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Play And The Politics Of Reading: The Social Uses Of Modernist Form

This book is an attempt to explicate some of the political implications of the act of reading and to propose a particular approach to reading that I think has important social uses in the contemporary world. Reading can be a paradoxically reciprocal but nonconsensual activity, in the sense that it requires mutual recognition (the text depends on the reader's powers to bring its meanings into existence) but does not have to culminate in agreement (indeed, the disjunctive tension between the worlds of the text and the reader is a typical, important value of the experience of reading). Nonconsensual reciprocity of the sort that reading can model and teach is an important practical and theoretical need in politics today. I return repeatedly in the chapters that follow to the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard about consensus and legitimization in order

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to suggest an alternative to the notion that interactions that are "rational" or otherwise socially productive and useful must have agreement as their goal. Reading as an exercise in nonconsensual reciprocity can provide a valuable model for a practice of democratic interaction that is not constrained by a conception of community as agreement but

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that avoids the dangers of violence, irrationality, and anarchy. Reading in this way is, I argue, a particular kind of play. This argument draws on the description of play by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser as a potentially open-ended and to-and-fro activity. Such play differs from that of instrumental games, which aim to establish



Synopsis

"Classrooms and curricula should be structured to foster the playful interaction that can teach students how to negotiate social and political differences in an emancipatory, noncoercive manner. . . . Teaching reading as a playful exercise of reciprocity with otherness can help prepare students for a democracy understood as a community of communities." —from the "Pedagogical Postscript"

Reading is socially useful, in Paul B. Armstrong’s view, and can model democratic interaction by a community unconstrained by the need to build consensus but aware of the dangers of violence, irrationality, and anarchy. Reading requires mutual recognition but need not culminate in agreement, Armstrong says; instead, the social potential of reading arises from the active exchange of attitudes, ideas, and values between author and reader and among readers. *Play and the Politics of Reading*, which has important implications for education, draws on Wolfgang Iser’s notion of free play to offer a valuable response to social problems. Armstrong finds that Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Henry James, and James Joyce provide apt examples of the politics of reading, for reasons both literary and political. In making the transition from realism to modernism, these authors experimented with narrative strategies that seek simultaneously to represent the world and to question the means of representation itself. The formal ambiguities and complexities of such texts as *Howards End* and *Ulysses* are ways of staging for the reader the difficulties and opportunities of a world of differences. Innovative formal structures challenge readers to reconsider their assumptions and beliefs about social issues.

Book Information

Hardcover: 224 pages

Publisher: Cornell Univ Pr (February 24, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0801443253

ASIN: B005ZOGOI8

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6.2 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 starsÂ Â See all reviewsÂ (1 customer review)

Best Sellers Rank: #2,178,076 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #373 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Movements & Periods > Modernism #434 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Books & Reading > History of Books #5285 inÂ Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > British & Irish

Customer Reviews

On the back cover of Paul B. Armstrong's *PLAY AND THE POLITICS OF READING: THE SOCIAL USES OF MODERNIST FORM*, John Paul Riquelme of Boston University is quoted as saying, "Nothing quite like it exists." You'll get no quarrel about that from me. However, as seminal as this book is, Armstrong probably should write a follow-up volume or two to flesh out his seminal thought. Armstrong is an English professor who specializes in modernist literature. Among other things, he devotes six chapters in this book to explaining for us how to read selected tricky works of modernist literature. They are tricky to read because something about the "form" of each work makes it tricky to read. In plain English, the authors deliberately wrote their works so that they would be tricky to read. To read such modernist works carefully, we as readers need to develop a certain play of mind. I would connect the play of mind involved in reading modernist works with the quality of mind that Aristotle refers to in the ethical person as "eutrapelia," grave merriness. See Hugo Rahner's book *MAN AT PLAY* (1967). Thus far, I have explained the wording about play and about modernist form from the book's title and subtitle. It remains for me to elucidate the wording about social uses and the politics of reading. Armstrong has also served as a dean. So he has had to undertake considering broader issues about higher education and society than just explaining how to read tricky works of modernist literature. Thus the author writes with two personas: Professor Armstrong and Dean Armstrong. Dean Armstrong asks, Are there social uses to learning the kind of play of mind that one needs to develop in order to read modernist works? Yes, he thinks there are.

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