

Posudek vedoucí na bakalářskou práci Kateřiny Hendrychové

“Fascinating Spectacles: Class as Traditional Obsession in Britain”

Studying television, in its mainstream or popular forms, is tantamount to a populist move for the traditional humanities. Yet, it became a key subject of analysis for British cultural studies since the 1980s. The specific focus of the submitted BA thesis is the analysis of popular modes of television-viewing in British media and their representation of class, utilizing as a case study the recent TV series *Downton Abbey*. I appreciate the enthusiasm and eagerness with which the topic has been approached. From the first, Ms Hendrychová has progressed in her study tremendously, researching independently, consulting and developing constantly new ideas. I value that she has reached out for an ambitious project. Class is a notoriously difficult concept to grasp, especially in the British context – a category not only economic, but mainly cultural and discursively constructed. Nevertheless, here perhaps lies the key problem of the thesis: the attempt to tackle a very large range of issues (from representation, class as category and image, attitudes to popular culture, audience response, national stereotypes, the heritage industry, and many more). As a consequence, many assumptions had to be tacitly made without question, many decisions taken without thorough contextualization. These comments pertain mainly to the introductory parts of the thesis. One could easily dismiss assumptions such as “the real spirit of a given time period ... is best represented through art” (page 8) as not fully capturing the complexity of media representation of “reality”; or that “TV best reflects the audience’s interests” and that “popular culture ... comes from below” rather than being “imposed from above” (page 8) as dismissing whole long decades of extensive debates between various models of media-audience relationships. Perhaps a more rigorous application of terms like ideology, audience, representation, encoding/decoding, resistant reading and the notion of pleasure could have anchored the thesis in more academic methodology. Or, at least, more contextualization of the “positive approach”.

I have some more specific questions:

1. Is there (not) a contradiction between the conclusion about class divisions on page 16 and the final sentence of the thesis (page 52; also repeated as a section of the abstract)?
2. What exactly are those “meanings that are relevant to the everyday lives of subordinate peoples”, which culture must offer us if it is to “be made popular” (page 21)? Surely, these cannot be restricted only (or, predominantly) to romance (as the thesis seems to imply) as the secret ingredient which we can relate to? Of what kind are those “other features”?
3. Related to this is the following comment. In the conclusion Ms Hendrychová aptly says that *Downton Abbey* “is well aware of our obsessions and it is not afraid to mock them in a way typical for [the] postmodern age” by developing “a critique of the cliché plot lines and patterns typical for such series” (page 52). It is a pity we do not get more on this subject of mockery.

4. To the issue of audience response: Viewing statistics indicate the great popularity of the series. Several questions could be asked in relation to this – what are the numbers in the Czech Republic? The audience response to this series (just as it was not, by the way, to the previous record breaker, *Brideshead Revisited*) was by no means so enthusiastic (it was, if I remember correctly, not even televised on prime time). I wonder what the reasons for this could be. What is the distribution of gender (was it more popular with women? – women tend to watch TV with less concentration, occupying themselves with other tasks, therefore the formulas and repetitions of soap opera; men tend to favour “serious” watching, e.g. documentaries).

To conclude, I find the thesis a sincere attempt to tackle contemporary social and cultural issues. I believe that greater acquaintance with cultural theory would have produced a rigorous and serious critical study. As it is, the thesis is a very readable essay on the mystery of the allure of sparkle, the “classiness” of class and the pleasures we find in the safety of romantic resolutions. To borrow a quotation from the thesis, just like Matthew Crawley, the thesis itself is placed in the dilemma of “disapproving of the flagrant exploitation of” class spectacle and yet “utterly seduced by it” (page 41).

The structure, language, style and list of bibliography are appropriate. The thesis adequately fulfills the requirements. Therefore, I recommend the thesis for defense with the preliminary mark of very good (**velmi dobře**).

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