Appreciation: Richard Ohmann's Voice

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There are many things to be praised in *Selling Culture*. It's an extraordinary book. From its remarkable opening act of imagination that introduces us to the fully realized world of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson who live on Cleveland's 107th Street, through its exhaustive research into the production and consumption of mass market magazines at the turn-of-the-century, to the magisterial sweep of its historical argument about culture and the professional managerial class, this book is a marvel. It is also a major contribution to the history and poetics of what the author himself calls "entertainment." Although it would be possible to comment at length on any one of these particular aspects of the book and to make a case for the innovative nature of their presentation, what I want to call attention to today is to something else—to something I have taken to calling "The Voice of Richard Ohmann."

What I refer to here is not the book's simple, straightforward rendering of Dick's own modest and matter-of-fact person. Those of us who are lucky enough to know Dick, even if only a little, recognize in *Selling Culture* the marks of his intellectual generosity, his relentless curiosity, and his willingness to take on the most embedded and unquestioned of institutional shibboleths. To treat the rhetorical voice of *Selling Culture* in this way as the transparent rendering of Dick's own very special self might confirm some of our more common-sense notions about the relationship between books and the people who write them. In this case, it would tell us only what we already know—this is the unusual book of an unusual man.

But I want to insist on the now equally familiar theoretical points that authorship itself is a social construction and that voice is produced rhetorically through a set of language practices and conventions. I want to look carefully at how the voice of *Selling Culture* is constructed and at how the book envisions and addresses its reader. I want to do this because I think such an approach will show how the rhetorical achievement that is the voice of Richard Ohmann opens up a new and much-needed nar-

rative space from which to view the labor and products as well as the consumers of the culture industries. It has created an angle of vision, a perspective, that can be used to great effect in the future because its practices are material and, as such, duplicable and capable of being modified and extended. At the same time, and perhaps most significantly, this voice has, by implication, identified some of the heretofore buried problems and blindnesses in some of the most familiar approaches to the topics of mass culture and popular entertainment. In effect, it is through his innovative mode of address that Richard Ohmann gently but powerfully chides the familiar academic voice within which so much of the critical analysis of the culture industries is articulated. At the same time, that mode of address provides a critique of the ideological understanding of the critic's social and cultural position which too often underwrites that critical analysis.

I'd like to begin, as I often ask my students to, with the opening pages of *Selling Culture*. I'll quote at some length here just to underscore how we are placed as we commence the business of reading this book:

> It is easy to imagine, and one will have to, because the Johnsons left no record of it.
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> When the morning mail arrives, on a muggy autumn day in 1895, Mrs Johnson is alone in the house on Cleveland's East 107th Street, at work on a new dress. Welcoming the diversion, she comes down from the sewing room and settles for a moment on the porch, where a slight breeze moves the unseasonably warm air. She reads a letter from her sister in Forth Wayne, glances at a couple of bills and puts them aside, and picks up the October issue of *Munsey's Magazine*. The cover engraving (in shades of red) shows an elegant woman in a top hat, side-saddle on a spirited horse, riding down a rural lane. The woman is at ease, riding crop and reins held loosely in her white-gloved hands. She ignores the horse and the road, gazing out into the landscape and showing us her aristocratic profile. Mrs Johnson has not been on a horse since she came with her family from Wellington, Ohio to Cleveland as a girl, and those were farm horses; still, she feels a subterranean kinship with the rider—the freedom; the style. (1)

These two brief paragraphs accomplish a lot and I can't delineate all of it here. Still, I want to point to several things. First, to that "one" in the initial sentence. Again, it reads this way: "It is easy to imagine, and one will have to, because the Johnsons left no record of it." It might not be immediately clear what that simple pronoun, "one" achieves. To get a sense of this, though, imagine the sentence written differently. "It is easy to imagine, and I will have to, because the Johnsons left no record of it." Had the pronoun "I" been used

here we would be placed on familiar terrain as passive witnesses to the expert authority of the controlling, analytical author. The "I" would call attention to itself and assert its own mastery over a situation that it not only surveys but actually creates. On the other hand, had the pronoun"we" been used instead, that very same author would have interpellated us without consideration to his position and simply assumed our assent to his practices and argument. "Richard Ohmann" does neither of these things. Rather, he associates himself with an anonymous, undelineated subject, a generalized subject who *might* envision the scene that follows because he or she shares certain knowledges and understandings with the narrator of this scene.

And what sort of knowledges are readers invited to recognize that they share with the author-narrator? Well, that the world they inhabit together is a phenomenological one, which is to say, one where the weather can make them feel hot, where the bills pile up and cause them consternation, where they, too, might hear from family and friends with all sorts of results, and where cultural products like magazines create moods, give them pleasure, invite identification, call up envy, and confirm their sense of themselves. The reader is decidely *not* placed in a world where it is only the consumer of mass culture, and definitely not the author, who feels the tug of emotion, is captured by the promises of sentiment, or enjoys the comfort of a well-furnished world. In fact, the reader is addressed by someone who seems to have experienced the compelling demands and responsibilities of everyday life as well as its rich pleasures—by someone who doesn't take either of them lightly.

The authorial voice constructed here is not the distanced, disembodied voice of so much academic criticism of mass culture (even some of that found under the rubric of cultural studies) where the disdainfully described sentimental banality and complacent self-satisfaction of magazine readers, MTV viewers, or mall crawlers is used to highlight by implication, the rigorous, dispassionate, highly intellectualized critique of the individual who analyzes rather than consumes popular art forms and who knows what is really important. The reader is addressed by an author who seems to understand the pleasures of magazine reading in part because he himself reads a whole raft that confirm his sense of himself as someone who is politically engaged. By evoking the activities and objects in his own world that are analagous to those enjoyed by the readers of *Munsey's*, the author "Richard Ohmann" deliberately does not place himself outside the world inhabited by those whose decisions, development, and predicament he wants to understand. He suggests subtly at first, and then more explicitly as his account develops, that he inhabits a world that is historically continuous with that occupied by mass market magazine readers and the professional culture producers who addressed them. More to the point, I think, he suggests that he is deeply implicated in the story he has to tell. He is one who, to a certain extent, understands it from within.

If the reader has missed the rhetorical effect of these first early devices—devices which are drawn from the repertoire of realist fiction—Richard Ohmann underscores his own situatedness and connection to the very world he is analysing somewhat later in this first chapter, which he appropriately entitles, "The Experience." In so doing, he also reveals more fully the kind of relationship he wants to take up both to his readers and to the historical subjects of his study, the producers and consumers of *Munsey's Magazine*. After evocatively detailing the full range of the social world within which *Munsey's* would have been read, and adumbrating quickly just what was new about this situation where magazine readers' attention was sold to manufacturerers and advertisers, Richard Ohmann places himself explicitly within the very commodified world he has just described. He tells us where he sits as he writes, he tells us what he knows about the builders of the old house that surrounds him, and then he describes some of the contents of the room.

> Today, nothing in this room is not a commodity, except for the dust, the cats, and the cordwood; and of course I used commodities to cut, haul, and split the wood. (The cats can be as self-sufficient as the Cooleys, but on the whole they prefer to eat commodities.) Among the kinds of bought thing I can see from where I sit, many came into use about the time of these magazines, and partly through their mediation: the record player, electric lamps, machine-made furniture, the typewriter through which my fingers express these thoughts, the automobile outside my window. (9)

Richard Ohmann is a man who is enlaced in the world of commodities and mass culture, someone who both benefits from their advantages and worries deeply about their effects. He is the kind of author who does not assume either that his way of being human is the standard against which all others should be judged nor does he assume that he can necessarily discern exactly how the experience of others was or is different. Reflecting on his project and on his imaginative effort in this first chapter, he observes, "My sketch of the Johnsons strikes me as thin and surely anachronistic in ways beyond my ken." He continues: "But sitting here, with three versions—1780, 1895, 1995—of what it was and is to be human imaged before me, the effort to understand that passage of consciousness, material life, and social being seems important. When did mass culture arise? Where did it come from? Why? What has it done for and to its various participants" (10). Richard Ohmann locates himself as one of those participants. And he wants to know, ultimately, what it is as such a participant, located in a particular place, that he might do to meliorate and/or reverse some of the most deleterious effects of the system that has produced mass culture.

This admission of his implication might seem like a small point. I don't think it is. For one thing, it prevents the author from struc-

turing the story of the rise of mass market magazines as a straightforward declension narrative. Thus he avoids the unstated implication of a good deal of mass culture criticism, that the only way to restore social concern and use-value is to return to the world of the "organic community," a return whose mode of achievement is never specified. Indeed Ohmann explicitly observes that "Farm and village life expressed some values that I endorse, and that were eroded or destroyed by capitalism and urbanization." He counters this immediately, though, with the further statement that "it also was a hard, narrow life, and in some ways a mean one." He continues:

> Although I do not accept Marx's phrase, "the idiocy of rural life," as accurate for these people at this time, neither would I choose that life for myself, were it available to be lived. And a return to it, or something like it, is not what I wish for our society. I will try to grasp the feelings of Americans as they both welcomed and resisted a new social order through the course of the nineteenth century. In this task, nostalgia is as much a hindrance as the triumphalism of Whig history. (366, EN 6)

Neither nostalgic nor blithely triumphalist, Ohmann's account is a complex one attuned to ambivalences, ambiguities, and ironies. He never assumes that mass culture has been so banal and all pervasive in its effects that it has successfully drained collective social life of all meaning. Nor does he believe that it has so thoroughly saturated the sensibility of the bourgeois self that the desire for commodities alone has replaced all other forms of what is usually called more "authentic" desire. Indeed Ohmann explicitly takes issue with what he calls "one familiar critique of consumer society: that it dissolves not just traditional systems of meaning but all 'symbolic structures outside the self,' and erodes 'meaning in general'" (172). This familiar critique is usually delivered, of course, by that distanced, dispassionate critic-outsider I spoke of before, the person who apparently still values traditional systems of meaning—or who rejects them etirely—one who has not been duped by consumerism into believing that "friendship, achievement, family cohesion, independence, [and] freedom from anxiety" can be addressed through the purchase of objects or by contracting for services.

The problem with this position, of course, is not only its condescension or the arrogant superiority that underwrites it. Nor is it the bad faith that enables the typing out of this critique in a well-furnished room largely insulated from want by the sinecure of tenure and by the university's relative stability as a critical, even necessary institution to the present social formation. The larger problem with this sort of critique is that it erases virtually all possibility of a common ground shared by the mass culture consumer and the critic. It denies from the start—in the very form of its address—that the critic and the consumer possess certain values as

well as certain interests in common. One is left wondering how the critic expects to address the consumer in convincing fashion. How does she expect to persuade the consumer to her view? I use the feminine pronoun here to indicate that I include myself within the category of the sort of critic who, despite her best intentions, still wrote as if she saw more clearly than others, as if her own politics were beyond reproach and uninfected by the very structures she was trying to critique.

But perhaps this critic doesn't expect that this sort of address or political dialogue is necessary at all. If it isn't, though, how will his or her published vision of change be implemented? Who does he mean to address with his writing? Does she simply mean to impose her own political vision for society on all those who supposedly live their lives mistakenly and vicariously through commodities like the romance and who, as she does not, mistake the pleasures of leisure-time respite for the hegemonic ideological practices they *really* are? What are the social, material, and political effects of writing and publishing this sort of critique within a social formation that produces only a very small number of individuals endowed with the complex literacy necessary to making sense of this sort of prose and structure of intertextual references, not to mention its point of view?

The author, "Richard Ohmann," does not explicitly pose these questions. Neither does he try to answer them. I would argue, though, that they are on his mind all the time. The book ends, after all, with the still-timely and now even more pressing question, "what is to be done?" I don't know how you felt closing the book but I know I read the last pages of *Selling Culture* in a disheartened mood, feeling finally, that the book had not quite managed to avoid the paralyzing pessimism that "Richard Ohmann" had earlier told us generally accompanies the condescension of the usual mass culture critique. While that sort of condescension has been completely banished from his account, the pessimism creeps back in, especially in that compelling last chapter where he summarizes with startling clarity and bleak honesty the nature of his findings about the ultimate effects of commodification. What I want to suggest today—albeit tentatively and for further consideration—is that the voice and rhetoric of address employed in *Selling Culture* together imply a political practice that is, to a certain extent, at odds with the theoretical conclusions that the last chapter sets forth. I don't have much time left to develop this argument fully but let me try to suggest very briefly what I mean here.

The last chapter seems odd to me, coming as it does, after *Selling Culture's* extraordinary account of the different daily lives and concerns, intentions and activities engaged in by the various parties to the production and consumption of mass market magazines. Our author, "Richard Ohmann," describes the self-interested yet often contradictory activities of these different groups with great sensitivity and a nuanced attention to the very real agency these people exerted in circumstances not of their own making. He gives us a sense of how they struggled with the conditions of modernity and

he shows us how different subgroups within the professional managerial class often worked at cross-purposes with each other to envision cultural forms that would express and address their own peculiar fears and desires. What they produced, as a consequence, he explains in that last chapter is Ideology in the narrow sense, what he glosses as "an assemblage of tacit or explicit beliefs" (346). This sort of Ideology varies across texts and speakers, it is what McClure, Munsey, Walker, and Bok produced *differently*.

Yet "Richard Ohmann" goes on to suggest that this explicit Ideology spun out in the pages of the magazines "was of less moment than ideology in the expanded sense, as embedded in the production and consumption of magazines" (347). He notes that although McClure and the others inflected PMC beliefs in distinct and different ways, "they all (perforce) joined in the same practices of commodification" (48). Here, Richard Ohmann draws on the Gramscian/Althusserian conception of ideology as "the whole of consciousness as it arises from and interacts with material and social life" (347). This expanded conception of ideology he names here "the ideology of commodification" and he suggests finally that "its stability, along with its many easements and its near transparency, made commodification a strong force for equilibrium in the whole hegemonic process, stronger I contend than Ideology—or for that matter, than the state apparatuses of regulation and repression and schooling, or certainly, now than the hotly controverted institutions of church and family"(349). With this observation, the reader is returned to a world where the ideological force of a commodified way of life overwhelms and, in the last instance, determines the effects of a range of contested, contradictory, and fractious beliefs and practices engaged in by not entirely homogeneous populations. With this sort of view of the situation, finally, with this sort of denial of the significance of surface difference and disagreement, what indeed is to be done? In one of his very last endnotes Richard Ohmann ruefully admits that *Selling Culture* doesn't explain how to change the world.

But the rest of the note within which this admission is hidden, it seems to me, alludes to another way of understanding this state of affairs and another way of responding to it. It alludes to a construction of the situation of commodification within which the voice of Richard Ohmann might have particular and efficacious work to do. Endnote number 9 to chapter 11 continues the author's observations about what is at stake in *Selling Culture*. To the text's suggestion that what is at stake is "how we explain the movement of history, and how we understand modernity" (351) the note adds, "and how we change the world" as well. Then, Richard Ohmann continues with this intriguing observation:

> I would not have undertaken this study or the kind of intellectual work, so distant from my early interests and training, had I not come out of the 1960s in solidarity with those on the socialist, feminist, and anti-imperialist left who wanted to change the world. (400)

The admission is interesting, it seems to me, for the vision of change it adumbrates. It constructs a time before the 1960s, a time when another author by the name of Richard Ohmann wrote about linguistics and speech act theory. This simple sentence suggests that something happened during the 1960s, a space that is occluded from view here, something that changed the Richard Ohmann of *Shaw: The Style and the Man*—who had not identified himself with the arguments of the left or with those of feminists—into a person who would later remake himself into the Richard Ohmann of *English in America* or even later still into the Richard Ohmann of *Selling Culture*. What is that thing or set of things that happened during the 1960s? How did this process of personal, political, and I would argue, social change come about?

I didn't know Dick then nor did I participate in the activities he chronicles in some of the essays in *English in America*. I was an undergraduate at the time but, like him, I was trying to make sense of the arguments and claims on my attention being articulated—and often through the mediation of the national press—by SDS, the Redstockings, the National Organization of Women, the Black Panthers, by Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, and so many others. Like Dick, I suspect, I listened, I read, I tried to understand—I felt myself called to responsibility by their arguments—just as I felt myself even more powerfully called home by the explicitly patriotic, pro-war, patriarchal views of my own father. Perhaps it was a daughter's need to refuse to listen to her father's voice or her familiar middle class desire to be independent that pushed her to listen more attentively to some voices rather than to others. Whatever the source of that willingness to listen or of the capacity to be solicited by new and different ideas, I was positioned in such a way that eventually I recognized my self in the audience addressed by feminism and the student left. In effect, I *was* hailed by both of them. Apparently, so was Richard Ohmann. The question I want to pose, finally, is why? What accounts for the ability to change, to see the world differently and to act on all that that implies.

I want to suggest that this happens because ideology in the expanded sense never fully determines Ideology in the narrower sense. Ideology in the narrow sense is fissured and fractured all the time, as *Selling Culture* admits, in part because it is formulated and produced not by unitary subjects who are everywhere the same, but rather by subjects who exist in and through the many different practices that constitute them. As a consequence, they are variously solicited by different practices, they are hailed differently by different voices and different institutions. The subject is contradictory at every turn, divided against herself by the faultlines of discourses and practices that neither align perfectly nor address all the disparate needs and desires with which she is so fractiously constituted. Dissatisfactions persist. Tacit understandings and buried common senses cultivated in some situations remain unaddressed and unheard by others. This uneven, unstable, not always fertile ground, it seems to me, is the ground where social change takes place. Why the Richard Ohmann of *Shaw: The Style and the Man*

was hailed by feminist voices at MLA and elsewhere is impossible for me to know. But I suspect it was because the ideas and beliefs he could give voice to at the time were not internally coherent or consistent and because his own previously experienced commitments and faiths shared some hopes and desires as well as worries and fears with feminist perspectives. These supposedly superficial differences in Ideology mattered, then, because they could be noticed and amplified or augmented through the voices and words of others, not words merely but practices, different ways of taking up a relationship to a differently-constructed world. Those practices may not have changed the world in some totalizing sense but they may well have altered how some individuals saw one or the other corner of it, so much so in fact that they tried to act on a new vision of what it might become.

This, it seems to me, is the responsibilty to which the voice of Richard Ohmann calls his many readers. This narrator, who combines distinctive colloquialisms with an abstract set of concepts that are also always glossed through concrete anecdote and clarifying story, both addresses his readers directly and encourages them through the use of phrases like, "well, you get the idea here." The Richard Ohmann who writes so familiarly is one who understands at least implicitly that neither he nor his readers occupy a ground that is completely different from that inhabited by the magazine consumers who are the subject of his analysis. Consequently, he does not position himself outside their concerns nor does he suggest that he is, in any essential way, different from them. He won't permit his readers the comforting complacency of feeling superior to them either. He implies that he and his readers live in world that is at least partially continuous with the world inhabited by these first consumers of mass culture, the magazine readers of the 1880s and 1890s. His mode of address is inclusive, it seems to me, and it implies that the activities of writing and reading are just that, activities, which is to say practices that, once taken up, change other practices, other ways of constructing stories about the world. What he gives us, at least in the first ten chapters of *Selling Culture*, is not the last word but a set of contigent words whose final effect it is up to us, his readers, to determine.

Works Cited

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Part I:

Richard Ohmann's Work in Context