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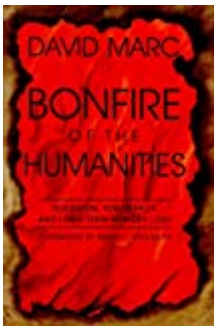

David Marc. *Bonfire of the Humanities: Television, Subliteracy, and Long-Term Memory Loss.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995. xvii + 174 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-0321-4.

Reviewed by Scott L. Baugh (Oklahoma State University)

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The premiere volume of the new Television Series by Syracuse University Press, David Marc's *Bonfire of the Humanities* advances and legitimizes scholarly attention to the impact of television on American culture–as did his earlier books, *Demographic Vistas* (1984) and *Comic Visions* (1989). In this latest effort, Marc elucidates the depreciation of humanities-based liberal arts study in American universities, largely a consequence of television's challenge to traditional notions of literacy and memory. Addressing the specific relationship between the growth of television's popularity and the undoing of the humanities in American universities as well as society at large, Marc expands on many of the relevant critical issues concerning students and scholars of popular and American culture, as revealed in Ray Browne and Marshall Fishwick's collection of essays, *Rejuvenating the Humanities* (1992), and other works in the field.

The heart of Marc's argument suggests that television, enabling a sort of epistemological paradigm shift, stands as the major force in American culture against the humanistic ideal search for truth. The visual montage of television and of some other forms of mass media displaces verbal expression as a source for and a means of making rational decisions, thus abandoning the humanities-based study as a "quaint, antiquarian ornament to 'real' thinking" (p. 7). While berating conservative humanist academics for ignoring the significance of television, Marc admonishes students and scholars of television and other forms of media to educate themselves in the tradition of the liberal arts-based study.

Marc's own writing exemplifies this advice: his ideas reveal a solid foundation laid by careful reflection in the context of a humanistic education with telling examples from the world of TV–from *I Love Lucy* to *Beavis and Butthead*. Touching on such relevant issues as institutionalized grade inflation and academic dishonesty, Marc provides an informative and cogent explanation for the status of the humanities in American universities. Personal anecdotes and autobiographical material often reinforce Marc's argument, though at times an agenda not altogether related to the topic fades the focus. While Marc's impudent comments regarding political correctness and its negative consequences, especially in American universities, might be accurate–and perhaps even entertaining–their relevance to the larger argument appears to be only tangential, and Marc's extended attention to them are not ultimately as beneficial as his main line of argument.

Owing to the tradition of Marshall McLuhan and Gilbert Seldes, Marc presents an insightful, very readable account of television criticism history and indicates direction for students and scholars of popular and

American culture. Rarely do scholars appropriately blend a witty, entertaining writing style with such well-documented and informative content; Marc excels on both counts. In spite of occasional minor typographical errors, the lay-out and organization of the book are well-conceived. Marc supplements his discussion with a relatively thorough bibliography; and, in addition to a subject-name index, a "Foreword" by Susan J. Douglas and Illustrations by Heinz Emigholz facilitate comfort and accessibility for readers. Popular culture and American culture students and scholars, especially those interested in television, film, mass communication, and other mass media forms, will find Marc's argument provocative and entertaining.

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