

G e o r g e S z a n t o

*Narrative
Taste
&
Social
Perspectives*

NARRATIVE TASTE AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

NARRATIVE TASTE AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

The Matter of Quality

George Szanto

Palgrave Macmillan

ISBN 978-1-349-08385-5 ISBN 978-1-349-08383-1 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-08383-1

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1987

All rights reserved. For information, write:
Scholarly & Reference Division,
St. Martin's Press, Inc., 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1987

ISBN 978-0-312-55934-2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Szanto, George H., 1940–

Narrative taste and social perspectives.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Literature and society. 2. Politics and literature. 3. Narration (Rhetoric) I. Title.

PN51. S94 1986 801'.95 86–1775

ISBN 978-0-312-55934-2

F. Scott Fitzgerald, excerpted from *The Great Gatsby*.

Copyright 1925 Charles Scribner's Sons; copyright renewed 1953 Frances Scott Fitzgerald Lanahan. Reprinted with permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

The extract from *The Great Gatsby* is reprinted by permission of the Bodley Head Ltd, from THE BODLEY HEAD SCOTT FITZGERALD, VOLUME ONE.

Every effort has been made to trace all the copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

*In memory of my mother,
Dorothy Zollschan Szanto*

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Graduate Faculty of McGill University and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada for grants which helped me to complete this book. In addition, my appreciation to the following for allowing me to reprint material published previously in somewhat different form: to Donald Gray and *College English* for 'Alternative Way-Signs: Some Passages Within John Berger's History-Making, History-Unravelling Experiment'; to Milan Dimić and *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* for 'Geography, Private Property and the Western Novel'; to Pierre Gravel and *Déterminations* for 'The Nostalgic Silliness of Tragedy'; to Paul Buhle and *Cultural Correspondence* for 'The 30% Margin: Jack Webb's UFOs'; to Gyorgy Vajda and *Néohelicon* for 'Positivism, Negational Aesthetics, and Literary Evaluation'; to Eva Kushner and the International Comparative Literature Association/*Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée* for 'Fictions, Societies, and Laws of Equal and Unequal Development'; to the *Massachusetts Review* for 'On the Political Rhetoric of our Narrative Tastes'; to John Berger who has generously consented to my quoting from *G.*, published by Pantheon (New York: 1980) and Chatto and Windus (London: 1985). I also wish to thank Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, and The Bodley Head, London, who have kindly given permissions to reprint pp. 40–41 from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

In addition I am deeply appreciative of the innumerable discussions and arguments with my professorial colleagues at McGill, Darko Suvin and Marc Angenot, and my ex-student colleagues now scattered around the world, Robert Elbaz, Pasquale Iacobacci, Marie-Christine Leps and Pierrette Malczynski. Their honesty has made this a better book. Finally, my greatest thanks are to Kit, who has always helped me to see, read and write a little more clearly.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
<i>Apologia</i>	viii
I INTRODUCTION	
1 The Question of Quality	3
II THE POLITICS OF ENTERTAINMENT	
2 Geography, Private Property and Western Narratives	23
3 The 30% Margin: Jack Webb's UFOs	40
III CANONIZED NARRATIVES	
4 The Nostalgic Silliness of Tragedy as the Twentieth Century Draws to a Close	55
5 Oppositional Way-signs: Some Passages within John Berger's History-making, History-unravelling Experiment	71
IV THE MATTER OF QUALITY	
6 History and Choice	95
7 Criticism and Evaluation	114
8 Narrative and the Social Context of Criticism	137
<i>Notes and References</i>	158
<i>Index</i>	163

Apologia

Some years after Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* came out, my wife and I went to see it with moderately close friends – I'll call them Mark and Jane – a couple we usually agree with about movies. While we and they have our personal differences, many of our film tastes are close enough so we talk easily afterwards. If we disagreed it had always been inside the same kinds of categories.

They disliked some parts of the film, enjoyed others, and said so as we came out of the theater. I despised the thing but only made a couple of polite judgements till we got back to the car. Then I exploded: what utter trash.

They tried to explain, gently, how they understood the qualities of the film, but to no avail. The argument quickly left the film behind.

I lashed out at anyone capable of hinting there might be some value to that silly and crude and dangerous waste of two hours. I let loose (I am in retrospect sad to admit) with some deeply *ad hominem* verbal clouts, gross kidney blows out of political left field, mixed metaphor assaults to the flank – all designed to put them, rather than the film, down. Because they couldn't see how wrong, even evil, the film was. Because they were caught in their usual liberal/conservative bind and had no political perspective whatsoever. Because they couldn't see the male-structured world of social classes all around them because they were blinded by the limited political framework of their tastes in films just as in everything else. And so on.

They suggested (they are very kind people) that I was 'making psychological generalizations about films just like always' and 'seeing social and economic causes in every little detail' and 'finding things wrong with a movie just so it'd fit into some theory or other'.

I stayed angry. It took a week before we could talk, and much longer for me to see that the furious differences in our reactions had

raised questions at least as large as our friendship. But at that time I couldn't articulate the leaps I'd made from the film itself to my admittedly partisan, though looking back probably incoherent, reactions.

For several years now I have tried to work out some organized responses. These, related to a breadth of cultural artifacts, primarily narratives, among which the Bertolucci film was one activating motivator, comprise the argument of the present exploration.

So the next pages deal with narrative material of primarily two sorts – those produced for a reading audience, and those produced for a viewing audience. My concern is with the relationships between audiences and their needs for narrative, audiences and their pleasures from narrative, and audiences and their judgements of narrative. I shall not try to explore the *differences* between audiences for books, audiences for television, and so on; these kinds of questions belong to a different province of examination.

The tactic of these explorations is to give away as much of the argument as possible as quickly as possible in order to avoid any uncertainty as to my intentions. So, after an introduction which raises some questions as to the appropriateness of dealing in terms of aesthetic quality and audience taste, the study examines aspects of popular entertainment and attempts to determine the extent to which such entertainments are politically partisan – consciously, unconsciously, non-consciously – in their structures and in their stories: specifically, a look at the American western; and at a late 1970s television series, Jack Webb's *Project UFO*. From there, the study explores two different examples of canonized literature – the phenomenon 'tragedy' and whatever breadth of meaning for contemporary audiences that concept might have; and the work of John Berger, a novelist-filmmaker-critic, whose corpus is just emerging into canonization. Finally, the study looks at some of the factors implicit in professional criticism which can both hinder and reveal processes of understanding.

I will therefore concern myself with trying to determine what the material realities of certain artifacts may be. On the one hand I shall explore specific cultural products, both as themselves and in their social contexts (or, when their context is other texts, then the nature of the mesh of texts of which they are part). On the other

hand I will examine what it is that allows such aesthetic matters to be apprehended so variously as to be enjoyed and judged in such divergent ways.

A final word as to what this study is *not*. It is not a systemized use, nor a critique, of the work of reception criticism – it is not an examination of Ingarden or Iser, not a commentary on Jauss or a critique of the semiotic theories which give the question of reception and reading some of its present legitimacy. Nor is it a return to the positions of Lukacs, Marcuse, or even Eagleton, in the attempt to quarry something of value from their theoretical work. In short, I shall not make yet one more attempt to survey the criticism of reading and viewing. Rather, I shall try to explore some of the implications of contemporary human beings reacting to narratives.

All of which carries with it apologies to Mark and Jane, and to no doubt many others along the way, for earlier non-organized – valid I still believe, if not then validated – critical outbursts.

Part I

Introduction

1 The Question of Quality

The dramatic theory of Bertolt Brecht has explained a great deal about relationships between a theatrical production and audience reactions. For example, Brecht has helped us as audience to realize how detrimental a thing *uncertainty* can be. Mainly, uncertainty is written or produced into a play so it can bring the audience into a state of suspense. But suspense arising from uncertainty usually obscures from the audience the causes for those events depicted by the production. Uncertainty confuses the audience.

Brecht assumed, as will I, that in a confusing world one of the strong human drives is to try to understand What is Going On, and How Things Work. But there is, Brecht claimed, a nearly uncrossable gap between on the one hand emotion-arousing suspense and, on the other, our potential understanding of the all too real mysteries that lie behind the story of the play, the mysteries that give sense to the play's parts. Brecht went on to explain that such a gap is intellectually debilitating and, consequently, humanly destructive.

Brecht's description, his critique, can be worthwhile not only in considering theatrical events or even literature in general, but also in exploring the narrative rhetoric of the greater political and economic chicanery – not quite theatrics – of our time. Caught up in the suspense of the first act of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, or in the second act of a world-wide nuclear disarmament movement, or in the twenty-fifth instalment of Ronald Reagan's budgetary juggling acts, we can become blinded to causes and to larger patterns. Suspense brought on by invisible disease bacilli, by uncertainty as to terrestrial survival, by billions of dollars withdrawn from social programs, such suspense keeps the world, the story, the play, mysterious.

Let me avoid any additional suspense here by making a preliminary claim: judgements of taste – 'bad', 'good', and the associated baggage of each – make sense only when we understand the context out of which these arise, and the context for which they