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Participating Audiences, Imagined Public Spheres: The Cultural Work of Contemporary American(ized) Narratives

This is a book about contemporary American(ized) narratives and the audiences they call into being. It brings together eight very diverse case studies covering and investigating a wide range of media, genres, and modes to ask how contemporary ‘texts’ encourage ‘imagined communities’ of readers/viewers that operate as ‘public spheres’ of social and political deliberation, self-fashioning, and debate. In asking this question, the contributions collected in this volume shift perspectives in a number of ways: They question the boundary between the audiences of (often popular and broadly circulating) narratives on the one side and national public spheres on the other; they thus encourage rereading the transnational mobility of American(ized) narratives not simply as a phenomenon of popular culture but as an indicator of emerging transnational public spheres; and they invite us to look closely at the narrative dynamics with which these texts operate their audiences as public spheres.

Particularly in the context of contemporary texts and popular culture, the concepts of ‘audience’ and ‘public sphere’ are often conceived as only conditionally related. Ien Ang’s seminal study of television audiences, *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, is a case in point. Ang juxtaposes a concept of television viewers as a public sphere with a purely commercial concept that she calls “audience-as-market” (21). She treats these two paradigms as clearly demarcated and mutually exclusive—conceptual opposites even. In her account, it is the intentions of television’s producers—whether their goal is to sell advertising time or to inform their viewers—that determine whether audiences in a broadcasting system figure as ‘market’ or as ‘public.’ If television viewership is addressed as a public sphere, she concludes, it “consists not of consumers, but of citizens who must be reformed, educated, informed as well as entertained—in

short, ‘served’—presumably to enable them to better perform their democratic rights and duties” (23). In contrast to an audience addressed as a market, this viewership “has nothing to do with the consumerist hedonism of (American) commercial television—it is a very dignified, serious business” (23). Ang’s argument perfectly operates within the logic of Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere as a space of “dignified, serious” debate and deliberation that is not only distinct from but even threatened by a sphere of commodification and consumerism.¹ In effect, Ang’s argument thus affirms the notion of two very different functions television viewers may have: that of a public sphere or that of a market.

This approach is suitable for Ang’s project of comparing US American and European broadcasting systems, but it is hardly productive for understanding the cultural work done by the narratives this book explores. In the following, we thus propose a different approach to audience, one that calls into question clear and easy demarcations between entertainment and seriousness, one that treats audiences in all kinds of contexts as ‘citizens.’

Conceptually, our approach diverges from Ang’s along two lines: First, we take our cue from cultural studies scholars like John Fiske or Henry Jenkins to insist that the authors/producers of ‘texts’—in television or any other medium—do not fully control what readers or viewers make of their texts and how they operate as audiences. Audiences, Fiske reminds us, are not passive recipients of fixed and hermetic messages but active decoders of inevitably polysemic texts who bring their own experiences and desires to the work of decoding (*Television Culture*). Jenkins, focusing on fans as a particularly engaged brand of viewers/readers, adds that such decoding can take the form of ‘poaching,’ of appropriation: He conceives of fans as cultural nomads who wander a mediasphere in which they hold no possessions but from which they borrow whatever meets their cultural needs and desires, constructing their own distinct cultures from these borrowings (*Textual Poachers*). To thus approach audiences as fundamentally active blurs the line between Ang’s two paradigms of audience. It means to expect that audiences may interpret and appropriate texts in a variety of ways, which may have very little to do with authorial goals and intentions. It means to conceive of culture as participatory, of readers/viewers as participating in a text’s negotiation of meaning. This participatory dimension becomes particularly palpable in the new media, whose technological infrastructures specifically provide for interactions between

1 See especially Habermas’s discussion of the forces that, from his point of view, contribute to the disintegration of the public sphere.

producers and recipients, but it also characterizes the ‘old’ media.² There, texts also engage their audiences’ participation—through their inevitable gaps and uncertainties or through the various techniques by which they address and appeal to their audiences, trying to persuade them to certain readings rather than others without ever fully controlling them.

Second, from a cultural studies perspective, it is hardly convincing to draw a clear and solid line between entertainment and the allegedly more serious forms of discourse Ang lists in her discussion of the two distinct functions of television. Of course, the very distinction between ‘entertaining’ and ‘serious’ cultural artifacts appears dubious to cultural studies scholars, who have always insisted that the forms and activities of everyday and popular culture are quite serious and often deeply political.³ But even when we accept that our culture accommodates ‘entertainment,’ ‘information,’ or ‘education’ as different forms of discourse, these discourses—in our age of media saturation and “convergence culture” (Jenkins, *Convergence Cultures*)—seem to circulate in ever closer proximity and often blend into one another. Using the metaphor of ‘flow,’ scholars like Jenkins highlight the way in which cultural forms and contents increasingly travel across boundaries—of medium, genre, national culture, or discourse, to name but a few.⁴ In the context of television studies, the term ‘flow’ has been used in another sense that may be relevant here, to denote the seamless sequencing of program segments—segments of potentially very different programs, interspersed with commercials—to which viewers expose themselves in their remote-controlled consumption of television (cf. Waller). In today’s convergence culture, it is not only television that audiences experience as a flow of possibly disparate materials: Our culture as a whole presents itself as a flow, typically consumed by ‘zapping’ across media and genres, a flow in which the boundaries of medium, genre, or discourse have become increasingly porous.

2 The development of the Internet and of new media has fueled the discussion on the feasibility of Habermas’s ‘public sphere’ as the market place of ideas, as scholars in both media and social studies have sought to explain the formation of ‘virtual communities’ and their interaction in the public sphere of instant and global online publishing across national borders and beyond physical, personal contact (cf. Butsch; Curran and Liebes; Rettberg).

3 Cf., e.g., Fiske’s extended argument about the inherently political nature of popular culture (*Understanding* 151-84).

4 Cf., e.g., Jenkins’s use of “flow” in his definitions of “convergence” and “cultural convergence” (*Convergence Culture* 322-23).

Scholarship has identified several factors that shape this trend toward convergence and, in some instance, hybridization.⁵ In this book, we want to highlight one factor in particular, a factor rarely considered in this context. The various forms of discourse circulating and often converging in our contemporary culture tend to share one common denominator: They take the form of narratives.⁶ Entertainment, information, education, and political debate typically come in the shape of stories: fictional and nonfictional narratives, based on different generic conventions of novelistic, filmic, journalistic, or documentary storytelling, to name but a few. And when audiences respond to or appropriate texts, their activity typically takes the form of storytelling: By filling in a text's gaps in the act of reading, they recreate a text's narrative; by exploring what makes a text pleasurable or relevant to their own lives, they expand and personalize the text's narrative; and when their work of reception fuels acts of cultural creation, they borrow elements from the text's storyworld to create entirely new narratives of their own. Stories and storytelling are all around us, and their ubiquity underscores, if not the arbitrariness, then the blurriness of a border between serious discourse and mere entertainment. Indeed, we live in a narrative world: We gain knowledge and pleasure from narratives; narratives are the lens through which we look at the world and ourselves; we negotiate our sense of who we are—as individuals, as members of certain communities, as citizens—through stories and storytelling; our social and political activism is fueled by stories and storytelling. This shared narrativity is a major grounds on which 'texts' converge and collide: It enables texts—the artifacts themselves or their (re)constructions by audiences—to transgress or blur discursive borders, and it mobilizes narrative elements—plots, characters, modes of narration—to travel across boundaries of discourse, genre, or mode.

The narratives circulating in our culture thus tend to perform several functions at once. They entertain, inform, educate, and invite readers/viewers to remake them. And when readers/viewers interpret, respond to, appropriate, and (re-)narrate the stories circulating in our culture, they tend to act simultaneously as consumers and as citizens.

5 Among the factors typically discussed are the ubiquity of (multiple) media technologies in everyday cultures, the development of new technologies that grant consumers greater agency in designing their own cultural experiences, and media producers' increasing turn to hybridization and transmediation as strategies of innovation in saturating markets (cf. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*; Spigel and Olsson; Kackman et al.).

6 In this interest in how the 'mechanics' of storytelling enable the dynamics we describe here, our project also resonates with an expansion of narratological methodologies from an application for literary texts only to the analysis of media and (pop-)cultural phenomena since the 1990s (Fludernik 408).

Responding to narratives, they form and renew group identities, and they (re)negotiate group-specific values, virtues, and perceptions of ‘truth.’ Storytelling, we emphasize in this book, thus is not only a fundamental human activity, it is also fundamental to social organization. Communities on all levels are constituted by shared narratives and communal storytelling, from the nations Benedict Anderson theorized as ‘imagined communities’ to the virtual communities establishing themselves in the new media through communal ‘narrativity,’ to borrow Paul Booth’s term. Through sharing, exchanging, co-narrating, and ritually re-narrating stories, communities on all these levels negotiate their identities, worldviews, and values.

It is in this conceptual context that the case studies assembled in this book discuss contemporary American(ized) narratives and the cultural work they do through and for their audiences. Thus, looking at one of the most canonized forms of narration, the novel, **Rüdiger Heinze** notes that fictional narratives about marked cultural practices tend to be seen either as representative of a specific personal and communal cultural identity or as participating in the construction of such a community. He argues that such a notion of ‘authentic’ representation drastically misrepresents the complexity of the cultural work these texts do. Instead, he suggests to focus on these narratives’ audience interpellation and on the work they demand their readers do, and he sketches two short case studies, one on Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and one on Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, to show the productivity of such an approach.

Similarly, **Carolyn Alice Hofmann** looks at the cultural work a novel does and reads Margaret Atwood’s *The Year of the Flood* for those narrative strategies that are particularly active or activating to the audience. By integrating moments of social/political referentiality into its fictional storyworld and by providing readers with points of environmentally activist identification, Hofmann argues, the book establishes a link to the experiences of its audience, self-confidently evokes the real world, and emphasizes its own relevance both as a text and as a form of political activism. Outside of its printed text, the novel likewise works to interpellate and activate a ‘green’ audience through its genre attribution and its paratextual environment. Ultimately, the novel thus stands at the core of a much larger, ethically determined narrative project that incorporates intermedia and participatory elements.

Moving away from the novel and into film, **Leonard Schmieding** looks at an unexpected form of audience activation across national borders, across the Atlantic, and

across the Iron Curtain. The US American movie *Beat Street*, he argues, was one of the most important impulses the budding hip-hop movement in the GDR received. Remarkably, the movie was perceived very distinctly by its respective audiences inside the GDR: Party functionaries, focusing on the depiction of the Bronx, approved the movie because they felt it conveyed a critical image of the USA that, they assumed, would foster solidarity within the international working class. Simultaneously, teenage viewers perceived it as a door opening to the world of hip-hop. In their appropriations of *Beat Street*, they imagined themselves into the transatlantic community of hip-hop culture and thus transcended the confines of the Iron Curtain.

Staying within the domain of moving pictures, **Katja Kanzler** fast-forwards to the first decade of the twenty-first century to look at how the genre of the TV courtroom drama dramatizes civic issues and seduces its viewers to an active engagement with such issues. Arguing that this genre exploits the theatricality of the legal trial before a jury audience, she discusses how contemporary courtroom dramas invite their audiences to join the characters' deliberation on social and political issues. Notably, these (post-)postmodern fictions, however, do not simply display these issues in a presumably transparent representative project. Instead, they add a self-reflexive dimension in which they encourage viewers to also reflect on how the dramatic construction of 'issues' shapes their civic debate. After a discussion of the theatricality of the legal drama, Kanzler offers a reading of episodes from two very different legal dramas, *Boston Legal* and *The Good Wife*, to show how these series activate their audiences into a consideration not just of social and political questions but also of the role the representation of such questions plays for their negotiation in society.

With the first four contributions focusing on fictional narratives, the remaining contributions discuss narratives that insist on their own nonfictionality. In this spirit, **Sebastian M. Herrmann** looks at a comparatively early instance of a text interpellating its audience into a particular (segment of the) public sphere, Joe McGinniss's 1969 *The Selling of the President 1968*. Arguing against the book's claims to documentary accuracy, he reads it as a text that is, on several levels, concerned with the difficulty of constructing and maintaining the public sphere as a textual space and that, rather than simply reporting on politics, uses politics as a site for this other project. To support this point, Herrmann dialogues the book with two earlier texts that are representative of an anti-advertising discourse dating back to the early 1950s. Charting the resonances McGinniss's text finds in this discourse, he argues that the book uses the description of Richard M. Nixon's campaign for the presidency to extend and explore this discursive

heritage's concern about the commercialization, fragmentation, and democratization of the public sphere.

Looking at a nonfiction narrative that has been at once very immediate and somewhat elusive, **Leopold Lippert** discusses the interpretive communities encouraged by the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York's Greenwich Village, an event that is often considered the starting point of the modern LGBTQ movement. Again highlighting an audience interpellation across national boundaries, Lippert argues that 'Stonewall,' far from being the 'American' story as which it is often perceived, has decidedly transnational meanings. Reading a brochure on the history of the Austrian LGBTQ movement, his article traces the imagined community called into being by the reception of the 'Stonewall' narrative in Vienna. Rather than telling yet another 'American' (hi)story, the brochure presents an account that creates an affective field outside the realm of national historiography. Instead of claiming national significance, it invites its readers to 'feel transnational.'

Moving even closer to the present, **Frank Usbeck** analyzes the concept of 'community' in blogs by US American servicemen and -women participating in the so-called 'War on Terror.' Utilizing and combining cultural-anthropological and media studies approaches, he argues that these 'milblogs' work to establish different communities from their audiences. These communities use the blogosphere to create and distribute a master narrative about the relationship of American civil society with its military and, thus, about how segments of American society attempt to come to terms with the War on Terror. In the practices of reading and of interaction that these blogs encourage, forms of fandom blend with the construction of civic communities, both being marked by the joint work of authors and audiences.

This volume closes with an essayistic contribution by **Detlef Kuhlbrodt**. In a text written shortly after the Norwegian terror attacks on July 22, 2011, and revisited in the late fall of the same year, Kuhlbrodt looks at the terrorist's 'manifesto,' a document describing the motivation and preparation for the attacks that surfaced for download on the Internet shortly after its presumed author's killing spree. Looking at the text as something akin to a postmodern novel, Kuhlbrodt explores its textual references and cultural resonances. This allows him, far from arguing causalities, to confront the eerie and deeply troubling familiarity of this narrative of sorts and the sense of helplessness this familiarity generates.

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