

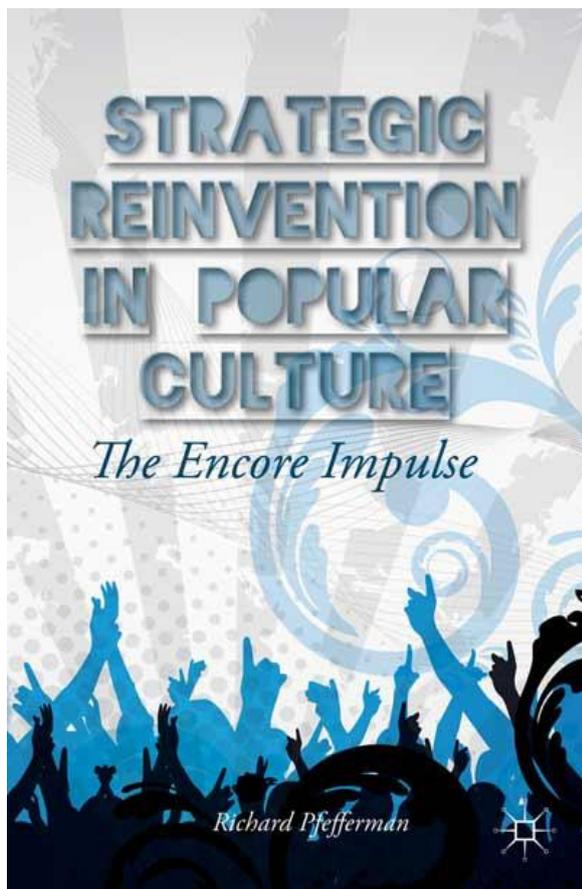
**BOOK REVIEW**

*Strategic Reinvention in  
Popular Culture: The Encore  
Impulse.*

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***Strategic Reinvention in Popular  
Culture: The Encore Impulse. Richard  
Pfefferman. Hampshire: Palgrave  
Macmillan. 2013***

Buzzwords such as “cheapening” and “hollow” can easily hijack any critical discussion about popular culture, but this devaluation is further complicated since this field “is not easily characterized by either its perimeter or its center” (Mukerji and Shudson, 1991: 5). Because the study of popular culture draws from disciplines as diverse as anthropology and literary analysis, to say nothing of the different schools within each area, it can be difficult to find an angle of initial entry into the arena. Richard Pfefferman offers a noteworthy approach in his *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture: The Encore Impulse*, though. Rather than reading popular culture by a single school of thought or offering an exhaustive history of its gradual and incomplete acceptance as a field of study, Pfefferman proposes a workable model that he uses first to explain and then to evaluate the way popular culture appears to recycle concepts and narratives. In his examination of examples across different times and media, Pfefferman proposes a theory of strategic reinvention that frames popular culture as a regenerative phenomenon with its own inherent set of rules.

*Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture* commences with Pfefferman’s acknowledgement of a common condemnation – the complaint that popular culture simply repurposes and repeats itself. However, he spends little time arguing against this denunciation or trying to explain its prevalence. Instead of highlighting *a priori* judgments concerning the value of artefacts that reference previous narratives or concepts rather than offering original ones, Pfefferman focuses on what he calls the theory of “strategic reinvention” as a means of determining the success of such iterations. In aid of his theory, Pfefferman distinguishes between “replications”, which he defines as formulaic reproductions, and true “reinventions”, which he notes are subtler in both design and definition but ultimately more successful for the same reason. To create the term “strategic reinvention” as introduced in his title, Pfefferman notes that successful reiterations of recognizable cultural artefacts follow certain strategies in adopting and adapting specific elements from precedent artefacts.

In a nod to the demanding “continuator’s dilemma” of referencing, deferring, creating, and enriching all at once (Hinrich, 2011: 10), Pfefferman identifies five “encore elements”, or components essential to a successful strategic reinvention: “essence”, “vitality”, “spirit”, “punch”, and “endurance”. “Essence” is about identifying and maintaining the unique element of the original narrative or concept, while “vitality” is about enhancing that essence against “an accommodating cultural backdrop” (Pfefferman, 2013: 57). Similarly, “spirit” involves maintaining authenticity in all reiterations, “punch” is concerned with conveying relevancy, and “endurance” is concerned with universality and timelessness. Ultimately, Pfefferman is contending

that the process of reinvention combines intentional, strategically-selected design with conscious consideration of both predecessors and contemporary purposes: this process will “start with the ‘encore impulse’ of an original, retain the core of its inherent value, and add value of its own by infusing meaning for a reconceived audience” (Pfefferman, 2013: 3).

Pfefferman, best known for his analyses of encoded social values in film and television, as in the co-written volume *Murder Mystique: Female Killers and Popular Culture* (Nalepa and Pfefferman, 2013), seems fully aware that a) his audience will likely include interested but non-academic readers and b) popular culture is still under considerable contention as an academic field of study. To this end, he writes with a direct, unadorned style, and follows a clear, meticulous organization that builds on Raymond Williams’ early emphasis that studying the meanings and values of popular culture is not a way of judging them against more formal modes, but instead intended “to discover certain general ‘laws’ or ‘trends,’ by which social and cultural development as a whole can be better understood” (Williams, 2011 [1961]: 58). This combination of directness and care allows Pfefferman to presuppose the academic value of studying popular culture to audiences both within and beyond the academy. By simply explaining the need for an evaluative model, Pfefferman assumes that popular culture is worth such critical evaluation, and by presenting his evaluative model with straightforward language and examples, he addresses those who seek to study, evaluate, or simply understand it critically.

In addition, Pfefferman’s basis in the definition of culture as a mutable participatory phenomenon also helps him avoid the elementary simplification that popular culture simply consists of public interest in media and media celebrities. Instead, he recognizes that popular culture concerns more than just the proliferation and cultural intermediality of popular narratives and concepts: the term also encompasses the trial-and-error process by which the public evaluates and only sometimes embraces such artefacts. This complicated definition is also reflected in the systematic arrangement and inclusiveness of *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture*. With a section apiece for “essence”, “vitality”, “spirit”, “punch”, and “endurance”, Pfefferman draws valuable distinctions between remakes, updates, sequels, spin-offs, adaptations, and extensions while also including examples of diverse media and non-media artefacts.

Each section is further divided into multiple case studies, which each discuss an original artefact of popular culture, the artefact’s reproductions, and the individual successes or failures of each iteration. Pfefferman rounds out each case study with comments drawn from social media users, thus offering readers an on-the-ground

demonstration of the encore evaluations at work in the consumer experience. Under this definition and organization, Pfefferman's evaluations of phenomena such as credit cards, celebrity family names, and Chevrolet Corvettes vs. Ford Thunderbirds fit well alongside his assessments of the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises and the subcultures that have driven their many sequels. He also manages to address diverse media ranging from film to television to music – with examples as varied as *Sex and the City*, *Doc Martin*, Natalie Cole, and *Modern Family* – as he examines how reproductions fare within the same medium or translate across media. His text concludes with an appendix that provides contemporary examples upon which readers can try and apply his model to evaluate the potential success of these iterations.

While its relative independence of theory-heavy readings makes Pfefferman's work accessible and informative, it can also seem overly reductive at points. The same five-section division that enables him to address "essence", "vitality", "spirit", "punch", and "endurance" distinctly also threatens to reduce cultural popularity and significance to a set of formulas whose inclusion would magically popularize anything. Similarly, the wealth of artefacts addressed means that Pfefferman must also split the discussion among his different sections, potentially leaving readers uncertain whether each of the five "encore elements" are perhaps specific to certain types of media – whether "encore essence" is applicable only to franchise films, for example, or "encore spirit" can only address media celebrities. On a completely divergent issue, the illustrations spread throughout the text do more to distract the reader than to authenticate Pfefferman's assertions. Though labelled as examples demonstrating principles of design, their blurriness and complete dichotomy from the specific narratives and concepts under discussion simply makes these illustrations distracting.

Despite these potential shortcomings, Pfefferman's theory of strategic reinvention still offers an interesting and replicable method of considering reproductions in popular culture. His final section on "encore endurance" may prove especially valuable to scholars with literary studies backgrounds as it outlines the use of narrative theory's themes and archetypes in successful reinventions, especially quests, personal transformations, and "overcoming the monster" narratives. Ultimately, *Strategic Reinvention in Popular Culture* has a great deal to offer readers in a culture that seems to rely more and more heavily on re-making rather than creating narratives and concepts, as the five reproducible "encore elements" of Pfefferman's strategic reinvention theory offer an objective means of evaluating all types of cultural reproductions.

## Works Cited

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