The power of the spoken word: Literature in the American mass media of the 1990s

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Abstract
The 1990s saw a climax of literature representations in what Ong called the secondary orality, particularly in film, television, and radio; for instance, the film industry produced a number of adaptations of novels that had been accepted into the American literary canon, while television and radio marketed literature through book clubs and literary shows. All these literary productions mediated through film, radio, and television are referred to in this study as mediatized literature. The argument of this dissertation is that 1990s U.S. mediatized literature constitutes a post-modern re-enactment of the traditional oral literature that initially emerged on U.S. territory with pre-literate populations. In support of this thesis, chapter 1 presents the features of the oral traditions of four ethnic groups, while subsequent chapters feature an application of these characteristics, or variations thereof, to literary discourses from film, television, and radio.

There is a structural correlation between the oral tradition of the four ethnic groups presented in chapter 1 -- Native-American, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian -- and some of the movie adaptations discussed in chapters 2 and 3 that are based on fiction representing the same ethnic groups (Beloved for the African-American mediatized literature, The Mambo Kings for the Hispanic one, etc.). While analyzing the features common to both the oral tradition and the mediatized literature, this study makes use of four variables (authorship, audience, literary product, and literary aesthetics) and of a complex critical apparatus that includes theories of the linguistic sign, the Bakhtinian dialogic system, the Jungian concept of the collective unconsciousness, Bolter's concept of remediation, etc.

Throughout this dissertation, I will argue that, in spite of the Ongian condescension vis-à-vis oral cultural messages as inferior to the written ones, and contrary to Postmanian media apprehensions and Franzenian inertia toward mediatized literature, both oral and mediatized literary messages can be classified as literature, although they may not always follow traditional aesthetic parameters embraced by canonical written literature. Chapter 5 of this dissertation presents some of the major points of the current conversation related to the acceptance of mediatized literature and of the oral tradition into the category of literature and to the complex socio-economic and literary implications of the dissemination of literature through mass media.

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The history of American literature can be divided into five periods: Colonial and Early National, Romantic, Realism and Naturalism, Modernist, and Contemporary. Each has its own unique characteristics, notable authors, and representative works. The first European settlers of North America wrote about their experiences starting in the 1600s. This was the earliest American literature: practical, straightforward, often derivative of literature in Great Britain, and focused on the future. In its earliest days, during the 1600s, American literature consisted mostly of practical nonfiction written by British settlers who populated the colonies that would become the United States. Mass communication has revolutionized the modern world. In the United States it has given rise to what social observers sometimes call a media state, a society in which access to power is through the media. The term media, understood broadly, includes any channel of information through which information can pass. Since a democracy largely depends on public opinion, all those involved in communicating information inevitably have an important role to play. The print and broadcasting media not only convey information to the public, but also influence public opinion. Television, with access to vir