

THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO WAS NOT FICTION

As someone who received her PhD in Comparative Literature just months before Bush was selected and who has read maybe ten fictional books since I stopped teaching fiction, I feel obliged to point to—and comment on—Chris Bowers' post on "The Rise of the Non-Fictional Aesthetic."

This decade seems to have brought on a broad shift in the leftist aesthetic in America. Although the dates are not exact, the shift I sense is from an inward-looking, confessional, disengaged, self-reflexive aesthetic of depression of the previous decade, toward an outward-looking, highly engaged, self-creating, activism-oriented, reality based aesthetic of determination. The newfound popularity of the political documentary, and the declining popularity of self-reflexive, retro-cool films in the style of Quentin Tarantino is but one cultural example of this. The vast increase in electoral related activism is another, more obvious example. It is possible that I am just talking out of my butt on this one, and describing a personal shift in aesthetic rather than something more broadly based. Still, I think that the rise of a more pluralistic America, combined with the vastly reduced cost of information brought on by recent technological developments, and topped off with a truly reactionary regime seizing power in America against the wishes of the American populace, really did change our cultural predilections quite profoundly.

Jennifer argues that we have lost something as progressives in this shift,

and that we need to find a way to re-incorporate the fictional narrative back into our lives. While I admit that this is a sense I have often had during my five years in professional politics, I also don't think that there is any going back at this point. Some really bad shit happened—bad shit that will stay with us all and make the future difficult for a long time to come. I don't think that there is any returning to the old aesthetic until our problems of war, unsustainable and corporatized economics have been truly mitigated, and that the forces waging a war of civilizations have suffered multiple, severe setbacks. The self-reflexive, fictional, depressed aesthetic just doesn't seem relevant anymore, or at least right now. We are way past Kurt Cobain at this point. The rise of a non-fictional, engaged aesthetic probably coincides with the rise of the long, global emergency. Until that emergency has been either downgraded or deemed hopeless, I don't expect the inward-looking, the disengaged-cool, and the fictional to come back anytime soon. There is no way to ignore reality anymore, and that which shows us a way out of our problems will be very similar to that which is beautiful for a long time to come.

I don't so much disagree with what Chris has to say, except to object to his characterization of this aesthetic—non-fiction versus fiction. Human beings construct narratives. All narratives—whether they tell a story about an uppity black man running for President or about a prisoner who exacts the ultimate revenge—involve a great deal of artifice and linguistic craft. Further, the book *Factual Fictions* makes a compelling argument that the Anglo concept of "fiction" is a culturally contingent concept that arose out of a need to distinguish between "news"—that was subject to

libel laws—and "fiction"—that could say whatever it wanted about people in power, so long as those people in power were not "real." Similar legally driven formulations of "fiction" exist in other cultures, and not every culture makes the distinction between "non-fiction" and "fiction." In other words, the terms "fiction" and "non-fiction" are really just convenient classifications for stories that helps people sort out library shelves and legal battles. Fundamentally, narratives are still narratives, which are necessary tools for the human creature to make sense of and interact with her world.

And I mean it when I say, "the Count of Monte Cristo was not fiction"—even though it's one of the most compelling stories of all time and even though it gets stored in the juvenile fiction shelf of most libraries. "It's a book you read when you're fourteen," Slavoj Zizek scoffed to me once.

But the narrative was published in a newspaper. Not the kind of literary journal you think of when you thin of Dickens' serialized novels, but an honest to god daily newspaper, with each installment beginning on the bottom of the front page, just under the reports from Parliament. This story, about a guy imprisoned at least partly because he once met with Napoleon, who then goes on to become a Napoleonic figure plunked down in "modern" Paris, appeared at a time when censorship laws dictated that you couldn't use the words "Bourbon" or "Republique" if you were writing things critical of the government. Dumas wrote the story after having met Louis-Napoleon, who was sitting in prison for one of his early unsuccessful coup attempts. But he wasn't the only one writing these Napoleonic narratives. Every single major daily in Paris—every one—was printing some kind of narrative about Napoleon in this period, whether they were "fictions," memoirs from Napoleon's brothers, race track reports using a horse named "Napoleon" as an allegory for speed and skill. These stories were all different conceptualizations of a certain kind of power

that exerted tremendous influence in Paris at the time. All these narratives about Napoleon usually get described as the cultural phenomenon that was the "cult of Napoleon" but, as events would later prove, that cultural phenomenon was in no way fictional.

In a world in which Jack Bauer has greater influence over our detainee policies than all the FBI's best experts on interrogation methods, we would do well to avoid the trap of "fiction" and "non-fiction."

So I would describe what has happened somewhat differently than Chris. If the Clinton wars and the Iraq War did anything, they demonstrated that the Right had a sophisticated and effective narrative industry, one that was having a dramatic effect on our governance. While we leftists were all playing with a-utilitarian postmodernism in the academy and fiction workshops, the Right was implementing a philosophy of utilitarian postmodernism—deliberately mobilizing narratives to accrue power into the hands of corporations and those who guard them. So it's not so much our aesthetic that has changed, I think, as our understanding of the battlefield.

That doesn't mean there's not a place for narratives that focus on emotion and personal relationships and everyday life. What it means is that we have to—and should always have been—engaging actively in the contest over dominant narratives. The Left has long had an abundance of people skilled in the construction of narratives—it's just we didn't see the need to mobilize those skills on a large scale, or at least not outside of the realm deemed "fiction." Once we recognize that narratives have the same power, whether they're labeled "fiction" or "non-fiction," those of us trained in the field can better use our skills to good end.