
BROWN, BILL. *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. Pp. 335. Notes, illustrations, index. \$25.95 pb., \$45.00 cb.

It is clear that the title of Bill Brown's book is meant to recall Frederic Jameson's influential study, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). In the introduction, Brown acknowledges his debt to Jameson and to the tradition of ideological criticism that rechanneled literary scholarship in the 1980s and helped pave the way to cultural studies. Make no mistake: *The Material Unconscious* is cultural studies practiced in the high tradition. Brown's "commitment to textual analysis" (p. 250) and his constant referral to cultural and literary theory-of all flavors, but with special status granted to Walter Benjamin, Sigfried Kracauer, and assorted poststructural critics-require a dedication in kind from the reader, or at least a willingness to breathe life into opaque critical vocabulary. Terms like "ludic," "catachretical," "diegetically," and "allotemporal" sent me to the dictionary, sometimes without success.

Yet Brown's analysis of "the *material* unconscious" differs significantly from Jameson's and other text-based studies of culture in that "it indulges in the prestructuralist fantasy of language's material reference" (p. 15). While for many historians this fantasy is a working reality, for Brown-a member of the English Department at the University of Chicago-this liberation from critical orthodoxy involves turning up "fragments" (p. 15) of material reality in the writings of Stephen Crane; examining them in the light of parallel texts and secondary historical accounts; dropping them back into the original source; and pondering anew the cultural significance of the literary text, the artifact, and the relation between the two. By material referent, Brown means many things: roller coasters, photography, freak shows, football games, toys-all objects or concrete processes whose increased presence in the 1890s exemplified both the commodification of American amusements and the development of public recreational space along racial and class lines. Brown dwells less on the social groupings that have preoccupied historians of mass culture than on the physiological, psychological, and perceptual shifts that, in the wake of new technologies of sight and feeling, helped constitute these social divisions in modern America. Writing, for instance, of the natural disasters staged at Coney Island, Brown explains that these spectacles, "like the new amusement rides, could produce visceral reaction dislodged from moral[izing] teleology" (p. 117), marking "the degree to which, within an increasingly rationalized urban society, sensory life can be experienced

only vicariously” (p. 119). Although Brown insists throughout that play is inseparable from the ideological strafing of the workaday world, readers looking for a clear delineation of power relations may be frustrated by his abstract portrayal of individual agency and class affiliation.

In Stephen Crane, however, Brown finds a prolific and iconoclastic portraitist of leisure activities, as well as a stable point of reference for exploring the relation between mass culture and modern consciousness. More than an excavation of marginal (or repressed) historical phenomena from the literary record, Browns tightly focused discussions of Crane’s fiction and journalistic writings also analyze the “dream work of cultural production” (p. 248)—thus suggesting how Americans subjectively engaged the developing economies of play. This approach yields complicated but important results. Underscoring not the determinative power of cultural processes, but rather the “radical contingency of history” (p. 102), Crane’s references to gambling or children’s toys position him alternatively as a critic of oppressive social structures (moral authority, gender roles, race relations), a consumer of pleasures (Crane thrilled to the romance of sport and war), a pioneering literary stylist (moving toward modernism), and an interpreter (wittingly or not) alive to the possibilities of cultural change inherent in play. As Brown shows, no single reference ever signified just one thing. So while Brown begins the book and his chapter on *The Red Badge of Courage* by noting that Crane’s football-playing experiences informed his representation of the Civil War, he goes on to demonstrate how this use of football is linked to spectatorship, war photography, cinema, masculine embodiment, and journalist celebrities. By the end of the chapter, after constellating contemporaneous visual forms, Brown argues that, although the novel illustrates “how machine culture manifests itself first in the destructiveness of warfare,” it also shows “how that destruction is reprocessed as an object of sight” (p. 155). In thus depicting war as an object of entertainment, Crane used the language and processes of leisure culture to condemn military aggression.

The Material Unconscious is a quirky, always challenging, and sometimes brilliant exposition of the imaginative dimensions of play in the 1890s. As intensively researched as it is theorized, the book provides an important interdisciplinary view of America’s emerging modernity.

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