world, one with other kinds of opportunities for engagement.³⁶ The industrial practices considered here make it difficult to talk convincingly about the political economy of entertainment or contemporary media policy—without also talking, in some way, about industrial theorizing and textuality.

Notes

1. "Revising Screen Studies" (Miller 2001b) argued that the "continuity of textual" studies has needlessly splintered media studies "for reasons of rent-seeking academic professionalism," and this "hegemonic" dominance of the field has prevented the emergence of effective public intellectuals (p. 92). "Cultural Citizenship" (Miller 2001a) described how film studies and media studies scholars have largely

ignored political and social theory, along with any substantive concern for cultural or political citizenship, in favor of "undergraduate-investigating psychology on the one hand, and armchair-therapizing, text-reading humanism on the other" (p. 185). *Television & New Media's* intervention into media studies has provided a range of research as a corrective to this list in the field of screen studies, including studies of political economy, public policy, transnationalism, and the globalization of television and new media.

2. Newcomb's *Television: The Most Popular Art* (1974) and *Television: the Critical View* (1976, 1982, 1987), and Allen's *Channals of Discourse* (1987, 1992) all bore the burden of carving out a field of television critical studies by distinguishing the importance of textual analysis as an alternative to studying television as a political-economic phenomenon or social science. Having worked to legitimize critical textual studies in this way, later editions of both collections moderated their arguments for critical isolation. Allen emphasized discourses over texts and discussed political economy alongside critical analysis in the introduction to the 1992 edition, and Newcomb brought more emphasis on industry and the mode of production in later editions of his collection, a trait fully evident in Newcomb and Alley's (1983) book *The Producer's Medium*.

3. "Boys' Geography Lessons: Probe Technology, Push Programming, and the World" (Caldwell 1998, 1999) extends *Televisuality's* (Caldwell 1995) critique of postmodern stylistics and theory in favor of the book's examination of the intersecting industrial, social, and cultural logics of contemporary television practice. Ultimately, these earlier proposals—which make the critical analysis of industrial and production space an integral part of textual analysis and vice versa—are not antithetical to the kinds of "socio-spatial" analysis proposed by Hay (2001) but are rather congruent and complementary with such ends. In the contemporary mediascape, industrial and production spatial practices can no more and no longer be jalled away from issues of culture and power than the textualism that Hay critiques or the domestic and consumer spheres that he favors and emphasizes in analysis.

4. A very good and detailed account of the interaction of the registers that make up the *Popsstars* phenomenon is found in Kim and Blasini (2001).

5. While Foster (1985) and Stam (1992) have grounded intertextuality in terms of subversive signs in artworld practice and fictional constructs in narratology, respectively, Jameson (1983) and White (1985) came closest to suggesting cultural reasons for the intertextual preoccupation. Jameson finds it central in the developing consumerism of late capitalism, and White describes it as a mechanism for increasing audience motivation and competence, thereby maximizing viewership. While these works tie the textual practice to the audience and consumer economies, they circumvent the important area and issue of industry—a domain that includes corporate and technical factors that make intertextuality profitable and efficiently reproducible.

6. The growing body of works that have desegregated critical media studies—and that integrate in some way studies of political economy with textual analysis and/or cultures of production with the production of culture—include books and studies by Spigel (1992), Anderson (1993), Caldwell (1993, 1995), D'Acci (1994), Gray (1995), Gripsrud (1995), Shattuc (1997), Cassell and Jenkins (1998), Seiter (1999), Mayer (2003), Brook (2001), and Chris (2002).

7. In the United States, for example, broadcast communications and telecommunications research programs that were established at many of the midwestern land grant research universities were traditionally noted for their historic work on mass media and societal contexts; research that was typically pursued from an experimental and/or social-scientific perspective, although the emergence of qualitative and critical studies programs have altered this profile to some extent. Doctoral programs in television criticism and history at the University of South Carolina (USC), New York University (NYU), and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) (the film schools) largely emerged from the tradition of cinema studies—informed by continental literary, aesthetic, and semiotic theory—and have typically incorporated close textual analyses as components in both critical and historical research. This context-versus-text split is reinforced in academic publishing on television as well. The *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, published by the Broadcast Education Association (which, in turn, is partly supported by the dominant professional association of the television and cable industries, the National Association of Broadcasters, or NAB), privileges the experimental and social-scientific paradigms (despite recent nods toward qualitative submissions), while *Cinema Journal's* articles on television, published by the Society for Cinema Studies during the past two decades, generally follow from a textual orientation of some sort, even in various poststructuralist permutations. Neither journal, in citations or reference, tends to betray any institutional or intellectual awareness or appreciation of the body of research issuing from the other, parallel, research universe.

8. This framework is most commonly associated with the era of classical theory and is outlined prominently in the work of Dudley Andrew (1976, 1984). Master paradigms reminiscent of Bazin or Arnheim's "total" models or assumptions permeate through network programming departments, which in turn work themselves out in marketing campaigns as well as the critical establishment that judges programming and film and new media based on such schemes or general truisms. At a standing room-only summit-like panel entitled the professional "DV" workshop at the NAB convention in Las Vegas in April 2001, key spokespersons laid out the two most effective modes or models for web streaming and TV-dot-com convergence. In Bazin-versus-Eisenstein fashion, representatives from old media (television production) and new media (a Silicon Valley dot-com) laid out the merits of their respective models. Both offered distinct, generalizable frameworks that informed a full range of options for a production unit—from how a company is organized, capitalized, and managed to the best ways to design digital infrastructure, record, edit, up-link, and download content in an online environment. This old-media-versus-new-media theoretical debate (on aesthetics, production, and reception) was subsequently followed by another panel that detailed yet a third (and very different) model for digital aesthetics—one tied to the successful use of high definition television (HDTV) by KRON-TV in San Francisco. This frenzied, earnest, caffeine-driven cycle of proposition and argumentation would never grace the pages of *Cinema Journal*, but afterwards, hundreds of practitioners signed up to continue the discourses online back in their production suites and boutiques.

9. Susan Hayward (1996) described post-1968 theory as the antithesis of classical or "total theory," as it assigns to the film or video text a far more ambivalent,

provisional, and multivocal status. Endless trade gatherings and panels in professional film and media production cultures constantly work over new screen practices and production methods with this sort of reflexive interrogation and questioning, and engage texts in ways that Bakhtin (1981) would probably describe as dialogic, polyvalent, and multivalent. Although academic observers in such settings can overdose on the displays of corporate and proprietary self-interest that drives this kind of industrial-theoretical interrogation, one wonders if such corporate self-interest is any more suspect than the insular, self-serving professionalization that Miller (2001a, 2001b) found hegemonizing film studies.

10. Seiter (1999) used the term *lay theory* in reference to the abilities that nonscholarly audiences use to make sense of the media they consume. While my concern is with conceptual competencies and processes of the production culture, Seiter's framework is congruent with my contention that practitioners are involved in theoretical practices as well as productively functions. Producers have analytic functions—in part because these encoders are also decoders and audiences.

11. Following Turner, scholars have argued that certain national rituals of live broadcasting (Dayan and Katz) or even more general aspects of television—such as the participatory but anonymous process through which TV creates a “cultural forum” (Newcomb and Hirsch)—are liminal rituals that are bracketed off from everyday experience. These moments out of time allow cultures to form new identities or reinforce old identities.

12. Within the concept of hegemonic culture derived from Gramsci (1971), *recuperation* has come to mean the processes by which even acts of resistance, alterity, and radical appropriation are contained and brought back into the fold of dominant culture.

13. Rather than only focusing on, or criticizing, the extent and lack of public intellectuals produced by doctoral programs in media theory, it might also be productive to look beyond theory as an autonomous something that intellectuals do (and can do to change policy) and fully consider the education of undergraduates as a most instrumental public and political act. Countertheory and counterproduction all earlier erred in this one way: they both assumed that there was a special kind of (*disembodied*) thinking and/or form that could somehow overthrow, resist, or force change to the dominant order. Many research professors writing their hands at the corporatization of culture while at the same time denigrating their undergraduate teaching loads that produce the very lived conditions (and industrial theoretical competencies) that make changing the mediascape viable. Apparently, such lived possibilities—within the closed world of higher education's highly stratified institutional caste system—complicate the intellectual's drive toward destinies of elegant theorization.

14. Critical, theorizing practice is more than simply a collection of “discourses.” Although a thicket of professional discourses are what an outside observer may first encounter in these work worlds, the degree of practitioner reflexivity in play tends to preempt or ignore the privileged position adopted by an academic analyst outside or above those discourses. One ignores this practitioner reflexivity at the peril of one's own research.

15. Bordwell and Carroll (1996) were attempting to skewer the totalizing and inept efforts of 1970s apparatus theorists to describe (speculate on) the production

of ideology in viewing subjects. While some consider their intervention into the field to be reactionary, few contemporary theorists evidence the same penchant for the universalizing interpretations that 1970s theory espoused.

16. I am specifically interested in how industrial theorizing practice animates and exploits a domestic and cultural politics of distinction and separation—one that bears little of the pitched-battle global dualism that is so obvious in the Fox/Superbowl/E-Trade/USA spectacle of complete and ecstatic consensus.

17. Up until the mid-1960s, American television was characterized by efficient but fairly monotonous styles: “zero-degree” telefilm production or the three-camera live video studio. By the end of the decade, in special cases, television created explicit stylistic events on prime time, but these were usually “bracketed” in their respective narratives as special experiences or “altered states” (Caldwell 1995).

18. Marc and Thompson (1992) in fact defined *Drygnet* by its resuscitation of “McCarthy-era extremism” (p. 136).

19. Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) became widespread and popular organizations for civic involvement by the American middle class of the 1960s, with a new generation of child-rearing suburbanites intervening in the public schools to promote and defend the welfare of their offspring.

20. Rather than rely on a full written treatment as the basis for program development, most shows now begin with an alternate, and far more punchy, concept mechanism: a spoken two- to three-sentence proposal that summarizes the premise, spine, and/or arc of a series in a short and engaging form. The very rapidity and efficiency of this mode of verbal conceptualization allows producers and writers to cover a vast range of story possibilities in very short order. The pitch also prizes and exploits rapid combinations and hybridizations of past and current shows. This manner of quick verbal collaging, sparring, and hooking—choreographed between producer staffs and teams of writers on a daily basis—ensures some consistency with a generic past as well as with some inevitable differences and innovations. Some have argued that this is one factor behind the penchant for stylistic excess in television since the 1980s (Caldwell 1995).

21. WGA is the commonly used acronym for the Writer's Guild of America, the signatory union that writes most of American prime-time television.

22. Cultural raiding of this sort has been a recognizable and unremarkable part of American program development for some time. The trait may be more obvious on the tabloid talk show circuit (a genre that needs an endless succession of trends to fill the void of program hours involved in the production of syndicated programs five days a week), but style-raiding fuels prime-time program development as well.

23. In American network programming competition, the sweeps weeks in November, February, and May are used to set advertising rates for shows on each network's schedule by calculating and comparing the percentage of total and possible viewers that choose to watch a given show. Although the science of statistical sampling used to calculate ratings and shares is far from perfect in itself, almost every network now attempts to spike or “hypo” its schedule with specials that will bring in artificially high numbers of viewers during that period. By spiking viewership in this way, networks hope to enjoy (artificially) higher revenues from the advertisers that buy promotion time on their series.

24. The appetite for explicit news tie-ins to dramatic programs may be more pronounced on local affiliate stations that are part of a network family, rather than on independent stations that are more loosely connected to the syndicated programs that they buy and schedule. Independent stations, on the other hand, are masters at exploiting the broadcast of feature films: an essential part of their trade in visibility.

25. This was a common theme, for example, in both official panels and in hallway discussions at the Showbiz Expo in Los Angeles in June 1997.

26. The distinction between the treatment given local stations owned by network NBC and local affiliated stations is an important one to make. The owned stations (such as NBC-4 Burbank) are centered in large cosmopolitan areas, produce significant revenue streams, and were overhauled with explicit changes in name and ID, while the affiliates whose local owners contract to buy and air network offerings (such as KJRH-2) were wooed by the network's celebration of a de facto corporate family.

27. Since the 1950s, NBC had started the network programming day with the talk show/news show, *The Today Show*, which was essentially a combination of soft news, happy talk, and short features aimed at the early risers and breakfast viewers of middle America. The *Today Show* was never intended to be, and certainly never pitched to the public by programmers as, a venue for cutting edge risk taking.

28. These comments on changes in screenwriting and producing were made at a public panel at the Showbiz Expo in Los Angeles in June 1997. The producers added—in a way that helped perpetuate the Hollywood success myth because of the “democracy” of the internet—that one of the young hires had recently been fired as a secretary at Disney.

29. Ellen Seiter (1999) has examined how the computer media and internet access predispose an audience to certain class commitments. Because of their disposable income, this relatively elite demographic has valuable revenue implications for advertisers and programmers.

30. Associated with the alcoholics recovery group Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States, the twelve-step therapy for recovery also became a widespread model for the cure of other forms of addiction (overeating, codependency, sex addiction, etc.). In this show, Nick-at-Nite parodies the program as a pop-psychological self-improvement enterprise and as a subterranean theoretical lexicon for the concealed meaning of the television text.

31. The reference here is to a book that helped define the the social psychology of Americans in the 1970s: *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch 1978).

32. The description by Stam, Burgoyne, and Filtnerman-Lewis (1992) of deconstructive reading characterizes perfectly the approach and attitude of Nick in this show, which enacted a strategy of reading “texts in such a way as to expose their factions and tensions, of seeking out blind spots and moments of contradiction, and liberating the oppressed ‘plural’ and figurative energies of a text” (p. 26).

33. Bahktin (1981) proposed an analysis that refused the monologic intentions of a given text, which he deemed a theological inclination. In its place, he proposed exposing the intersection of an artistic work's textual surfaces, which in turn could open up the analysis to the “open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture” (Stam, Burgoyne, and Filtnerman-Lewis 1992, 204).

Nick's reading and performance takes on its critical objects from a very similar stance.

34. Once again, I have used the somewhat totalizing term *industry* to reflect on the symbolic importance of this unifying mythos to practitioners. In reality, the industry is composed of many different groups and subgroups, locked in a world of anxious contention and competition. Yet, such competitors insist—in their symbolic practices, texts, and events—that there is such a unity. The industry is only singular, I might add, because it consists of many different agents brought together not because they are alike but because they share a *willed affinity* (a term I borrow from Bambi Haggin, who used it in a conversation with the author to describe racial and national identities).

35. While most scholars identify the liminal with specific types of social interactions, group experiences, and social rituals (as I have indicated earlier in the article with regard to trade shows, summits, and pitch sessions), I am suggesting that many other iconographic and written theorizing practices also serve this function. Although ostensibly static as visual and narrative “artifacts,” such texts do, in fact, exist in time as forms of exchange between practitioners. This network of *textual* exchange and deliberation on such texts provides the opportunity for professional communities to stand back; to monitor; and to reconsider themselves, their identities, and their directions, all of which are functions of liminal rituals as well.

36. Scholars might denigrate industrial practices as “CliffsNotes” quality critical theory, but producers and industry folk frequently assert that academics tend to bring a correspondingly impoverished understanding of industry to their media critical studies work; deeming it, in essence, “CliffsNotes Industry” accounts by academics. I would argue that it is not the overt (and typically watered-down) quotation of one field by the other that is the most interesting or sociologically significant but rather the resident, discipline-specific discourses and generalizable models that make up critical thought in a given field, discipline, or creative craft. Nick-at-Night's explicit and self-conscious use of postmodern theory and verbiage, for example, is far less interesting (and important) than Nick's complex, multimedia marketing schemes that circulate critical promotional texts around otherwise overlooked and forgotten shows in a way that animates components of the Nick/Viacom/MTV/Paramount/CBS conglomerate.

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Narrating Injustice

British Cultural Studies and Its Media

Bhri Gupta Singh

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As a theoretical starting point, this article suggests a shift from media-as-text to media object-as-utterance (in the sense of the term as worked out by Bakhtin and Voloshinov). This is done to move away from the production/consumption dichotomy, a framework on which most media studies analyses are predicated. From here, the story is told of *Injustice*, a documentary that found itself in unusual circumstances at the time of its release in Britain in July/August 2001, with the local police attempting to block the screening of the film at various venues. Attempts to place this narration in relation to an existent cultural studies tradition of writing on the media lead us to consider relations of power/knowledge between British cultural studies and the media it comments on. In conclusion, this article attempts to set out a terrain within which a dialogic anthropology of media can work as a critical knowledge practice.

Keywords: *cultural studies; film; race; anthropology of media*

In this essay, I narrate the story of *Injustice*, a recent documentary film, which I first heard about in July 2001 because of the unusual circumstances surrounding its release in Britain. This narration also involves posing certain questions to cultural studies as a discourse, or rather to that aspect of cultural studies that takes the media as its object of study. These questions raise a number of problems, which I will address in two related ways. First, there is the problem of a framework for description. Theoretical approaches to the study of the media have overwhelmingly (although not always consciously) situated themselves in a dichotomous production-consumption framework. In such a framework, media "products" are produced by "structures" and consumed (albeit, in recent times, actively consumed) by consumers. Such an approach has severely limited the scope of ethnographic study by limiting and fixing people as objects of study to the status of "audiences" in a narrow sense of the term and, more loosely, as a

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Contents

- 99 Critical Industrial Practice:
Branding, Repurposing, and the Migratory
Patterns of Industrial Texts
John T. Caldwell
- 135 Narrating Injustice:
British Cultural Studies and Its Media
Bhriqupati Singh
- 154 Global Vistas and Local Reflections:
Negotiating Place and Identity in Vancouver Television
Serra Tinic
- 184 Gay-Themed Television and the Slummy Class:
The Affordable, Multicultural Politics of the Gay Nineties
Ron Becker
- 216 The Spectacle of The Prisoner
Joanne Morreale