Readers' Forum Introduction: Popular Culture and the Culture of Research Funding

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This reader's forum got its start because of an article written by Robert Fulford for the *National Post* on 13 October 2007 about SSHRC (The Social Science and Humanities Research Council) and the work of Dr Jes Battis. The article, "Lex Luthor Hearts Superman: Your Tax Dollars at Work," takes SSHRC to task for not revealing much about its research proposals, then moves on to mock Dr Battis for doing research on popular culture and queer issues, and ends by criticizing Dr Battis's success at earning grants. Fulford even supplies the fact that Dr Battis wrote about soy milk and corn muffins on his blog as some kind of evidence that he is not a good scholar.

It is easy to be annoyed by Fulford's predictable attack on SSHRC (what a waste of tax dollars!) and to be disturbed by his extended attack on Jes Battis as a person and as a scholar (cornbread! muffins! piercings! queer stuff!). It's more puzzling to see him get upset about research on popular culture—and in its parent discipline, cultural studies—if only because one of his recent books, *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture* (1999) discusses popular culture at length, including the films of D. W. Griffiths, the culture of gossip, and Jack Nicholson, among other topics. Clearly, it's not the objects of popular culture which have

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attracted Fulford's ire since he writes about these himself, but popular culture research influenced by the politics of cultural studies, which aims to critique the conservative values Fulford holds dear.

Fulford chooses to cloak that discussion of politics in contempt for the subject matter, and that's where things get really interesting. Fulford's strategy of expressing contempt for serious studies of popular culture on the one hand while writing about popular culture seriously on the other isn't so different from the position of popular culture in the humanities and social sciences today. Doing research and teaching on popular culture is seen in some academic quarters as a guilty pleasure, but it is not a pleasure which creates real research or substantial teaching, or which—until the recent creation of the cultural studies category for SSHRC Standard Research Grants—deserves funding. Fulford's hiding of ideology behind a contempt for everyday objects that he finds banal when he's not talking about them finds an uneasy parallel in the world of research and teaching, where emergence of popular culture as a field within cultural studies is accompanied by worries about its possible banality, its threat to "serious" fields, even the fact that popular culture is, well, popular with students and the general public too. And anything popular can't be all that educational, can it?

It isn't only Fulford who gets exercised at the thought of articles about Buffy the Vampire Slayer. The general response to the Oprah Winfrey Show and Oprah's Book Club in the popular press is equally dismissive and hostile about Oprah Winfrey's choice of books (even when they are classically literary) and about the way readers in Oprah's Book Club choose to read and interpret. Recent scholarship on Oprah's Book Club is creating a more complex idea of what it is to be a participant on the show and what the selections themselves can mean. Earlier scholarship, however, was dismissive of Oprah because Oprah was seen to be promoting a form of critical reading, a job which is usually assigned to academic professionals, even though she is a media celebrity. Those who have taught selections from Oprah's Book Club, as I have, know that these attitudes of cultural superiority and dismissiveness also appear in the attitudes students have to reading what they call, with some contempt, "an Oprah book." When my students report with surprise that they actually liked an Oprah selection, it is still possible to detect a divide (in their minds) between popular culture and what is perceived to be culture worthy of study, even in the classroom. And hidden within this attitude, in the academy itself, is the assumption that (in the case of Oprah) if women read without the "help" of the professoriate, then their reading isn't good reading. Or, if we look at

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the politics of Fulford's position, cultural productions by and about queer youth aren't worth taking seriously either, especially when they make use of "popular" cultural forms like those on television or on the Internet.

Fulford's attack did provoke outrage in the academic community. Battis's work was defended by Chad Gaffield of SSHRC and Noreen Golfman of the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation, among others, in the press. Battis himself wrote a witty letter back to Fulford, which *The* National Post published. But the issues which Fulford raised should give scholars in the humanities and social sciences pause, beyond the temporary media storm that the original attack created. How good is SSHRC at making the work of researchers accessible to the Canadian public, and what should it do better? What kinds of research is SSHRC funding? Why is the study of popular culture still seen as threatening, and what exactly does it threaten, inside the academy and outside it? Does SSHRC invite interdisciplinarity of the sort which is a hallmark of cultural studies, and what sort of interdisciplinarity does it in fact allow, and fund? Does it even make sense to have "interdisciplinary" as a category of knowledge at SSHRC, and what does it mean to have this? How is distaste for popular culture used as a way not to talk about political issues connected to gender or sexuality in the public realm?

At *ESC*, we believe that the readers of this journal, whether they are doing research and teaching in the area of popular culture or not, are very interested in these questions, which are at the heart of what it means to do funded research in the humanities and social sciences today. And so, this Readers' Forum sets out to address issues—provoked by Fulford's article—about what counts as knowledge in the public sphere and in the academy, and what should count.

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