states of being, overt villainy [...] grotesque and shocking stories, unforeseen disasters in personal life”. What is the function of this melodrama? As Peter Brooks states in his famous work on the nineteenth century theater genre, melodrama functioned, through its emphasis on bipolar morals, as a mode of “coping with and interpreting the cultural world without the reassurance of religion and monarchy”². According to Conboy, melodramatic themes functions similarly in contemporary popular press, as frameworks “that enable a mass popular readership to cohere in an era of cultural fragmentation. They provide the reassurance of community and continuity” (171–172).

These analyses lead Conboy to the conclusion that the contemporary popular press has lost its traditional political power and has been diverted “into a consumer-imaginary, a rhetoric sold to the people to enhance a sense of community embedded within a market economy”. Contemporary popular press has exchanged its political content for an emphasis on entertainment, but even in the non-political carnivalesque and melodramatic press there remains a powerful influence. Its popular rhetoric is still situated in and connected to the everyday life of its readers, and in this way resonates a political function “suited to a consumer-oriented, popular culture postmodernity” (171–172). The low political profile of contemporary popular press is – Conboy sighs – a symptom of its era: “in postmodernity, its ability to achieve this feat is strained” (181).

Notes

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The Persuasion Handbook offers an almost overwhelming overview of scientific attention given to the basic question ‘how individuals exercise influence via communication’. The Persuasion Handbook contains 34 chapters, nicely divided in seven sections, in which the editors and contributors outline their opinions on the state of the art.
In the introduction the editors Dillard and Pfau refer to the 2000-plus-year history of rhetoric as precursor of modern communication science perspectives on persuasion. The chapters are all grounded in scientific models and theories. Some chapters are explicitly directed at the evaluation of particular theories, others only use them as a frame of reference in order to organize and explain patterns of empirical facts. This notion on the absence of an all-explaining theory on persuasion is not new of course. Instead in this book this notion is presented as the power of the field to look beyond scientific boundaries in order to extend frameworks and ways of understanding. Besides that “the practice and study of persuasion are dynamic endeavors” (xi) over the centuries.

Although not explicitly mentioned by the editors, the development of theory and practice, characterized as openness to scientific knowledge from various disciplines, has constantly and gradually extended the perspectives on persuasion over time. As a reflection of this development, the sections in the Handbook are ordered on a micro-macro continuum. The content of the different sections and chapters can best be summarized by what the editors state in the Final thought about persuasion at the end of the Handbook: “... basic issues about how the human mind organizes and processes information, various theoretical explanations for how influence occurs, the role and impact of affect in persuasion, how message strategies exert influence, and the role that communication media play in persuasion” (789).

The contributors to the Handbook, who are all, but one, employed by US universities or research organizations, seem to have been systematically and precisely briefed. This has lead to a welcome standardization within the different chapters. First, each contributor introduces his/her issue regarding the study of persuasion (theory and research), including shortcomings and unresolved questions. At the end of each contribution future theoretical directions and research priorities are sketched.

Section I starts with basic issues. Millar’s notions on new directions in theory and research regarding persuasion, published two decades ago, offer a nice ‘kick off’ for evaluating developments since then.

Early Theories of persuasions are presented in Section II. The already well-known and widely applied dissonance theories, expectancy theory, elaboration likelihood model and theory of reasoned action are discussed and criticized.

In Section III the perspective on persuasion is broadened by introducing emotions and affects. Still emphasizing individuals as ‘victims’ of persuasion, authors stress the importance of emotions over cognitive reasoning. Negative (fear, warning, guilt) and positive (hope, joy) emotions are the main concepts in this section.
In Section IV the importance of message features is shown. The role of language in persuasion is described in five chapters. Message framing, figurative language, evidence and nonverbal influence are the key concepts in this section.

Section V starts with the notion that contexts define opportunities and obstacles faced by anyone who seeks to influence another. In different chapters persuasion is presented in different contexts: small groups, commercial and legal settings.

Section VI deals with the social consequences of persuasion campaigns. Three areas are discussed in which persuasion campaigns prevail: politics, health and environment. A general conclusion is that the planning and organization of communication activities are necessary in order to produce outcomes and effects of enormous social significance.

Finally in Section VII, the relevance of media and media use is discussed in four chapters. Several authors deal with the influence of the consumption of news and entertainment media on the (mis)perceptions of social reality, how meaning is constructed from television images, the embodied meaning of different media forms and the importance of interactive technology for persuasion.

Looking at the Handbook as a whole there is hardly anything that is not mentioned. Unfortunately the perspective of the persuader is dominant in the different chapters, which undermines the importance of theories which focus on being persuaded in different situations in everyday life. Interpretative, action theoretical approaches and explanations regarding the (in)effectiveness of persuasive communication are discussed insufficiently. This problem is mentioned in future directions in persuasion scholarship and can be expected in upcoming editions of the Handbook. European traditions and experiences in persuasion theory and research might be added as well by that time.

The Handbook can become a valuable sourcebook for students and scholars within the field of persuasion and beyond. In fact there is something in it for everybody. The Handbook contains an extensive author and subject index, besides a logical and balanced structure of sections and chapters, which makes it assessable and useful. Convenient to readers is that each chapter starts with a short introduction in which its focus is mentioned.

All in all, I agree wholeheartedly with the closing remarks of the editors: “Having now read through each of the chapters in this book and surveyed the field, we are convinced that persuasion research is both robust and vibrant. (...) we anticipate continuing growth in our knowledge of one of the most fundamental processes of social existence – persuasion” (796).