Reviews

Real to Reel: A New Approach to Understanding Realism in Film and TV Fiction, by Martin Sohn-Rethel (2015) Leighton-Buzzard: Auteur ISBN 978-0-99307175-1

This is a review partly in the form of a tribute. Martin Sohn-Rethel taught Media (and Film) at the same institution, Varndean College in Brighton, for over twenty years. He was known to me as a colleague working on A Level teaching resources and examining and as a practitioner keen to share his good practice, particularly around the topic of this book, at the annual British Film Institute conference and other events.

We disagreed on several things, most notably during a keynote by David Gauntlett at the BFI, for which I was 'discussant' and endorsed some of the presenter's provocations about the cherished 'key concepts' for the subject, which outraged Martin. At other times, we clashed (politely) over awarding body positions which I represented at public events. But this was far more than a clash of the 'old school' with new ideas, rather Martin always offered an astute and experienced critical voice 'from the patch' but was more fundamentally an enthusiastic advocate of challenging students with theory and looking always to charge media education with academic rigour.

In *Real to Reel* he offers a rich overview of the concept of realism and offers a 'seven code' model for students to apply in their analyses. These codes build on the vast body of work in this area but add layers and re-workings: surface realism (with regard to Ellis); social realism; the genre code; narrative; psychology; the code of discourse and ideology and counter-realism. A chapter on each applies the framework to a range of texts, mainly either 'classic' or well-worn by reviewers and academics (*Erin Brokovich*, *District 9*, *The Lives of Others*, *This is England*, *La Haine*, *Coronation Street*, Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights* – but it's a REALLY long list). The author is not attempting to cover new textual ground, or skew the work to awarding body criteria for currency, but instead working across and between a set of examples that allow him to exemplify the model with rigour and depth.

But equally this is no detached, 'objective' appraisal of texts as static. As Jenny Grahame says on the back cover, the approach here is to *review and re-evaluate existing perspectives*. And the author's own meaning-making, sometimes highly personal, is at work, albeit in glimpses, most notably in the reflective interpretation of Haneke's *Hidden*. He offers a 'mind searching' of his visit to Krakow and Auschwitz, describing a personal experience of outrage woven in with his response to the director's moral injunction, conveyed in an interview, about how we stand today to mistakes of the past. For this reader this, and other such moments of personal reflection which he (mistakenly in my view) disclaims as

'controversial' offer a refreshing break with the tendency to fetishise directors and received academic analyses, as opposed to using the seven codes more to liberate textual meaning-making to more fluid or inter / para-textual ways of 'doing realism'. That said, all the chapters offer an accessible but challenging structure in which the key concepts at stake in each code are set up but also problematized and indeed the central project is to show how the seven codes cannot be nearly aligned with one another – so understanding realism here is to see multiple realisms.

Students of realism but also, as the codes weave together all of the major key concepts, of media more broadly, will also be very well served by the meticulous bibliography which brings together the vast body of work on the various *realisms* in question thematically and offers a plethora of rich leads for further study arranged by chapter topics.

Giroux wrote of teachers as public intellectuals, encouraging us to think in this way of teaching as *a form of intellectual labor, as opposed to defining it in purely instrumental or technical terms*. I will remember Martin Sohn-Rethel in this way and this book is a fitting parting gift.

Reviewer – Julian McDougall

Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness by Neil Postman (1985). London: Penguin Books, ISBN 014303653X (2005 20th anniversary edition)

Laughey's Canon

Editor's note: in this series we publish reviews of 'classic' media and cultural studies texts by contemporary media educators, who we ask to reappraise the utility of the text in question for media teaching and study at the time of writing. For this issue we extend this to a final year undergraduate student who evaluates the longevity of the book and its relevance to her current studies.

Amusing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman was published thirty years ago, in a world fresh from the Orwellian nightmare of Nineteen Eighty-Four. As a media and communications academic, Postman uses Orwell's ideas and compares them with those set out by Huxley's

Brave New World in order to reflect on how society in the 80s had changed around the medium of television. As a current media student, the text was an incredibly interesting read, and it served as an amazing source of reference to compare with how society, culture, and the reception of new media has seemingly changed over the past three decades.

On a general note, the text is easy to read, and Postman's ideas are set out simply and clearly, unlike other academic texts I've read from the same publishing period. Even in the foreword, his direct links to both *1984* and *Brave New World* set up exactly what his direction is and in what context he is thinking, rather than waffling on with extremely long, complicated words and sentences in an attempt to seem academic. This makes spotting and transferring ideas to a modern day environment extremely simple, and with his strong reference to how media will develop and change, I would argue that this was his intention in order to aid further study and pose future questions for media students and practitioners.

Despite the age of the text in regards to the constantly changing world of media in the digital era, I feel that the points and ideas Postman presents are still entirely relevant to today's media students and future practitioners. Ideas such as conversation being applicable 'not only to speech but to all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages' (p.6 1986) is a concept most media outlets and practitioners – even most teenagers – today will be familiar with; a group chat on WhatsApp is a conversation, or a debate on Twitter, or comments on a blog, and although Postman wasn't aware of these outlets, his vision of how media would develop and merge with society is reflected clearly in the text. The arrival and infusion of the internet into today's modern culture and society doesn't necessarily make his points irrelevant or defunct, it just means, as practitioners and academics, we need to think on a broader scale; it's not just a television screen now, it's computer screens, tablet screens, and mobile phone screens… but this, as a concept, is not difficult to do.

As a general reading reference, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is a very good source for generating ideas and thoughts of discourse around the area of society and how media affects it. However, the text in its entirety, unfortunately, cannot be entirely and wholly applied to specific essays or criticisms on culture and modern society. For example, Postman argues mainly that 'television has taken the place of the printed word as the centre of our culture', and whilst the same ideology of the internet destroying television can be applied today, the exact argument and points of reference cannot be directly transferred. But even so, I've rarely come across a text – modern or classic – that I can apply directly to any of my essays or studies, and so even this inability to be 'directly transferred', I think, cannot be deemed as a reason for the text not to still be relevant today.

In conclusion, I fully believe that Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, and the ideas and discourse posed within it, is still relevant to today's society, and in turn, today's media students and practitioners. Whilst a little out-dated in terms of its references to whom the president of the USA is and the 'recent' arrival of *1984*, the overall points and ideas can be easily and accurately applied to any study of modern culture and society in regards to new media and technology. It touches on key theories as desensitisation and the hypodermic needle, and in my honest opinion, is as relevant and viable in today's modern culture as it ever was at the time of its original publishing.

Reviewer – Jessica Kirton, Bournemouth University, final year, BA (Hons) Television Production.