



UCLA'S JOURNAL OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

MEDIASCAPE

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1. Should cinema and media scholars remain "independent" of politics, or are there circumstances or moments in history when the role of scholars and scholarship should become one of advocacy, or conversely, become more circumspect?

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Nichols: Can academic freedom survive if scholars with expertise in an area fail to exercise it? Politics are inseparable from media; form never exists in a social vacuum. Linking the two may be more or less vital but it is never irrelevant.

Miller: Simply by virtue of teaching and writing inside the university, scholars are making political-economic decisions about who has access to their work; the function of their activities in the society; and the selection of topics for consideration in an enterprise that is political both in its own procedures (the organization of labor in television, for instance) and in its intertexts (the impact of a Social Darwinism blended with consumerism that interpellates the subjects of reality television makeovers as ethically incomplete, for example). So deciding not to 'be political' is an act of ignorance, not refusal.

Field: Whether overtly expressed or not, scholars are always working within a particular cultural and political context. Depending on their specialty, they are also concurrently working with a degree of expertise in another era, medium, culture or area of specialty that informs their perspective on contemporary events just as contemporary events inform their scholarship. Rather than struggle to remain "independent" of politics, scholars should aim to be critically aware of their own perspectives and how they inform their work. In my opinion, it is incumbent on scholars to call out injustices in the world as they see them and, ensuingly, bring their own expertise to the ultimate goal of their eradication. As media scholars, perhaps the most powerful contribution we can make is to bring attention to the way meaning is constructed, disseminated, and how it functions in society. Training students to be savvy media consumers is one of our primary responsibilities.

Tryon: Cinema and media scholars should remain engaged in politics, especially when their specific areas of expertise can help to illuminate or clarify a specific debate. This involvement may not entail direct involvement in partisan politics; however, scholars can help to clarify the effects of specific policies that are being proposed by the two major political parties. As the 2008 presidential election approaches, we find ourselves facing a crucial election in which the major economic, environmental, and foreign policy positions of the two major candidates are starkly different. Unemployment is currently over six percent. Hundreds of thousands of homeowners have defaulted on their mortgages, while many of the nation's largest banks and lenders are on the verge of collapse. Over 40 million U.S. citizens currently do not have health care. The oil companies relentlessly lobby for offshore drilling despite the environmental risks and the dubious effects on oil prices. And yet the cable news networks that serve as primary sources of information for voters continue to focus on trivial concerns, reinforcing cynicism not only about the public service role of television outlets but also about the political system itself.

Film and media scholars, in particular, are well positioned to bring their specific areas of expertise into the public arena in order to engage with the mediation of politics on cable TV, in newspapers, in the blogosphere, and on YouTube. Scholars informed by a political economy approach have, for example, introduced questions about the effect that the consolidation of media ownership has had on limiting political diversity, especially on television

and talk radio. In fact, Robert McChesney and Eric Alterman, among many others, have been leaders in the media reform movement, with the result that consumers and citizens are far more likely to think critically about the role of journalism in the public sphere.¹ Others of us, skilled in textual analysis are well-prepared to engage with the argumentative techniques used in political speeches, debates, and advertisements. In all cases, scholars can historicize and contextualize contemporary political practices.

I would add that, as web publications have finally gained in credibility, scholars have new avenues for reaching wider audiences, which in turn has allowed for a reconsideration of the role of academics in the public sphere. Publications such as [Flow TV](#) and Mediascape, as well as the countless academic blogs that are out there, provide new avenues for timely, thoughtful contributions to political discourse. Finally, media scholars, like all academics who participate in a wider public sphere, must approach this participation with some degree of self-reflection. As Timothy Burke reminds us, professors "have to be vastly clearer and more restrained in describing where and how that expertise is generative or productive, and far more aware of the ways in which popular skepticism about expertise is warranted."²

Notes:

1 Alterman, Eric. [What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News](#). New York: Basic, 2003; and Nichols, John and Robert McChesney. [Tragedy and Farce: How the American Media Sell Wars, Spin Elections, and Destroy Democracy](#). New York: The New Press, 2005.

2 Burke, Timothy. "The Bérubéan Moment." [Easily Distracted](#) 9 November 2006. <http://weblogs.swarthmore.edu/burke/?p=295>.

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