

Berger, A. A. (2005). *Media analysis techniques* (3rd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Reviewed by: [Sean Phelan](#)

First published in 1982, Bergers *Media Analysis Techniques* is certainly admirable in its intent. Written in an accessible, student-friendly register, the book, now in its third edition, sets out to offer a clear introduction to four important theoretical reference points for the analysis of media texts: semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and sociology. The approach is broadstroke and Berger cautions the reader about the books necessary simplification of key terms and categories. The result is a book that largely succeeds on its own prescribed terms, though, as is perhaps its fate, aspects will grate with the more specialist reader.

The book is organised around a two-part structure that is supplemented by an appendix of useful teaching suggestions and a glossary of key theoretical concepts. The first part introduces what the author calls the techniques of interpretation themselves, while part two applies the various methodological perspectives to texts as diverse as an Agatha Christie novel, an American football game, a perfume advertisement, talk radio and video games. The structure works well and Berger is very alert to the dangers of scholarly bamboozlement when it comes to the formal discussion of (broadly defined) critical theory. Hence, he approaches his material mindful of the pedagogical value of a good illustration and analogy, as, for example, in his discussion of Saussure with easily intuited references to Sherlock Holmes and Star Trek.

Given the impressive scope of what the author covers in 250 pages, critical objections may seem a tad nit-picky. But, for all its success in demystifying challenging theoretical concepts, the book is perhaps not quite as student-friendly as Berger would like to think. What it fails to do, for instance, is even cursorily note the links between semiotics and other methodological perspectives, such as discourse analysis, rhetoric, and framing analysis, in ways that would ultimately be more attuned to the disciplinary sense-making needs of the undergraduate student. (There is no glossary entry for discourse or rhetoric, while the entry for frame is vague). It could have put more of an effort, too, into pointing out some of the obvious linkages between the four identified perspectives. Even more lazily, many of Bergers characterisations speak more to the 1980s readership of the first edition: we are told on page four, for instance, that semiotics has its outposts of progress in England, which will sound very peculiar to anyone familiar with the recent evolution of British cultural studies.

The strengths and weaknesses of the book are clearly exhibited in the chapter on Marxist analysis. It gives a good exposition of key Marxist concepts such as alienation, ideology, base/superstructure, though the chapter is structured around a somewhat antiquated concern with false consciousness. The comparative importance of hegemonic theory to media studies is de-emphasised and discussed without any explicit reference to Gramsci. The chapter segues into a discussion of Mary Douglass grid-group theory of political categories, while neglecting to cite the much more significant attempt by Stuart Hall and others to link a Marxist intellectual tradition with semiotics. (Berger does at least get around to briefly mentioning Halls cultural studies work under the banner of sociological analysis on page 113, though he still fails to note the elementary fact of this works theoretical debt to Marxism.) The authors failure to note the emergence of a so-called 'post-Marxist' perspective is more forgivable, though the books general treatment of the implications of post-modern approaches is trite and dismissive.

The author makes much of the books international appeal in the preface, as earlier editions have been translated into, among other languages, Italian, Chinese, Korean, and Arabic. Unfortunately, the book nevertheless assumes a monocultural, US-centric perspective quite at odds with its otherwise critically engaged posture. For instance, the community of readers is implicitly cast as American on page 5 (semiotics has only recently been taught here [meaning the US] he asserts) while the applied analysis of football as a system of signs proceeds as if references to American football are tautologous. The application of the different techniques in part 2 of the book is still useful, though the inclusion of a more descriptive chapter on video games seems out of kilter with the rest of the book. Furthermore, the analysis of the perfume advert in chapter 7 works from the closed assumption that the woman in the advert could only be read as Polynesian, when the material could have easily cued an illustration of the elementary differences between a structuralist and post-structuralist perspective.

Yet, these objections aside, I would still recommend Bergers book to anyone wanting a clear introduction to how they might critically dissect media texts from a 'depth' theory perspective. The creative, playful approach is very suggestive and one can only admire Bergers attempts to democratise concepts that sometimes appear impenetrable to the uninitiated. Importantly, the reader is also regularly reminded of the danger of reductionist, doctrinaire applications. As the author himself concedes, he could have addressed other techniques as well. But the unsurprising fact of gaps, in such an ambitious synthesising text, should not deflect from its obvious merits.

Purchase information: This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Footprint Books at www.footprint.com.au.

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