

Scholes broadens the definition of 'literature'

By SAM COALE SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

I have followed and enjoyed the literary criticism of Robert Scholes, research professor of modern media and culture at Brown, over the years because of its jargon-free, eminently clear, and "up front" presentations on everything from semiotics and signs to literature and film.

This wonderfully readable and perceptive latest offering understands the decline of the English major at the college level and moves to widen that discipline to include film, ads, television, magazines, and essays: "We need to free ourselves from a restricted notion of literature" and focus on what he calls "textuality" in all texts, the strategies, techniques, and rhetorical powers within "a more spacious idea of literacy than a concern with literary works alone."

He goes on to analyze in a quietly dazzling way such texts as Wagner's operatic Ring cycle; the film, "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," "Porgy and Bess," St. Paul's admonitions, "Pagliacci," and "A Little Night Music," among others. How does one medium transform another? How do texts get altered, molded, and re-shaped in different media?

If Scholes has a villain (he offers a complete curriculum with courses at the end of the book to apply his criticism pragmatically), it is the fundamentalist reader who believes in a "literal" reading (which is itself an interpretation) and runs roughshod over the complexities and ambiguities of all texts.

For Scholes, texts are webs, interwoven and "interactive" performances that can never be taken at face value, presenting us with complications that "fundamentalist reading normally rejects, denies, or conceals."

In our era of ideological rigidity and bantering banshees of bunkum, Scholes comes to the rescue yet again. We all need to appreciate and hone our interpretive skills. Texts have power, and we need to be both seduced and suspicious as they have their ways with us.

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