Julian Stallabrass

GARGANTUA: manufactured mass culture

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ANALYSIS OF MASS CULTURE has shifted considerably since the 1930s. This has much to do with the rise of cultural studies as a separate discipline in the late 1960s. The old school socialist cri-
tique of mass culture that found much of its strength from within the modern tradi-
tion of philosophical aesthetics. This is a book written out of the ethical legacy of Adorno, Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, and thus out of a philosophical commitment with the artwork as the negative ‘other’ of commodification.

Adorno, in particular, has come to define the high-ground of the debate. In his aesthetics art has the potential to stand athwart the culture industry and to resist the potentially pernicious effects of commodification. His development of this position was one of the key influences on the work of Stuart Hall and the patrician liberal view of mass culture as the destruction of taste and cultivation, have largely retreated, as popular TV, Hollywood film, comics, and computer games, have become acceptable areas of study. Crucial to this shift has been a critique of conventional ideology theory. Following the work done by Gramsci and Bakhtin on language and consciousness in the ‘30s, the orthodoxy in cultural studies now is a rejection of what has been called, after Althusser, the dominant ideology thesis.

Mass culture, it is argued, doesn’t reproduce dominant ideology by coercively producing false-consciousness in passive con-
sumers, but is in essence an act of seduction and co-optation. For instance, the consumer of soap operas, does not take at face value their world of comfortable horror, but reads through and against the meanings of the text according to the specifications of class, gender and race. This dialogic approach has turned the study of mass culture from something that is seen as manipulat-
ing the subject, to something that shapes it in contradictory ways. TV is no longer judged as a one-shot flow of homogenising trivial-
ity and unrefining vulgarity but a complex site of intentional pleasure seeking and creative viewer-resistance.

In the 1970s, mass culture was widely used in cultural studies to counter the revival of the Hegelianism under the exten-
sive influence of Jean Baudrillard and the Situationists. Baudrillard’s understanding of mass culture though was very differ-
en from other critics who saw mass culture as a total dislocation of meaning and control and the consumer as a mere ideologically effec-
tive system. For Baudrillard the widespread legitimation of the trivial-
ity and barbarism of mass culture in the masses was not so much a ques-
tion of self-conscious incorporation of the culture industry given its subjective drive to continually out-
side the culture industry, as a denaturaliser of vision, this is a highly abstract base to begin with. Stallabrass’ defence of graffiti is loosely reminiscent of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, just as his evaluation of the ethical legacy of Adorno, Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, and thus out of a philosophical commitment with the artwork as the negative ‘other’ of commodification.

However, his defence of cultural autonomy and critique of mass culture is very heterodox and at times confused. Stallabrass, in fact, is not interested in elevating the status of cultural autonomy against the domination of mass culture as a political force. What is thus needed is a reappraisal of Baudrillard’s political thought, and a more radical perspective on the notion of resistance.

This idea of rubbish as the ubiquitous ‘other’ of capitalist rationality and the accelerated turnover of the commodity is the key focus of Stallabrass’s cultural politics and his notion of critical practice. He thereby, therefore, is responding to the theoretical and practical problems of early modernism’s romantic-primitivism: the idea that the unformed, the grotesque, the anti-aesthetic can provide a utopian glimpse beyond the limits of capitalist order and linearity. This is clear when he appears to believe that every time we pass a rubbish dump (or that matter a graffitied underpass) or every time the kitchen bin is full to overflowing we experience a moment of critical insight into the law of value. Rubbish push us up close to the brittle surface of the commodity. Whatever the merits of rubbish as a denaturaliser of vision, this is a highly abstract base to begin with. Stallabrass’ left defining his writing on class consciousness and commod-
ification. For Lukacs, with the expansion of the commodity form and the rise of modern forms of social control and administra-
tion, workers’ consciousness of capitalism as a total system is subject to the iron logic of atomisation and fragmentation. He therefore, that every time we pass a rubbish dump (or that matter a graffitied underpass) or every time the kitchen bin is full to overflowing we experience a moment of critical insight into the law of value. Rubbish push us up close to the brittle surface of the commodity. Whatever the merits of rubbish as a denaturaliser of vision, this is a highly abstract base to begin with. Stallabrass’ left defining his writing on class consciousness and commod-
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