

Book Reviews

Diane P. Janes, Editor

Messages, Meanings and Culture: Approaches to Communication Criticism by Malcolm A. Sillars. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1991. ISBN 0-673-46030-4 (\$19.60)

Reviewed by Richard F. Lewis

Malcolm A. Sillars textbook introduces students to how critical theory can be used in message analysis. He suggests that the text can be used in many areas in communication studies. There are two reasons why readers of *CJEC* might want to read this book. Media literacy educators will want to examine it as a comprehensive text to teach their students how to apply different communication theories to the message. The rest of us can use the book as a primer of critical theory, teaching us some new concepts absent in most of our undergraduate and graduate work.

The book focuses on the message. This in itself is not new. What is new is the focus on the message in context and the notion of the critic. Sillars suggests that the message is not only produced by society but that it can shape society itself. Any discussion of message therefore must deal with its impact and not just with the message itself. Sillars' second important notion is that of the critic. I suspect that most of us would use techniques contained in the early chapters of the book as we analyze messages. We would try to objectively determine the content of the message. Many media literacy curricula on advertising suggest good schemes for describing the content. They lack guidance on what to do once the content is collected. Sillars' work is rich with suggestion on what to do once the message has been described. The critic is important because of his/her effect on truth or objectivity. Some theories want the critic to be as objective as possible. Other theories suggest that the critic affects the process and thus should recognize and deal with the effects of the criticism.

Sillars begins by categorizing eight approaches to criticism as belonging to either the common-sense or the deconstruction tradition. Common-sense theories include accurate interpretation, formal criticism and neo-classical criticism. Deconstructionist approaches include semiotics, value analysis, narrative analysis, psychoanalytic theories and ideological criticism.

Chapter Two: *Analyzing Messages*, defines the message and then attunes the reader to the tools which all approaches to criticism require. Sillars provides concrete suggestions for basic message analysis which will allow all other critical approaches to be used. Each of the next eight chapters deals with one approach. Sillars describes each approach, tells the reader how to use it, delineates its assumptions, and exposes problems with the approach. The book is replete with examples drawn from television programs and the United States political system. Unfortunately, the book assumes that the United States is its universe, drawing no information from events and messages from the rest of the world.

Sillars suggests that the common-sense approaches to criticism (Chapters 4-6) assume that a trained critic can uncover the "truth" behind a message. They assume that there is a truth there to be discovered and that everyone negotiating the message could uncover this truth. Critics of these approaches suggest that there is no truth, only a representation of reality, constructed by one mind to communicate with others.

Deconstructionist approaches want the reader to look beyond the message itself to deeper meanings and contexts. Semiotic analysis (Chapter 6) suggests that messages consist of signs, codes and conventions which comprise values, myths and ideologies which allow us to communicate. The critic must look beyond the message itself to see what it connotes since meaning is negotiated between the message and the audience. Value analysis (Chapter 7) examines texts to determine how they define the culture. The values in the texts reflect the value system of a culture. Sillars describes the major American value system. Canadians appears to share some of the value system Sillars describes. Narrative analysis (Chapter 8) seeks to understand a culture through the stories it tells. Various rhetorical and structural analyses characterize narrative analysis. Psychoanalytic criticism (Chapter 9) which is based on Freud's ideas assumes that we can analyze texts to uncover the interaction between the conscious and unconscious minds. Ideological criticism (Chapter 10) uncovers the political agenda behind the messages. It always examines power relationships within the culture.

Sillars does not favour one method over the others. He suggests that your assumptions and objectives as a critic will govern which approach(es) you use. Various approaches borrow from each other, so there are common elements. I like to think of critical approaches like learning theories: we can use elements from all of them making our criticism much more powerful. I wish that Sillars had reinforced that point in a concluding chapter. As the book stands, Chapter Ten on ideological criticism ends. When you turn the page for the summary, you are greeted with the Bibliography.

The *book* is very readable, keeping jargon to a minimum and simplifying content wherever possible. Although all references are American, Canadian readers will identify with the television examples and with some of the references to the political system and Constitution of the United States. The book provides an excellent introduction to new theories of communication and how they can be applied. Its extensive bibliography will help the reader locate many interesting and sometimes rare material.

REVIEWER

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