“East of Easton”

A (Post)modern Rhetorical Criticism

(or three fragments in search of a meaning)

a work in progress by students of Comm 344, Exploring Rhetorical Texts

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And a well-trained architect could design ideal city stages and insert them at random into the heterogeneous mixture of urban forms, instilling the illusion that harmonious order controlled chaotic and unruly reality. This was the vanishing point toward which all of Alberi’s theories strove: the miraculous linking of the perfected humanist world with reality, of the spiritual with the temporal and by extension, theatrical ideals reordering the soul of the spectator.

The City of Collective Memory

If commodities no longer dominate, this is because the salable product no longer carries the same importance, since history, technology, and art, as presented in the museums, have now become commodified. The world of the shopping mall—respecting no boundaries, no longer limited even by the imperative of consumption—has become the world.

The World in a Shopping Mall
Margaret Crawford

Enslaved thought, fake despair, pseudo-culture, the commodity spectacle, a dead thing.

The Society of the Spectacle
Guy Debord

The metamorphosis from industrial production to cultural capitalism is being accompanied by an equally significant shift from the work ethic to the play ethic. While the industrial era was characterized by the commodification of work, the Age of Access is about, above all else, the commodification of play—namely the marketing of cultural resources including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements, spiritual and fraternal activity, and civic engagement in the form of paid-for personal entertainment.

The Age of Access
Jeremy Rifkin
About the Production

"East of Easton" is a form of critical practice, of understanding a cultural phenomenon in a non-traditional way. Standard rhetorical criticism, i.e., the critical examination of rhetorical practices, is typically the written work of a critic with a defined point of view. Students in "Exploring Rhetorical Texts" have spent most of the semester studying and practicing this kind of rhetorical criticism, but for the last project the class is trying something different. A postmodern perspective approach seemed right for Easton, with its multiple entrances, disconnected architectural styles, disguised surveillance, and sophisticated fetishes. Our "postmodern" critique has several characteristics that separate it from traditional critical practice.

a. This criticism is "performative." Postmodernism can be radically relativistic. It doesn't want to privilege a point of view or an authorial voice. Dramatic performance, with its multiple characters and absence of narrator, moves towards this perspectival multiplicity. Pomo is also about 're-presentation.' There is no 'real' in a postmodern world, only traces, echoes, repetitions. There is no real Alex Trebeck, only different versions.

b. This criticism is intertextual. There is no original text, no original authorial voice. Any text is inevitably a quotation of previous texts. Postmodern cultural performance doesn't pretend to be original - it's a patch-quilt of voices of the culture. The "Works (Mis)appropriated" list appended cites some of the texts and authors from which this performance was stitched together. You will recognize others yourself - Jeopardy, Siskel & Ebert, etc.

c. This criticism is self-referential. Partly this means that we're exposing the means of production. In film theory the term "suture" (borrowed from medical surgery) expresses the idea that standard texts seek to hide the apparatus behind their production, thus promoting the illusion that they are real. Just as when Toto pulls the drapery on the Wizard and shows 'how the trick is done,' we're exposing the apparatus of production. In this production we don't hide what goes on behind the scenes.

d. This criticism is whimsical and ironic. Postmodernism doesn't take itself too seriously, since it often flirts with the notion that we're going downhill fast without a life-jacket and we might as well enjoy the ride. It is also irreverent and iconoclastic. It tries to debunk metanarratives related to God, country, etc. We're trying less to debunk than to call everything into question.

e. This criticism is fragmented. It tries to avoid a narrative linearity and a strong sense of closure. These are the traditional virtues of coherent meta-narrative of the world. It offers an irrational dreamscape that opposes the logic of Western rationalism. Why does Vanna wander through the Jeopardy set? I thought Roger Ebert was dead?

f. This criticism is non-traditional. It seeks to challenge conventional social practices (like written critique, adherence to the rules of genres), and in so doing makes us aware of our conventionality.

g. This criticism is "critical." In spite of postmodern posturing toward radical relativism (which all of the above characteristics promote), in the end it has a strongly progressive orientation. It comments on gender stereotypes, consumer culture, social inequality, commodly fetishism, etc.

h. Our performance is 'in process,' more like a dress rehearsal read-through than a finished performance. Postmodernism prefers things messy and unfinished. It lives in a world of contingency, indeterminacy; there is no final version, no definitive interpretation. Lucky for us.

i. Meanings in postmodernism are unstable. Our language and symbols are polysemous, multivalent, and ambiguous. Everything is interpretation. This can seem disorienting. Go with it.