

have functioned as 'textual shifters' in relation to these primary texts, altering the horizons within which they have been read with perceptible consequences for the positions they have occupied in relation to ideologies of class, nation and gender. In view of these considerations, Bennett and Woollacott are led to suggest that popular fictional texts do not have fixed ideological meanings or effects but function rather 'as pieces of play within different regions of ideological contestation, capable of being moved around differently within them' (p. 428).

Finally, in 'Television and gender', David Morley turns his attention to the crucial role of gender in organizing the frameworks in which television is interpreted and used. In 1985, Morley conducted a research project consisting of extended, unstructured interviews with eighteen families. The originality of the inquiry consisted in the members of the families being interviewed together, rather than separately. Morley decided on this interview format partly because many people typically watch television as members of families, and partly because he particularly wanted to discover how television is used as an occasion for constructing and organizing social relations within the home. While the interviews ranged freely across many topics, the excerpts selected here summarize some of Morley's more salient findings concerning the different cultures of use and expectation which characterize male and female orientations toward television. His findings lend vivid support to the arguments Tania Modleski advances in accounting for women's interest in soap operas. They also provide a startling demonstration of the degree to which control over the television set can become a matter of key concern within the structure of domestic power relations.

Notes

- 1 Bourdieu, Pierre (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 32.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 34.

Tony Bennett: Popular Fiction:
Technology, ideology, production,
reading (London: Routledge 1990)

21

The operational aesthetic

Neil Harris

At the end of August 1843, New York newspaper advertisements announced a 'Grand Buffalo Hunt, Free of Charge', to take place on a Thursday afternoon in Hoboken. A Mr C.D. French, 'one of the most daring and experienced hunters of the West', had captured the animals near Santa Fe at considerable risk to life and limb. Strong fences would protect the public from the savage beasts, who would be lassoed and hunted as part of the entertainment. What the newspaper advertisements did not say was that the buffaloes were feeble, docile beasts, hardly capable of movement, much less of violence. Barnum had purchased the herd for several hundred dollars when he saw it earlier that summer in Massachusetts and had stowed it away for several weeks in New Jersey. Knowing that the spectacle might not be all the audience anticipated, Barnum wisely decided to make admission free. What he did not disclose was an arrangement with the ferryboat owners who would transport the public from Manhattan to New Jersey; his profits were to come from a percentage of the fares.

The great day finally arrived, and boatloads of spectators crossed to New Jersey. There were to be several shows, and by the time the first batch of spectators had seen the hunt, a second batch was passing them on the Hudson. The returnees called out from their boats that

the hunt – a debacle in which the frightened animals fled to a nearby swamp – was the biggest humbug imaginable. Instead of being disappointed, however, the expectant audience, in the words of a witness, ‘instantly gave three cheers for the author of the humbug, whoever he might be.’

Barnum told the whole story in his autobiography. He understood that American audiences did not mind cries of trickery; in fact, they delighted in debate. Amusement and deceit could coexist; people would come to see something they suspected might be an exaggeration or even a masquerade. Any publicity was better than none at all, and if the audiences did not get all they anticipated, they had a pleasant outing in New Jersey for the price of a boat ride.

The principle of the Hoboken Hunt – the national tolerance for clever imposture – was one Barnum relied on again and again in his early museum days. As he was building up his cabinet of natural curiosities, he couldn't resist making his exhibits a bit more enticing than literal truth permitted. In the 1840s museum visitors could examine the wooden leg that Santa Anna had lost on a Mexican battlefield, captured, presumably, by American troops; a woolly horse, supposedly brought back by John Fremont from the Rocky Mountains; and a mass of other spurious but colourfully described oddities. . . .

Barnum's success was so great and so long-lasting, everywhere but in the South, that there had to be more to it than the simple collection of curiosities on which other entrepreneurs had already given up. To explain it, at least two questions must be answered. First, why were Americans apparently so credulous, why could they be fooled so easily, why did they flock to see mermaids, woolly horses, and other anatomical monstrosities that seem in later days to be so patently false? Why did they accept commonplace objects – wooden legs, articles of clothing, minerals and weapons – as sacred relics associated with famous men and historic events? And second, why did Americans enjoy watching shows and

visiting exhibits that they suspected might be contrived, why did they flock to witness impostures that they knew about? In other words, why the apparent naïveté about deception, and why the pleasure in experiencing deception after knowledge of it had been gained?

These questions are related to a larger issue, for P.T. Barnum was not the only entrepreneur to fool Americans in the early nineteenth century. Ever since Washington Irving and James K. Paulding had published *Salmagundi; or, The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Lancelot Langstaff, Esq.*, in 1807–8, New York City had been popularly known as Gotham, the legendary town of fools, and the name appeared to have some basis in fact. In the three decades before the Civil War, New York was the setting for several tremendous hoaxes that Barnum had no hand in. One of the most memorable became known as the Moon Hoax, an episode engineered by Richard Adams Locke of the *New York Sun*.

The *Sun* had been founded in 1833 by Benjamin H. Day as a penny daily. It concentrated on human interest stories, and Day was one of the earliest practitioners of what would become an established tradition in American urban journalism. Readers of the *Sun* discovered, in the summer of 1835, that the internationally known British astronomer Sir John Herschel had gone to the Cape of Good Hope to experiment with a new and powerful telescope. The articles, supposedly reprinted from the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*, went on to say that Herschel's success had been beyond his wildest dreams, for with the telescope he had managed to penetrate the secrets of the moon. And Herschel's discoveries were far more interesting, or at least more astounding, than the actual voyage that would be made over a century later. The moon, it turned out, contained trees, oceans, pelicans, and most exciting of all, winged men. The *Sun* 'quoted' Herschel's minute description. 'I could perceive', he wrote, 'that their wings possessed great expansion and were similar in structure to those of the bat, being a semi-transparent membrane expanded in curvilinear

divisions by means of straight radii, united at the back by the dorsal integuments.'

This was, to be sure, hard reading, and so was the extremely detailed description of the telescope's design. The *Sun* sold its papers madly, however, and while running the article reached a circulation of almost twenty thousand, larger, it asserted, than any daily newspaper in the world. Thousands of Americans believed the story absolutely, and there followed some of the rituals that seem inevitably to be born of these jokes. Some Baptist clergymen immediately began prayer meetings for the benefit of their unconverted brethren in the moon. A number of scholars at Yale went over the material to substantiate the accuracy of the episode. At last, to much general embarrassment, Locke confessed his authorship, and the discoveries turned out to be an important chapter not in the history of natural science but in the history of hoaxing.

Having achieved one success, the *New York Sun* did not rest on its laurels for too long. In 1844 the same newspaper relayed astonishing news from South Carolina. Mr Monck Mason had crossed the Atlantic in his balloon, the *Victoria*, making the voyage from England to America in seventy-five hours. Once again, the description was careful. The size and weight of the flying machine were specified, and so was the design of the screw, 'an axis of hollow brass tube, eighteen inches in length, though which, upon a semi-spiral inclined at fifteen degrees, pass a series of steel-wire radii, two feet long, and thus projecting a foot on either side'. The technical analysis could not be matched by anything so astonishing as moon men, but the newspaper dispatch did celebrate the joys of flying over water: 'The immense flaming ocean writhes and is tortured uncomplainingly. The mountainous surges suggest the idea of innumerable dumb gigantic fiends struggling in impotent agony. In a night such as is this to me, a man *lives* - lives a whole century of ordinary life - nor would I forego this rapturous delight for that of a whole century of ordinary

existence.' This marvellous conquest of nature could not last as long as the Moon Hoax, alas, because it took only a short time to establish contact with the Charleston post office and find that no Atlantic crossing had taken place. It was all the product of the fertile imagination of Edgar Allan Poe.

Poe himself, in 'Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences', noted the prevalence of deception on both a large and a small scale. 'A crow thives; a fox cheats; a weasel outwits; a man diddles.' The successful diddler was ingenious, audacious, persevering, original, and entirely self-interested. Poe described some of the successful variations. A camp meeting would be held near a free bridge. 'A diddler stations himself upon this bridge, respectfully informs all passers-by of the new county law which establishes a toll of one cent for foot passengers, two for horses and donkeys, and so forth and so forth. Some grumble but all submit, and the diddler goes home a wealthier man by some \$50 or \$60 well earned.' This scene was not the product of Poe's imagination but actually took place, one of the innumerable devices by which Americans tricked each other. . . .

A full explanation for the effectiveness of the pranksters must take account of the advanced technical and material conditions of American life. By the 1830s and 1840s portions of the United States were as advanced in those areas as any part of the Old World; innovations like the railroad and the telegraph were greeted with enthusiasm and constructed with rapidity. American mechanics and toolmakers competed with European rivals. There was widespread interest in and support for scientific progress. Physical improvement had become inextricably connected with the genius of American civilization. Visiting the United States in the 1830s, Harriet Martineau was fascinated by the Moon Hoax. She argued, however, that its success was misleading. Americans learned of real scientific advances more quickly than they were taken in by frauds. In any other

nation, she went on, the Moon Hoax would have fooled a far larger proportion of the population than in America, because Americans were becoming scientifically educated and alert to the possibilities and varieties of technological change.

In emphasizing American scientific literacy Harriet Martineau got hold of the right issue, but from the wrong end. American experience with science and technology was crucial to the hoaxing attempts, but this experience led not to less credulity but to more. A vital factor in the success of the hoaxes was national skepticism itself. Men accustomed to examining the truth or validity of every person, idea, object or act presented to them – as Americans proverbially were – became easy targets for pseudoscientific explanations, for detailed descriptions of fictional machinery, for any fantasy that was couched in the bland neutrality of a technological vocabulary. Men priding themselves on their rationalistic, scientific bent, familiar with the operation of novel machines, aware of the variety of nature, tended to accept as true anything which seemed to work – or seemed likely to work. The coming of steam, of railroads, of telegraphs indicated the futility of declaring anything impossible or incredible. Nothing mechanical was beyond the range of Nature's imagination. . . .

Not only was the predisposition to accept the mechanically probable or the organically possible a result of changing technology and the growth of natural science, it was also a peculiarly patriotic position in Jacksonian America. At a time when the advantages of a common school education were being extolled by reformers, when the common sense of the average citizen was proposed as a guarantee for the republic's future, many avid democrats assumed that any problem could be expressed clearly, concisely and comprehensively enough for the ordinary man to resolve it. Secret information and private learning were anathema. All knowledge was meant to be shared. Contemporary pamphleteers delighted in ridiculing experts and specialists; the expert turned out

frequently to be a pedantic ignoramus, easily fooled himself; the learned doctor was often a victim of scientific nonsense and deserved to be overruled by intelligent laymen. 'When *doctors disagree*', Barnum had phrased it in his mermaid advertisement, then it was up to ordinary men to decide for themselves. . . .

Technological progress and egalitarian self-confidence combined to make many Americans certain of their own opinions – and so, easy prey for the hoaxers. And these traits were supplemented by the sheer exhilaration of debate, the utter fun of the opportunity to learn and evaluate, whether the subject was an ancient slave, an exotic mermaid, or a politician's honour. Barnum's audiences found the encounter with potential frauds exciting. It was a form of intellectual exercise, stimulating even when literal truth could not be determined. Machinery was beginning to accustom the public not merely to a belief in the continual appearance of new marvels but to a jargon that concentrated on methods of operation, on aspects of mechanical organization and construction, on horsepower, gears, pulleys and safety valves.

The language of technical explanation and scientific description itself had become a form of recreational literature by the 1840s and 1850s. Newspapers, magazines, even novels and short stories catered to this passion for detail. Manuals on almost every conceivable activity poured forth from American presses. . . .

Nowhere was the zest for operational description better satisfied than in the sea novels that figured prominently on American reading lists of the Jacksonian era. The complexity of the great sailing ship, the varied activities of the crew, the complex task of coordinating the rapid raising and lowering of the sails to meet the challenges of weather and position, formed a staple for the novelists. . . .

The novels of Herman Melville contained, in addition to the depiction of sailing and harpooning operations, immense and erudite discussions of anatomy, geology, and physiology. Floods of data, anecdotes, measurements, whaling lore, manipulated more skillfully by

Melville than by any contemporary writer, overwhelmed the reader in his passage through the book. Such detail satisfied the same relish for acquiring knowledge that led to travel literature, how-to-do-it manuals, and almanacs of useful information.

This delight in learning explains why the experience of deceit was enjoyable even after the hoax had been penetrated, or at least during the period of doubt and suspicion. Experiencing a complicated hoax was pleasurable because of the competition between victim and hoaxer, each seeking to outmanoeuvre the other, to catch him off-balance and detect the critical weakness. Barnum, Poe, Locke and other hoaxers didn't fear public suspicion; they invited it. They understood, most particularly Barnum understood, that the opportunity to debate the *issue* of falsity, to discover how deception had been practiced, was even more exciting than the discovery of fraud itself. The manipulation of a prank, after all, was as interesting a technique in its own right as the presentation of genuine curiosities. Therefore, when people paid to see frauds, thinking they were true, they paid again to hear how the frauds were committed. Barnum reprinted his own ticket-seller's analysis. 'First he humbugs them, and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it. I believe if he should swindle a man out of twenty dollars, the man would give a quarter to hear him tell about it.' . . .

There is one final reason why American audiences responded to Barnum's techniques and so enjoyed practical joking. The practice of humbugging solved some special problems of the mass sensibility, problems particularly acute in America, where cultural ambitions outstripped cultural achievements. Concentration on whether a particular show, exhibit, or event was real or false, genuine or contrived, narrowed the task of judgment for the multitude of spectators. It structured problems of experiencing the exotic and unfamiliar by reducing that experience to a simple evaluation.

Many Americans, however much they admired and

respected the realm of art, feared its mysteries. They were uncomfortable encountering masterpieces because they could neither analyse nor justify their reactions. Art exhibitions, when they were organized with theatrical settings and sentimental appeals – Hiram Powers's sensationally popular 'Greek Slave', for example – were crowded with onlookers. And patriotic appeals aided the art unions of the forties and fifties in distributing thousands of lithographs of landscapes and genre paintings. But these were, on the whole, exceptional experiences. No great public galleries existed for the public to stroll through, no historic buildings featured ancient murals and statuary. Instead, paintings and sculpture stood alongside mummies, mastodon bones and stuffed animals. American museums were not, in the antebellum period, segregated temples of the fine arts, but repositories of information, collections of strange or doubtful data. Such indiscriminate assemblages made artistic objects take on the innocent yet familiar shape of exhibition curiosities. Contemplating a painting or a statue was not so different from studying Napoleon's cane or wood from Noah's ark; in every instance, a momentary brush with a historical artefact stimulating reflections on its cost, age, detail and rarity.

The American Museums then, as well as Barnum's elaborate hoaxes, trained Americans to absorb knowledge. This was an aesthetic of the operational, a delight in observing processes and examining for literal truth. In place of intensive spiritual absorption, Barnum's exhibitions concentrated on information and the problem of deception. Onlookers were relieved from the burden of coping with more abstract problems. Beauty, significance, spiritual values, could be bypassed in favour of seeking what was odd, or what worked, or was genuine. . . .

But it was in American fiction that the taste for exposure and problem-solving most convincingly appeared. The pre-eminent practitioner of the art was Edgar Allan Poe, with his famous studies of criminal

detection. This period witnessed the birth of the modern detective story, and in C. Auguste Dupin, the hero of 'The Purloined Letter', 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Mystery of Marie Roget', Poe created one of the archetypes of detective fiction, the detached, powerful, analytic intellect who solved crimes of the greatest mystery by logical method and intensive empathizing. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' Dupin proves even before he discovers the evidence that the true killer of two women in a Paris apartment had to be an orangoutang, and much of the story deals with the steps which lead him to this conclusion. Poe begins the tale by apostrophizing the analytical intellect: 'As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which disentangles. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension praeternatural.' This was also a description of the person who delighted in the competitiveness of Barnum's exhibitions, who sought to measure his wits against a master hoaxer, who enjoyed the intellectual exercise of disentangling the true from the false, the spurious from the genuine.

Reason alone, to be sure, was insufficient for the great detective. In 'The Purloined Letter' the Paris police, 'persevering, ingenious, cunning and thoroughly versed in the knowledge which their duties seem chiefly to demand', fail to discover a stolen document they know to be in the hands of a government minister. Dupin is more successful because he measures the minister as a man and a mind before deciding what he could have done with the letter. The police consider only 'their own ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for any thing hidden', refer 'only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it'. When the cunning of the felon differs from their own, the felon foils them. 'They have no

variation of principle in their investigations.' Problem-solving of the highest sort, then, was not simply a rarefied strategy of logical rules; it demanded insight into personality and character, a knowledge of the ways of the world, a willingness to burrow into the temperament of other men and uncover the springs of action that push them forward. Dupin, like Barnum, never made the mistake of assuming that all men would reflect his tastes and proclivities; he acted only after observation and generalization permitted him to categorize the possibilities and vary his techniques.

Poe's artistic intentions, certainly, were complex, and his tales of mystery touched on interests not directly related to the operational aesthetic. Yet his stories exerted an immediate appeal and enthralled his readers because of their controlled problems; his audience joined with the protagonist to discover the intricacies of the puzzle and enjoyed the lengthy expositions that demonstrated the true facts. In the popular 1845 edition of Poe's tales, Evert A. Duyckinck, the editor, selected the three detective stories as part of his total of twelve, leaving out others that Poe considered among his best. For many, Poe's mystery tales actually came to symbolize mental training, and they served this use even in political campaigning.

In 1860, shortly before the presidential election, William Dean Howells wrote a brief but influential campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln. Howells faced the problem of proving that this little-known western lawyer, poorly educated, with few intellectual pretensions, was really quite intelligent, and equal to the burdens of the office he sought. Howells turned to Lincoln's reading habits to make his point. Having a mathematical bent of mind, he wrote, Lincoln was naturally pleased 'with the absolute and logical method of Poe's tales and sketches, in which the problem of mystery is given, and wrought out into every-day facts by processes of cunning analysis'. In the isolation of the rural Midwest men could sharpen their wits by studying

the clever reasoning of C. Auguste Dupin. Lincoln allowed no year to go by without reading some Poe, added Howells to clinch his argument.

Poe's fascination with cryptography also satisfied the taste for problem-solving. In various issues of *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* for 1840, and in the summer of 1841 in *Graham's Magazine*, Poe published a series of ciphers with some solutions to them. Wide public interest was aroused, and readers sent codes in for Poe to solve. In a three-month period in 1840, fifteen articles on ciphers appeared in *Alexander's* and thirty-six ciphers were published or referred to. Poe did not explain his methods at this point, but waited until he published 'The Gold Bug'. Here, W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., has written, 'in dramatized form, with the romantic adjuncts of invisible ink, a golden scaraboeus, a skull and a buried treasure', Poe revealed his method of translating ciphers, 'for which fireside cogitators have long awaited. It was a master stroke of selling strategy', stimulating the interest of readers with tempting glimpses of cryptographic methods, but satisfying them only in his finished tale. That Poe's analysis contained important errors was less important than the impression he made on his contemporaries as a man of great analytical power, whetting their appetite for its continual demonstration. . . .

22

Peter Pan and the commercialization of the child

Jacqueline Rose

. . . There is one question asked by children which is almost as hard to answer as where babies come from and that is how money is *made*. How can you explain to a child how you make something which always comes from somewhere or somebody else? Perhaps it is because of this difficulty, and not just because of the seeming insatiability of children's demands, that we so often resort to insisting that 'money doesn't grow on trees'. We could try saying simply that money doesn't *grow* at all. But it does. It accumulates according to processes that are often as invisible to us as to children. Making money, like sex, is another one of those always mystified processes which then gets converted into a childhood taboo - which might be another reason why it is so difficult to trace its movements, other than symptomatically, in the history of literature for the child.

Peter Pan, as has already been mentioned, accumulated vast sums of money. But whereas we could see that money (its quantity) as helping us to define the value of *Peter Pan* (just what is it worth?), instead it only makes it more obscure. One look at the extent of the commercialization of *Peter Pan* is enough to establish that we do not really know what we are talking about when we refer to *Peter Pan*. In its history to date, *Peter Pan* has stood for, or been converted into, almost every