

Seeing is Believing: the Politics of the Visual

Rod Stoneman

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The image of the view through the door of Duchamp's installation, *Étant Donnés...*, a full frontal pudenda, is visible for real everyday in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. An image of what is seen emblazons the front cover of this trade volume from Black Dog, as directly as its title challenges the ideologies of the consumer society; so will the American matrons tolerate such an attack on their honour?

Rod Stoneman is Director of the (John) Huston School of Film and Digital Media of the National University of Ireland in Galway and as such has a good knowledge of tolerance levels in the US and Catholic Ireland, developed over many years working at senior levels in television and film production in Europe, and more recently as an indie, an independent producer, in Italy and Latin America.

Eight chapters divide the book into domain areas populated by short essays, each led by an image with supplementary images. History/Politics, Art/Culture, Film/Television, Products/Possessions, The Quotidian/The Strange are the domains covered; the Verisimilitude/Delusion essays complete the volume. In many ways this approach follows that of the blog, which may explain the slight links between each entry, though

rather more time has been spent reflecting and exploiting the gains of hindsight, tracking down references, some of which are assiduously included, though assertion rather than argument is the writing style.

The management of mediated culture lies at the core of this account, with divergences, asides and footnotes, occasioned with a certain jocularly somehow added to quite horrifying topics; "...an unseemly interest in consumer goods", said of a looting Soviet soldier. The anecdotes which leaven these accounts successfully record the fleeting thoughts we share, here captured by a retentive and practised commentator of the passing scene. At times this reads as a Babylon-type exposé, with not so much celebrity but key signifiers dropped in as historical context:

"'Overthrow everything' the students chanted, inspiring French intellectuals to swing to the extreme left for about three-minutes." Post-Marxist aphorisms declare, "Money is always structuring our relations with what we do in this short life"; but there is playfulness with terms like 'apparatus' when describing how his sons managed to extract retribution from the Coke dispensing machine by jamming its mechanism. Other curious diversions into autobiography loosely linked to the topic under discussion compounds a collage of reflection, manifesto, memoire, opinion, exposition, commentary, reportage which equally suddenly become passages of prose, 'a la condition humaine.'

But management is the main picture drawn here, as a television EP availing himself of so many 'madcap' ideas, the obsessions of dreamers and creators, his being able to comprehend the breadth of the creative imagination in some detail, advise supplicants and then in the unenviable position of Commissioner find ways of telling many that their projects are not feasible, 'at the present time.' This whilst balancing the KPIs and holding

back the 'boundary keepers' who 'generally over anticipate the dangers of showing controversial programmes'.

On our personal experience of mediation he observes: “We immediately see the selection, gaps, choices, and so often inaccuracies and falsities too. They may be trivial and tenuous, unreliable and inconsequential, but the partial memories of fleeting encounters and almost human relations with those whose faces and movements make the film and defend the realm of representation, eventually fall into place within a more intricate critique.” There is a plethora of quotes from various protagonists, producers, theorists, commentators and artists, but somehow this comes over in the language of a trade magazine, with little sense of a personal knowledge of the people, or the audience. The recent academic area of audience studies and the nuances that avail do not receive as much attention as the notion of television viewing figures.

From the intensity of the flow, insistent vectors emerge – the centrality of risk and experiment, of moving away from boundaries and channels of enquiry defined by commerce, or the conservative politician. As a collection of memoirs of past battles, is the picture presented useful to our current understanding of the structures of the mediated landscape? In many ways these stories document the era of broadcast television and publishing in the 1980s and 90s, now unrecognisable following corporate review; there is hand-wringing about the internet but little reference to contemporary studies of its functioning. To be sure however, the rest of the world is able to gain insight into the complexities of class and social relations in Britain during this time.

The design of the book is flawed for a project commencing as an

image-based project. Juggling images as tangents to text, with footnotes on an almost square page (260x220cm) compromises the size of the column, font and images, leaving large blank areas useful only for scribbling into; the image quality is fortunately high. Though clearly not intended for the coffee-table, size and weight will discourage coursework postgraduates from carrying it around. Such students will however, find plenty of leads and insights into the morass of electronic media production and dissemination from someone who has been there, fought the fight, and seen the horror of it all.

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