

## Figure/Ground Communication

Interview with Arthur Asa Berger

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What attracted you to the academy?

I got a B.A. in literature and philosophy, assuming that a good education would fit me for any job. I didn't have the slightest idea of what I wanted to do, but recognized I'd need more education, so I applied to graduate school in journalism, thinking that I liked to write and might find journalism an interesting career. I was accepted into the University of California Berkeley journalism school and started there in the summer of 1954. While there I got a letter from the University of Iowa in Iowa City, offering me a small fellowship. Since it had a good writer's workshop that I could also attend, I went there instead and began in the fall of 1954. I focused on magazine journalism because I thought long form writing (long articles) would suit me best, but I also studied in the workshop with the wonderful and mad Marguerite Young. I was also able to take a couple of philosophy courses with Gustav Bergmann from the Vienna Circle. While at Iowa I was the "Cultural Commissar" of the university, being the music, art and theater critic.

I was drafted in the summer of 1956, eleven days after I received my MA. I got out of the Army in 1958 and went to Europe for a year. I had written high school sports weekend evenings for the *Washington Post*. I recognized in the Army that 9 to 5 jobs were not to my liking, so a year after I came back from Europe, I enrolled at the University of Minnesota's program for a Ph.D in

American Studies – a nice interdisciplinary program that would allow me to fashion my own course of studies, more or less. I realized that I had “intellectual” interests and figured becoming an academic and hanging around an institution of higher education would suit me best.

In time, I ended up teaching in a media department at San Francisco State University where I taught courses on writing and media criticism. I was able to make good use of my training and what I taught myself in my teaching. You can get a better idea of my interests by visiting the website (<http://www.enculturation.net/writing-myself-into-existence>), which reprints a selection of a memoir I wrote (and self-published).

Who were your mentors in graduate school?

There were two professors who were my mentors. The first was a political scientist named Mulford Q. Sibley. I did my dissertation on Li'l Abner under him. He was a political theorist and I literally took all the courses he taught that I could fit into my program. He died a number of years ago. He was a great man as well as a distinguished scholar. It turns out that I had written a paper in a course on American politics on Li'l Abner and he suggested I add to it and do my dissertation on the comic strip. I did. The second mentor was an intellectual historian with whom I studied; he is still alive at around 90 and still my friend. We corresponded for more than 40 years. What I learned from them both was the value of following your interests regardless of intellectual fashions and fashioning your own perspective on things.

What advice would you give to young graduate students and aspiring professors?

For young grad students I'd remind them that academia is full of landmines from the administration, other faculty members, and students (who now seem to have a sense of entitlement). How I survived academia without losing my mind or my sense of humor is beyond me. I have written a number of darkly comic academic murder mysteries that have helped me deal with the traumas I experienced at San

Francisco State University. A great deal depends on your colleagues, I guess; it is a place full of some wonderful people, but also upwardly mobile careerists who won't think twice about sticking a knife in your back. The politics in academia are incredible and often nasty.

For university professors, I would suggest they only dine with their backs to walls, and not let their battles with other professors destroy their younger colleagues and their students. The Broadcast and Communication Arts Department where I taught was full of really moral and decent people, but we still had some opportunists and careerists. One faculty member who joined our department had been to lunch with everyone important in the school in the first semester there and eventually moved on to a "real" university, without the publications that such a position required. The professor got the position due to friendship with a famous professor at a different university. I retired from S. F. State because one year I had five books published and didn't get a merit award. "Why hang around this place when I don't have to," I said to myself. My system had a program that enabled you to teach part time and be generously rewarded so I taught part time for five years and retired for good in 2003. Since then, I've been a full time writer. So the moral of it all: be careful. And remember that a sense of humor will help at all levels.

In your experience, did the role of the university professor – and in particular, student-professor relations – “evolve” since you were an undergraduate student?

Since I got my B.A. in 1954, if universities (and all other institutions) didn't evolve it would be a miracle. Institutions are always evolving. Now that many universities are fighting for students (with the possible exception of the top ones, which are fighting off students), they have become more like businesses. Probably all are more like businesses now and less like isolated groves of academe where people pursued knowledge more for its own sake than for commercial rewards. Universities are probably more student-centered as well, as in “attract students and keep them.” Of course, dealing with seventeen- and eighteen-year old persons is not fun, and as I understand it, lots of students transfer after their first or second

year. Students now take six years to graduate, whereas when I went to school in 1950, we graduated in four years.

To cater to students, many universities are simulating resorts with fancy student unions, swimming pools, etc. Probably student-faculty relations are better than in the past. Professors are not so remote anymore, but many young students, having been told how wonderful they were all their lives, have a sense of entitlement that causes problems. Student evaluations are very destructive in universities; the patients are now running the asylum. I know that many of my colleagues inflated their grading to get good reports. If professors are judged on their ability to entertain students, which I fear is often the case, it is a bad omen. Here's a comic poem I wrote about universities and students who try to go to the best ones:

Many try Harvard  
 And many fail.  
 Who then go to Princeton  
 Or to Yale  
 While those with a brain  
 The size of a pea.  
 Have a hell of a time  
 At USC.

Actually, I understand USC has now raised its standards for undergrads, which makes sense because it is an excellent school.

I also wrote some academic mysteries that were really textbooks, and that is a way to interest students. My book *Postmortem for a Postmodernist* is really a book on postmodernism and my book *Durkheim is Dead* is about social theory. I understand there are a number of novels written by professors to teach students various topics and I think it is an excellent idea. In addition, I found that teaching by playing learning games was a good way to teach students how to apply theories I taught them about semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, etc. I understand many professors are getting away from straight lecturing.

As I mentioned, I last taught in 2003 and since then I've been a full-time writer. Actually, I think of myself as a writer who taught, rather than a teacher who wrote. Not all professors write and there is no reason for all of them to write. I once asked a colleague from another department, "What do you do with

your time?" He answered, "I think!" There's no written record, alas, to show what he thought about anything, other, perhaps, than how to become chair or dean.

What are universities for in the first place? Do you think the academy as an institution is in "crisis"?

Universities are in crisis because all institutions are in crisis and almost always are in crisis. Maybe professors will become commentators on courses taught by "great" professors at Ivy League schools and other top-ranking institutions. They'll teach remedial English and remedial math and various low-level courses. As things stand now, many universities exploit people with doctorates who are not in tenured positions; these road warriors do a lot of teaching for cheap. In many fields, it would seem the prospects for tenured positions are very limited. In any case, different kinds of professors use universities for different purposes. Some, that I knew, tried to use their schools as country clubs and played a lot of tennis – when they were not "starring" on committees. I wrote a comic poem about committee stars:

Good on committees  
For which he was cherished.  
He never published  
And he never perished.

There are many professors who really are interested in their subjects and their students, and they make universities worthwhile places. You never can escape politics so you might as well be in a place where you can play around with ideas, as long as you have tenure. For students, universities are places where they can experience failure and it is not a disaster. They may start out as pre-med and after a course in organic chemistry decide that elementary education or business administration is best for them. They also benefit from being in a place where ideas are valued, though so many now think of universities as places to train for jobs that to some degree universities are more like community colleges, except at a higher level.

I would like to know more about your experience at the University of Minnesota's Ph.D program in American Studies. You said it was a nice interdisciplinary program that granted you a lot of freedom. Do you still believe in inter-disciplinarity?

I was in the American Studies program at the University of Minnesota, which allowed me to design a course of study around my interests. I found that very useful. What I created was, in a sense, a cultural studies program in which I studied American music, literature, social thought, political thought, philosophy, etc., along with other courses of a more general nature.

I don't know what the faculty there is like now, but I had some wonderful professors and enjoyed being in a multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, pan-disciplinary program. When I saw *Rashomon*, I got my methodology set. There are many ways of looking at anything and one must expect that different people with different perspectives will disagree on what they are seeing. And maybe they are all correct.

I wrote a book, *Media Analysis Techniques*, published in 1982. I just sent in the fifth edition of the book to the publisher. The first part of the book has chapters teaching semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, and sociological theory. The second part of the book has chapters on various topics in which I show students how the theories might be applied. My idea for a final examination: show students a television show and ask them to write four different interpretations, based on the techniques they learned: semiotics, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory and sociological theory.

The one problem with multi-disciplinarity is figuring out how to put things together, but the Rashomonic approach is very interesting in that regard.

I also just got the cover for my forthcoming book: *Dictionary of Advertising and Marketing Concepts*. I made the cover drawing myself, so I now write and illustrate my books. The fifth edition of *Media Analysis Techniques* will have thirty or forty of my drawings. I get a lot of pleasure from writing and from illustrating my books. So I now have two books in production. My best year I published five books; this year maybe four. Most years one, if I'm lucky.

One might think that generalist programs in American and Canadian studies are more important than ever as nation states try to reassess their identities in a post-globalization age. Yet Canadian studies programs were among the first to take a hit when massive budget cuts were implemented throughout Canada in 2008. And last year, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT) decided to abolish the Understanding Canada-Canadian Studies Program, which offered grants to graduate students pursuing research in Canadian studies. What do you make of this situation? Do you see a similar trend happening in the United States?

Money is tight nowadays and politicians probably feel that spending funds on basic scientific research has more payoff than courses dealing with matters such as national identity. I've been out of academia for ten years now. I retired in 2003 and I am not up on what is happening in American Studies and Canadian Studies programs, though you point out that they are not being supported in Canada and I can understand why, given the politicians' mind set.

I believe that the American Studies program at the University of Minnesota is going strong, and probably Yale's American Studies program or department or whatever it may be right now still is very popular. Interdisciplinary programs sound good, but I don't know whether they have delivered much, except, perhaps, when they have a focus on American or Canadian or some other culture. And even then I wonder: I always sensed that American Studies faculty members felt a bit less important than English or History or core discipline faculty members, who probably saw American Studies as a fad that would soon pass. In their search for acceptability, many American Studies professors wrote deadly dull papers on subjects that seemed important to them. They wanted to show they could write papers as dull as those written by historians and literature professors. Cultural Studies now has changed things and I see American Studies as a focused form of cultural studies. It seems to still be going strong, despite what happened at Birmingham, which is where it all started.

How did Cultural Studies evolve since Birmingham? Did the field as we once knew it die out as postmodernism faded in recent years?

Cultural Studies is alive and well. I searched for it on Google and found there are 123,000,000 sites that have something about cultural studies in them. There are also 173,000 books on cultural studies at Amazon.com. I would imagine there are many courses in universities that involve cultural studies but don't use the term in course descriptions.

Below is a description of the cultural studies program at UC Davis:

*Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture and society that responds to and builds upon, critical analyses of traditional disciplines and epistemologies as well as upon developments specific to gender, ethnic, and sexuality studies that have emerged over the last thirty years. Key to the Cultural Studies approach is the perception that language, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and class organize identities, complex social relations and cultural objects. Also key is the assumption that the study of culture in all of its complexity requires cross-disciplinary work.*

*Cultural Studies assumes that the object of knowledge will determine the methodologies to be used. It actively encourages the crossing of disciplinary boundaries and promotes the innovative interweaving of methodologies that have been traditionally associated with a wide range of disciplines. Cultural Studies flourishes within formations that facilitate communication and collaboration among scholars from diverse fields.*

There is also a cultural studies program at the University of California at Berkeley, and I would imagine interdisciplinary courses in many other universities in the San Francisco Bay Area – taking a local perspective on the subject. When I taught a course on the analysis of the public arts at San Francisco State University, it had a cultural studies approach. I would imagine that programs in American Studies, Latin-American Studies or Asian-Pacific Studies, all have a cultural studies perspective, so it is flourishing even though many programs do not use the term “cultural studies” in descriptions of what they offer.

I had an interesting experience relative to cultural studies. I compiled a dictionary of terms used in cultural studies and sent it to one of my publishers. My editor there informed me that their dictionaries were all very large texts and my manuscript was too small. So the next day I went to the computer and wrote an introduction about cultural analysis, then I put all the terms relative to literary theory in one chapter, all the terms about semiotics in another chapter, and I did the same for psychoanalytic theory and Marxist theory. I called it *Cultural Criticism* and my publisher (Sage) took it. My chapters on semiotics were longer and more detailed than the ones in my *Media Analysis Techniques*. In *Cultural Criticism* I did one of my best.

I'm not sure Postmodernism is dead. When I see young people all wired and spending their lives gazing into their smart phones and texting like mad, it would seem to me that they have all been affected by pomo and reflect it. That is, it has triumphed and because it is so all-pervasive, it has lost its fascination for many scholars – but not all.

American Studies at Minnesota was really cultural studies with a focus. It saved me from the English department at Minnesota, which was, at the time, a death trap. I did not like the course requirements and many of the grad students in the program felt terrorized. So American Studies was my salvation. In the course of my career I morphed from American Studies into Cultural Studies. To my mind, it was six of one thing, half a dozen of another.

How does it feel to be one of the “founders” of contemporary popular culture studies?

It is kind of hard to think of myself as a founder of contemporary popular culture studies since I'm only 80-years old and still alive and kicking, but I guess my work on Li'l Abner and my books on pop culture, media, and related concerns might qualify me for that status. I'm still writing all the time and it is hard to think of myself as a founder since founders of anything are dead and buried. After they've been dead a while, someone labels them a founder of this or that.

I've always been interested in everyday life and in vernacular art forms and in the life experiences and thought processes of ordinary people, so it was natural for me to become interested in popular culture. One of my former colleagues at San Francisco State University told me that popular culture was irrelevant; he was

interested in an important topic and published maybe one article in forty years of teaching. And it was on teaching. Once I was at a conference at Stanford, filling for someone who was snowbound, and an “eminent” sociologist told me he does popular culture in half an hour. I had a moment of great pleasure when I found that a big, thick introduction to sociology that he wrote bombed. If I am a founder of popular culture studies (and I’ve been reputed to be, not only by you, but by a few others), I probably don’t have any sense of what it means because I’ve not founded a school or even a working group.

The short answer is, if I am, actually one of the founding fathers of popular culture studies, it feels good – because it means that some scholars might be interested in investigating the matter in future years. I also have the pleasure of knowing that I have written some academic mysteries, which means I’m not only a study of popular culture but someone who has created some popular culture...of dubious value, but that’s what nice about pop culture – most of it is of dubious value.

What are some of the texts from the Cultural Studies canon that you think young graduate students and aspiring university professors should read?

There are some core books that have influenced my work and thinking:

Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, *Interpretation of Dreams*, and all of his other books

Karl Marx, assorted books and works

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*

Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktales*

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, *Empire of Signs* and other books

Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*

Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*

M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

Jean Baudrillard, *System of Objects*

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*  
J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*  
Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics, Role of the Reader, etc.*  
C. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*  
E. Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusion*  
J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* and other books  
R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* and other books  
H. Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*  
C. Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*

Those books should be people interested in pop culture off to a good start.

What attracted you to Roland Barthes and how did you interpret his work?

Roland Barthes was one of the most influential thinkers of recent years and produced an enormous amount of seminal books on literature, popular culture, everyday life, etc.

His book *Mythologies* dealt with French popular culture and everyday life. The first chapter in the book is on wrestling and offers any number of insights into what wrestling is really about (in France). He also has essays on soap detergents, toys, and steak and frites, among other things. That book suggested that Marxist-informed semiotics focusing on what might seem to be significant trivia could yield interesting results. I had written on the politics of wrestling myself before I discovered the book, so I was very much interested in what he had to say.

One of his books, *Empire of Signs*, is about Japan, and provided me with a methodology for doing the books I've written on tourism – but really the cultures in countries where tourism is important and on the nature of travel. In his book on Japan, Barthes wrote that he was interested in dealing with certain topics that struck his attention, such as Japanese eyelids, the empty center in Tokyo, subway stations, etc. All of these are signifiers that he analyzed.

I used this model for writing books on tourism in a number of countries: India, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Bali, the United States, etc. I've also done a book on iconic buildings in places all over the world, and another on iconic places in

America. So I owe a great debt of gratitude to Barthes for providing me with a methodology. He said he was interested in “flashes,” and not in writing a history of Japan or anything like that. In my books I dealt with tourism in the countries, but mostly on important icons and signifiers found in each country.

You mentioned that you’ve been out of the academy since 2003, but you’ve hinted that you remain intellectually active otherwise. What are you currently working on?

I recently found a book I wrote about English culture (from London) in 1973. It was typed. So I found a way to copy it using OCR and now I am going over the manuscript. I called it *The UK*, taking off from a study of the IK, a tribe in Uganda, I think. When it is done I will self-publish it as I don’t imagine many publishers would be interested in a book written around fifty years ago. It is full of my speculations about English culture and pop culture, everyday life, etc.

The publisher of my advertising book asked me to do one on communication, so I’m writing a book on all kinds of communication, not just media. I have no deadline for that book.

I am also writing an introduction to Orrin Klapp’s 1962 book *Heroes, Villains and Fools*. It will be reprinted by Transaction books.

So all of this is enough to keep me busy, but not terribly busy. I’m retired and don’t play golf or tennis, so I have to write or I’d be bored out of my mind. I never could have imagined when I was young how my career would turn out, but I’m not complaining about what’s happened. My wife and I love to travel, so I spend a lot of time planning our trips and then taking them.

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