

Understanding and Reading Media

Reading “texts” well may sound like an academic concern, but it’s not. People do care about the kinds of materials adults and children alike are encountering these days and what they may be learning from them—if anything. Major magazines and newspapers routinely run articles lamenting the hours young people are wasting, for example, playing video games, communicating on social networks, and watching reality TV. But, as always, the bigger picture may be more complex and, perhaps, even encouraging.

In this brief cluster, we offer three readings about our cultural engagement with media of various kinds. In the first piece, a former English teacher worries that books are no longer getting the kind of attention they deserve even in libraries where they’ve been displaced by a focus on information technologies and popular entertainment. But contemporary texts may have much to offer. That’s the argument made in the other two articles, one by a distinguished film critic contemplating the charms of the blockbuster summer movie and the other by a media critic who argues that watching *The Sopranos* makes people smarter. All three authors and their texts deserve your close attention as well as your creative responses.

A L
Boo

Thoma
(2007)

FY

I’m a lil
school.

sizes are s
to their cc

Yet from
something
gathering

When I

used to t
were mos

as I mov

science I

books we

Informati

base net

tools clair

the curric

literacy to

how Engl

librarian r

by how we

informati

Typically

have the ti

informatio

nologists.

literacy,” a

mastering

reading and

quality of r

dents how

successful

scramble is

A Librarian's Lament: Books Are a Hard Sell

Thomas Washington

(2007)

FYI

Thomas Washington is a librarian at a private school in the Washington DC area. His opinion piece originally appeared on WashingtonPost.com on January 21, 2007.

I'm a librarian in an independent Washington area school. We're doing all the right things. Our class sizes are small. Most graduating seniors gain admission to their college of choice. The facilities are first-rate.

Yet from my vantage point at the reference desk, something is amiss. The books in the library stacks are gathering dust.

When I started in this profession five years ago—I used to teach English—I presumed that librarians were mostly united in their attraction to books. But as I moved along in my library science program, I found that books weren't really our focus. Information management, database networking and research tools claimed the largest share of the curriculum. In other words, literacy today is defined less by how English departments or a librarian might teach Wordsworth or Faulkner than by how we find our way through the digital forest of information overload.

Typically, many people in my line of work no longer have the title of librarian. They are called media and information specialists, or sometimes librarian technologists. The buzzword in the trade is "information literacy," a misnomer, because what it is really about is mastering computer skills, not promoting a love of reading and books. These days, librarians measure the quality of returns in data-mining stints. We teach students how to maximize a database search, about successful retrieval rates. What usually gets lost in the scramble is a careful reading of the material.

**These days, librarianship
is all about making
the sale.**

Students are still checking out the standard research fare—the Thomas Jefferson biography, the volume of literary criticism on Jane Austen—but few read it. The library checks the books back in a day later, after the students have extracted the information vitals—usually an excerpt or two to satisfy the requirement that a certain number of works be cited in their papers.

Conventional wisdom has it that teenagers don't read because they're too busy. Only after high school, sometime midway through college, do young adults reconnect with their childhood love of reading and make books their partners for life. I don't think so anymore. The 2004 *Reading at Risk* report by the National Endowment for the Arts concluded that literary reading was in serious decline on all fronts, especially among the youngest adults, ages 18 to 24, whose rate of decrease was 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population.

To counter this trend we set up a "new arrivals" display shelf this school year. It's stocked with best-sellers, young-adult fiction and DVDs. We also maintain a top-shelf lineup of books that we hope will entice young minds and bring them back to the reading table. We position the books on tiny stands and place notecard teasers underneath, much as Borders bookstores promote the managers' top choices.

No, I'm not foolish enough to think that the books are going to move off the shelves like jeans at Abercrombie, but any school librarian who hasn't figured out some way to market his goods probably needs to find another line of work.

These days, librarianship is all about making the sale. Public libraries have caught on: In Fairfax County, *The Washington Post* recently reported, they're tossing out volumes that have gone unchecked for two years in favor of books that can "generate the biggest buzz."

Recent front-runners in my school library include "The Boy Who Fell Out of the Sky," Ken Dornstein's memoir about his brother's death

aboard Pan Am Flight 103; "The Overachievers," on how our culture of high-stakes education has spiraled out of control; and "Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews." While I wait for nibbles on these and other books, my colleague and I paste eye-catching posters on the walls. These aren't literary quotes, either. Today the American Library Association's posters have employed Denzel Washington to encourage kids to read. But how many of these students really buy the message?

I recently spoke with a junior who was stressed about her decreasing ability to focus on anything for longer than two minutes or so. I tried to inspire her by talking about the importance of reading as a way to train the brain. I told her that a good reader develops the same powers of concentration that an athlete or a Buddhist would employ in sport or meditation. "A lot out there is conspiring to distract you," I said.

**To her, the idea
that reading might
benefit the mind was,
well, lame.**

She rolled her eyes. "That's your opinion about books. It doesn't make it true." To her, the idea that reading might benefit the mind was, well, lame.

A library's neglected shelves reveal the demise of something important, especially for young readers starved for meaning—for anything profound. Still, I'm not ready to throw in the towel just yet. I'm turning the new-arrivals shelf into a main attraction in my school's library. Recently I stood Charles Dickens's "Bleak House" next to the DVD version produced by the BBC. Lady Dedlock (Gillian Anderson) graced both covers. A senior fingered the DVD for a minute, then turned it over to read the blurb. "The book is too long," she said. "Is the movie any better?"

"You're right. The book is long," I said. "But once you start this one, you won't be able to put it down, right from that first page about the London fog."

"I think I'll watch the DVD," the student said.

And in my library ledger, I'll register this as a sale.

CONSIDER

- 1 Does Washington describe your own recent experience with libraries and research? Do you in fact spend more time with databases and Web sites than actual books? Do you read books mainly to extract information and, if so, is that really a problem? How regularly do you read a book, cover to cover?
- 2 Is it a sign of cultural decline that librarians recommending books have to think about "making the sale"? Or does it make sense that books have to compete in the same marketplace of texts as other forms of media? What, if anything, marks books as special?
- 3 Many critics of visual or electronic media focus on the fact that such texts don't put sustained intellectual demands on readers: instead, they cater to (or perhaps foster) short attention spans and superficial opinions. Is this a legitimate criticism or a misreading of the way people use media? Provide specific evidence for any response you offer.

CHALLENGE

- 4 Online, look for a copy of "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America." (Search the phrase "NEA report: reading at risk.") Review the document and write an essay responding to it in the same personal style that Thomas Washington employs in "A Librarian's Lament." Draw freely on your personal experiences.

Defe
and

Manoh
(2007)

Summe
and de
has it. It is
intermina
nation's t
sugar-jon
the cinem
recycled l
mass dist
the block

Blockb
carries w
cultural j
tags and
Critics, i
buster as
producti
words an
engage t
tive spin
death of
corporat
uct plac
here yo
Maguire

But ju
mean it
like the
places y
things
worlds,
your b
laughte
up and
Matrix'
enrapt

Source: M
May 6, 20
Laws of t
written p

Defending Goliath: Hollywood and the Art of the Blockbuster

Manohla Dargis

(2007)

Summertime and the viewing is lousy and noisy and deedle-dee dumb, or so the received wisdom has it. It is our season of stupidity, summertime, that interminable stretch when adults surrender the nation's theaters to hordes of popcorn-chugging, sugar-jonesing, under-age nose-pickers for whom the cinematic experience means nothing more than recycled big, bigger, biggest bangs. It is the season of mass distraction, of the tent pole, the event movie, the blockbuster.

Blockbuster is really just descriptive, but it often carries with it a down-market whiff, as do many pop-cultural products that come with eye-catching price tags and seem precision-tooled for young audiences. Critics, including, yes, yours truly, often use blockbuster as easy (too easy) shorthand for overinflated productions that rely more on special effects than words and characters, and that distract rather than engage the audience. At its most reductive the negative spin on blockbusters is that they signal the death of cinema art and mark the triumph of the corporate bottom line, of marketing strategies, product placements and opening-weekend returns. And here you thought you were just watching Tobey Maguire run around in a unitard.

But just because a movie blows stuff up doesn't mean it automatically stinks. A good blockbuster, like the recent Bond flick "Casino Royale," takes you places you might never otherwise go and shows you things you could never do. It brings you into new worlds, offers you new attractions. It takes hold of your body, making you quiver with anxiety, joy, laughter, relief. When great blockbusters sweep you up and away—I'm thinking about watching "The Matrix" for the first time with a few hundred other enraptured souls—they usher you into a realm of

FYI

Manohla Dargis is a film critic for the *New York Times*. She has previously written for the *The Village Voice* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Her essay on the summer blockbuster film appeared in the *New York Times* on May 6, 2007. A writing course she took while pursuing a Masters in Cinema Studies at NYU led to her career as a film critic.

communal pleasure. In a culture of entertainment niches, they remind you of what going to the movies can still be like.

They also remind you that without the human factor a blockbuster is nothing but a big empty box. Blockbusters that endure strike a balance between the spectacular and the ineffably human, whether it's Peter O'Toole framed against the never-ending desert in "Lawrence of Arabia" or Keanu Reeves coming down to earth in "The Matrix" as he realizes that he knows kung fu. It's the epic story of America refracted through one family in the "Godfather" films. It's a mechanical shark and Robert Shaw remembering the U.S.S. Indianapolis in "Jaws." It's Tom Cruise hanging by a thread in "Mission: Impossible" and Christian Bale standing amid a cloud of bats in "Batman Begins." It's Leonardo DiCaprio's wild eyes in "Titanic" and Kirsten Dunst's sad ones in "Spider-Man."

Blockbuster usually describes products sold in enormous quantities, like movies, but also theater productions, museum shows, hit songs, books and even pharmaceuticals. The word probably originated with the powerful bombs that the British Royal Air Force used to decimate German cities during World War II, the so-called blockbusters. It soon entered the vernacular, appearing in advertisements before the end of the war, and as a clue in a 1950 crossword

Source: Manohla Dargis, "Defending Goliath: Hollywood and the Art of the Blockbuster." From *The New York Times*, May 6, 2007. © 2007 The New York Times. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the material without express written permission is prohibited.

puzzle in this newspaper (46 across). In the early 1950s the heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano was known as the Brockton Blockbuster, after the city where he was born, and the word blockbuster routinely appeared in articles about the Hollywood vogue for super-size entertainments.

These days highbrows dismiss movie blockbusters because they are often based in fantasy rather than reality, which is generally a bad thing unless the fantasy comes with a literary pedigree like "The Lord of the Rings." Blockbusters tend to be made for adolescents instead of adults, which is also a bad thing because youngsters are untrustworthy cultural consumers. (One exception: blockbusters based on children's books that also appeal to adults, like the Harry Potter cycle.) Blockbusters based on comics are invariably questionable unless they are called graphic novels and then not always. Blockbusters that open on thousands of screens are also considered dubious because anything that appeals to a wide audience is inherently suspect. I'm joking, but not really.

Blockbusters based on comics are invariably questionable unless they are called graphic novels and then not always.

In recent years it has become axiomatic that the 1970s special-effects-laden blockbusters "Jaws" and "Star Wars" helped bring an end to New Hollywood's flirtation with creative freedom (think of "Nashville"), ushering in the era of juvenile diversions like "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Never mind that "Jaws" is a good movie, far better at least for some than "Nashville." As Martin Scorsese says in "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls," Peter Biskind's history of 1970s American cinema: "'Star Wars' was in. Spielberg was in. We were finished." Well, not exactly, as suggested by the little gold statue presented to Mr. Scorsese in February by Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola, whose 1972 blockbuster, "The Godfather," also happens to be a masterpiece.

The movie industry has been in the business of big—big stars, big stories, big productions, big screens and big returns—about as long as it's been a business. And as long as the movies have told stories, they have used spectacle to sell those stories. In the silent era motion-picture producers employed spectacle to help distinguish the new medium from that of the theater, creating what were essentially protoblockbusters. In the 1950s the faltering movie industry went into the business of the supercolossus, delivering epic-size stories on ever-widening big screens in part to distinguish itself from that small-screen menace called television. Much has changed about the movies in the decades since, but not so the uses of pyrotechnics, sweeping landscapes and all manner of cinematic awesomeness.

Nowadays the armies of sword-brandishing soldiers may be largely computer generated, as in "300," but film spectacle works more or less the same now as it did in 1912 when the Italian epic "Quo Vadis?" hit screens with a cast of literally thousands

and extreme action in the form of a chariot race. That film's pageantry, its gladiators and sacrificed Christians earned an enthusiastic thumb's up from the sculptor Auguste Rodin, who declared it "a masterpiece." (Everyone really is a critic.) The Italians were among the first in the

film-spectacle business, but the Americans soon jumped in with costly productions like D. W. Griffith's benighted masterpiece, "The Birth of a Nation," which dramatically advanced the art.

Spectacle didn't just enthrall audiences; it was instrumental to the very development of feature filmmaking, as directors learned how to make longer-running entertainments. Not that spectacle and narrative always mesh, then or now. In 1923 an anonymous critic for *The New York Times* wrote that Cecil B. DeMille's "Ten Commandments" was divided into two sections, "the spectacle and the melodrama," that might as well have been directed by two different men. The critic's admiration for the spectacle ("done with meticulous precision") tempered the larger criticism. ("It would have

needed an stand up in Jerry Bruck why he can reviewers.

Yet if audi with suspi buster sugg partly due to privilege we screenplays, amalgamatic them. But t and familia "Top Gun" evidence th: deadly virus a shell of a

CONSIDER

- 1 How does by it or ex
- 2 How well mers that
- 3 Dargis pr buster ex
- 4 What cult ating the
- 5 Dargis in one side through identify?

COMPOSE

- 6 Can you liked by t buster m

needed an unusually perfect modern drama to stand up in comparison.") Somewhere the producer Jerry Bruckheimer is shaking his head, wondering why he can't catch a similar break with today's reviewers.

Yet if audiences dig spectacle, critics often view it with suspicion, as sneers about the modern blockbuster suggest. The negative rap on blockbusters is partly due to the literary bent of a lot of critics, who privilege words over images and tend to review screenplays, or what's left of them, rather than the amalgamation of sights and sounds in front of them. But the sneers also suggest an underlying and familiar contamination anxiety. In the 1980s "Top Gun" wasn't just a glib *divertissement*; it was evidence that MTV had infected the movies like a deadly virus. In the same grim light "300" isn't just a shell of a movie; it's proof that the movies have

been infiltrated by an outside force, namely video games.

The threats have changed over the years—from television to music videos, comic books, digital technologies and so on—yet what has remained constant is the idea that the movies are under siege. But if the movies have taught us anything it is that they are brilliant adapters. They mutate and shift, stretch and adjust, and they neutralize those threats the way an organism absorbs nutrients, by assimilating them. We call some of these movie mutations comic-book flicks and compare still others to music videos, sometimes with a sigh, sometimes with a smile. We complain about car chases and forget that D. W. Griffith was among the first to put pedal to the metal on screen. And we condemn blockbusters for, if we're lucky, doing the very thing we say we want from the movies: giving us a reason to watch.

CONSIDER

- 1 How does the first paragraph of Dargis's essay get your attention? Do you find yourself in any way offended by it or excluded from her intended audience?
- 2 How well does Dargis define the blockbuster film? Could you list a dozen films from the past several summers that fit into this category?
- 3 Dargis presents herself as a serious critic. Are you surprised when her argument turns to defend the blockbuster experience? What kinds of evidence does she offer to defend big summer movies?
- 4 What cultural contexts does Dargis explain for first understanding the term *blockbuster* and then for appreciating the history of the genre? Is the information new or surprising to you? Is it relevant to her claim?
- 5 Dargis in part structures her argument by imagining a cultural divide, with serious or elite critics of films on one side and ordinary viewers who like big movies on the other. Examine the way she uses this device throughout the essay. Does she stack the deck in favor of one side or the other? With which group do you identify?

COMPOSE

- 6 Can you identify another type of text that, like the action or superhero film, is typically unappreciated or disliked by the cultural elites—perhaps a genre you enjoy yourself? Write in its defense, as Dargis does for blockbuster movies. Take the time to research your subject.