

Media Sense: The Folklore Popular Culture Continuum

Peter Narvaez and Martin Laba (eds.) Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, no date, 168 pp.

This book is a compilation of 10 previously published papers all dealing with the subtitle, "The Folklore - Popular Culture Continuum," with folklore referring to "artistic performance which is transmitted and communicated by sensory media of living, small group encounters," and popular culture as, "cultural events which are transmitted by technological media and communicated in mass societal contexts." These two facets of the human experience meet and often become indistinguishable. It is on this merge and the interdependence of folklore and popular culture that the editors have fashioned their premise with primary emphasis on the various media and how it serves to combine the popular as in radio and audio recordings with the traditional elements which identify sections of a society. Narvaez and Laba remind us that the images used in the media are derived from stereotypes and attitudes dominant in the folklore of a particular group and on the other end of the continuum the metaphors and attitudes of the folk are affected and shaped by the popular culture of a given time and place.

Of the collection of articles re-printed here all but two deal with case studies and of these most deal exclusively with fieldwork carried out in Newfoundland on the role of radio, audio recordings, and religious pictures in defining the placement of cultural material on the continuum. The effective use of radio in shaping Joseph R. Smallwood's popularity and perhaps his political career is examined by Peter Narvaez, as is the nature of open-line programs and the relationship between host and audience in "Gossip, Rumour and Personal Malice: The Rhetoric of Radio Open-Line Shows," by Martin Lovelace.

Paul Smith discusses a multi-media approach to the transmission of culture and how each form changes the nature and focus of specific items. Peter Narvaez examines the popular attitudes of Newfoundlanders towards the province's now disbanded train known as the "Newfie Bullet," and how the nostalgia regarding it was used by a theatre company to create a moderately successful stage and radio program.

Although all articles relate to the editors' thesis, the one which best illustrates it is Michael Toft's "Of Scoffs, Mounties and Mainlanders: The Popularity of a Sheep-Stealing Ballad in Newfoundland," The song in question, "Aunt Martha's Sheep," draws on a tradition where such stories are popular and re-inforces an attitude which encourages fooling the mainlander - a Newfie joke turned around, so to speak!

Three other essays present further evidence of the intermingling of popular culture and audience response. James Hornby's "Rumors of Maggie: Outlaw News in Folklore," examines opinions regarding Margaret Trudeau and how the press, her autobiography, and a song combined to create a rather unorthodox picture of the wife of the then Prime Minister of Canada. "Big Fish, Small Pond: Country Musicians and their Markets," by Neil V. Rosenberg is one of the few selection which doesn't deal

exclusively with Newfoundland but instead presents sound research from samples throughout Canada and the U.S.A. showing the interdependence of the progress of the careers of performers and the acceptability of the repertoire to their audiences. In "Holy Pictures in Newfoundland Homes: Visual Codes for Secular and Supernatural Relationships," Gerald L. Pocius discusses the role these visual images play in expressing local attitudes and how the behavior in certain rooms within the homes is affected by the subject matter of a print.

Completing the collection are two selections dealing more with a contextual treatment of the two areas on the continuum. Martin Laba's "Popular Culture and Folklore: The Social Dimension," minimizes the technological influence of popular culture and argues its ties to "social practices" and "human expressive behavior." Finally, in "Occupational Stereotypes," Robert McCall explores popular culture metaphors which often determine, not only the public's view of a particular job, but also contribute to the view that many of the workers have towards their occupation.

The study of folklore and popular culture is inextricably tied to the context in which they occur: it is their adherence to this which makes some of the articles stand out. Their strength lies not in furthering the editor's point of view but in their analysis of the "ordinary" and in showing the importance of such things in shaping the perspective on ourselves and our community.

Whereas this book contains some excellent work the packaging might mitigate against their accessibility; there is no index and the title which could suggest a theoretical treatment of the subject gives no indication that much of the work focusses on the intermingling of popular culture and folklore in Newfoundland.

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