

Rethinking a Media Studies Class with *The Ghost Reader*

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The Ghost Reader offers an essential corrective to the misogyny and racism embedded in more canonical historical overviews for media studies students. The standard narrative about the evolution of media criticism in the 20th century often risks oversimplifying the effects of media on consumers and the motivations of producers as content-creators. Anyone who teaches about new media technologies, moral panics, and theories of mass influence – as I do – can appreciate access to this exciting pedagogical alternative to the traditional timeline of media criticism that runs from Edward Bernays to the Frankfurt School to Marshall McLuhan to German media theory to the present. Unfortunately, each juncture of this received history lionizes a succession of white male critics who are either celebrating progress and innovation or bemoaning societal degradation and collapse.

For instructors who choose to emphasize the ambiguous impacts of media technologies, there is much in this collection to draw upon. For example, an instructor might want to defamiliarize students' thinking by decentering contemporary screen technologies, such as television or social media platforms. For example, *The Ghost Reader* provides a wealth of resources for examining radio as a novel and influential media technology, including considering infrastructural conditions and lived practices of message control. Critics in this reader who have investigated radio in-depth include Marie Jahoda, Patricia L Kendall, Jeannette Sayre, and Lisa Sergio. Although Kendall may be better known in many circles, Sergio is a particularly interesting figure, given her expertise in a range of topics, including how radio might offer artistic edification, distance learning, political literacy, participatory culture, and authoritarian propaganda.

Individual historical events can also be explored with a deep dive of *The Ghost Reader*. For example if teaching about the post-World War II comics panic, the work of Marjorie Fiske might be extremely useful to navigate the vast middle ground between a text like Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which warns of juvenile delinquency, desensitization to violence and sexuality, and mindless conformity resulting from a lowbrow comics culture and one like Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, which celebrates the semiotic richness of colorful graphic layouts and ridicules the ignorance of the older generation. The same could be done to research the rise of "yellow journalism," the implementation of the Hays Code in Hollywood, or public outrage over the War of the Worlds broadcast.

At the same time, this collection speaks to many present-day media debates. For example, one could assign Fredi Washington to discuss the entrenched racism of Disney animation or the persistence of blackface, minstrelsy, and servile "mammy" characters. Although it can be difficult to teach topics in media studies about the entrenched and invisible nature of white supremacy in states prohibiting discussion of Critical Race Theory, *The Ghost Reader* includes a trove of useful material about bias and prejudice that remains relevant, including Patricia L Kendall's "Mr. Biggott" research.

Given that many of the writers in *The Ghost Reader* use theoretical frameworks derived from Marxism and other anti-capitalist perspectives, there is also much to be said about how media

industries operate. Horkheimer and Adorno famously wrote about “the culture industry” in sweeping terms. In contrast, the authors in *The Ghost Reader* often offer more nuanced and granular accounts than their male Frankfurt School counterparts.

Gretel Karplus Adorno’s correspondence with Theodor Adorno is obviously of interest, but more relevant to this kind of media studies curriculum might be Mae D. Huettig’s micro and macroeconomic analysis of the film industry – including production, distribution, and exhibition -- and Hortense Powdermaker’s use of participant observation techniques to forms of economic organization that range from Hollywood guilds to the studios’ lobbying for subsidies and resistance to antitrust regulation. In the excerpts published from her work here, Powdermaker’s insights are invaluable about the economics of mass production, the uniformity of movies, the studios’ flawed trust in formulaic approaches, and problems with audience research by the industry itself. Her attention to the many forms of capital at work and the many configurations of political economy would be likely to spur all kinds of class discussion and allow application to contemporary social media market behavior as a precursor to its neoliberalism.

In a related vein, Dorothy Blumenstock Jones’s work on Hollywood and the war industry might be useful, perhaps in conjunction with readings by Friedrich Kittler about militarism and media technologies or more recent texts that focus on the “military industrial entertainment complex.”

In examining the intersections (and tensions) between Marxism and feminism that are often discussed today, *The Ghost Reader* provides essential historical context. For example, many present-day feminist media critics explore the topic of desire – and in its deferral for female subjects the “desire to desire,” as Mary Ann Doane says. The detailed examination of daytime serials and the intersections of gender and class by Herta Hertzog might be a particularly useful text for consideration to survey work on this topic.

Those interested in expanding current scholarship on media infrastructures – building on works such as Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski’s *Signal Traffic*, will also find many of these readings useful. For example, if discussing systems of classification, labeling, and metadata with students, the pioneering contributions of Romana Javitz for understanding the essential structures of visual archives might be revelatory, particularly in conjunction with work on other established archives, such as the federally funded photo archives of the Roosevelt administration or large newspaper collections of images that were once stored in “morgues” and are now stored in databases. Courses on visual culture would also benefit from Javitz’s work.

Some might take issue with the North American focus of *The Ghost Reader*, but in many ways it anticipates the current shift to attention in attention to postcolonial frameworks, particularly by including Shirley Graham and her vision for the possibilities of Ghanaian television and its role in a newly independent state. There is also much here to strengthen the teaching of reception theory, particularly in selections oriented around “audience research.”

What is particularly impressive about the women represented here is their expertise and impressive ethos as researchers in a time that often devalued their contributions to the scholarly literature around media studies. I often teach a course called “Media Seductions” that examines the long history of moral panics about new media phenomena and how new forms of knowledge

arise to explain, rationalize, and suggest expedient solutions to the perceived ill effects of new media. For example, in the 20th and 21st century sections of the course, we look at experiments by social psychologists and neuroscientists and their use by parents and regulators concerned about the ill effects of new media on the young. *The Ghost Reader* offers a completely different cast of experts, and I look forward to integrating it into the next iteration of “Media Seductions.”