

“Oh, I love trash...”

review

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 '60s. The old school socialist critique of mass culture as the embodiment of false-consciousness, 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 recently 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 consumers, but is a space of conflicting identifications and desires. For instance, the consumer of soap operas, does not take at face value their world of comfortable homilies, but reads through and against the meanings of the text according to the specifications of class, gender and race etc. This dialogic approach has turned the study of mass culture from something that is seen as manipulating the subject, to something that shapes it in contradictory ways. TV is no longer judged as a one-way flow of homogeneous triviality and unremitting vulgarity but a complex site of intentional pleasure seeking and creative viewer-response.

In the 1980s this dialogic model was widely used in cultural studies to counter the revival of the Hegelianism under the extensive influence of Jean Baudrillard and the Situationists. Baudrillard's understanding of mass culture though was very different from other critics who saw mass culture as a total system of control and the consumer as a mere ideological effect of this system. For Baudrillard the widespread legitimation of the triviality and barbarism of mass culture in the masses was not so much evidence of the super-commodified subject, but in fact a wholesale rejection of the social democratic political process itself. What he called the implosion of the social in the masses was, for him, a kind of utilitarian act of disaffirmation. However, for all its novel inversion of what constitutes resistance to bourgeois culture, Baudrillard's model was clearly within a philosophic tradition which approached mass culture in terms of the erosion of meaning, the homogenisation of subjectivity and the de-politicisation of the public sphere. His later writings may have become guide books for radicals in how to love the vertiginous pleasures of the commodity, but nevertheless for Baudrillard mass culture remains at base a forbiddingly abstract and pacifying experience.

It is little surprise therefore that the dialogic school of cultural studies has upped the ante on both the would-be fluid and open character of mass cultural forms, and the idea of the consumer as an active, creative interpreter. In the 1980s, in the construction of what might be termed a counter-postmodernism or critical post-modernism, many writers on culture borrowed from a revisionist post-Derridean school of philosophy in which the social itself was considered to be elastic and open. Following on from Paul Hirst's infamous attack in the 1970s on Marx's supposed economism—for Hirst material interests cannot be held to have a determinate influence on class consciousness—the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, for example, insisted on a separation of the link together. This allowed cultural theorists susceptible to this kind of thinking in the name of anti-reductionism, to talk about mass culture as if it was structurally open to its own critique, as if the capitalist demands of cultural production could be turned over with hard work and good intentions to enlightened and progressive interests.

Julian Stallabrass's *GARGANTUA: manufactured mass culture* steps into the debate. Yet, Stallabrass's book is less a survey of the literature, or the settling of professional scores within the field of cultural studies, than an unrepentant attack on mass culture as such. “This work will look at stupidity” and “how the decline of thought and principles makes acts of cruelty easier”. It is not often on the left these days you read a full-scale assault on mass culture for its imbecility, boredom and wastefulness, the popular impact of the dialogic model having made such sentiments appear deeply anti-populist and ‘out of touch’. But Stallabrass insists he is not anti-populist, but merely a critic of the way the cultural studies industry has driven the study of mass culture into

a banal relativism. In this *GARGANTUA* positions its critique of mass culture and cultural studies from within the modern tradition of philosophical aesthetics. This is a book written out of the ethical legacy of Adorno, Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre, and thus out of a philosophic engagement 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 given its subjective drive to continually outreach the powers of discursive reason. What art carries before it, therefore, is the possibility of the subject's non-identification with brute social reality, a possibility made in the name of a greater freedom forever touched, but always out of reach this side of the end of the rule of capital. For Adorno this does not mean a defence of art as freedom, but a recognition that however coerced art might be by commodification, its drive to self-determination coincides with the principle of freedom itself: the pursuit of individuation. When postmodernists argue, then, that we are living in a period when the divide between high culture and mass culture has lost all distinction they confuse the very real expansion of art's commodification—its industrial development as ‘entertainment’—with the notion that art's claims for critical autonomy have been superseded. Stallabrass argues, quite rightly, that this supersedition is a myth.

However, his defence of critical autonomy and critique of mass culture is very heterodox and at times confused. Stallabrass, in fact, is not interested in giving any kind of post-Adornian defence of autonomy at all, just as his critique of mass culture, despite his coolness towards Baudrillard, is extraordinarily one-dimensional. What interests him first and foremost is the possible radical content of those popular practices that are in internal disalignment with mass culture such as graffiti and amateur photography, where he perceives the disenchantment with mass culture and the social democratic political process to be a broad, collective activity (albeit cut across by age and gender). Autonomous art's implicit critique of mass culture may sustain a utopian glimpse of world beyond capital, but this is confined to a narrow middle-class base. Whatever form the self-conscious incorporation of these limits might take in the production and theorisation of art cannot alter this fact. Popular practices such as amateur photography, and to a lesser extent graffiti, on the other hand, are the result of a generalised will to knowledge, self-representation and creativity. “Slipping out of the noose of avant-garde fashionability amateur photography takes fragments of the world as evidence for an order of things, forcing them into making sense”. “Graffiti...is...consciously oppositional art. It is a ‘criminal act’, made in defiance of commercial and governmental authorities”. In this respect the issue of a self-conscious autonomy is less significant for Stallabrass than the idea of popular cultural practices as a kind of unconscious resistance. Because amateur photographers are concerned with recording an event or scene for their own use and memorialisation this represents a “radical moment” of refusal of commodification.

That amateur photographers take photographs in ‘philistine’ defiance of the bourgeois categories of professional art practice there is no doubt; and there is no doubt that this in certain circumstances can have an explicit class consciousness. Just as urban graffiti is evidence of a thwarted socialised individuality. But ‘unconscious resistance’ remains unconscious, that is, it remains below the level of what Adorno demanded of freedom: self-reflexivity. The issue, here, therefore, is not about the aesthetic value of such practices in relation to the professional categories of art, but how the symptoms and contingent gestures of working-class resistance are theorised in relation to the social cost paid in the split between art and mass culture. Stallabrass is very critical of middle-class cultural theorists projecting their ideas on the non-specialist consumers of mass culture, but I detect a similar kind of projection at work in his theory of cultural resistance. Indeed what is striking about Stallabrass's use of the modern tradition of philosophic aesthetics is his turn to the romantic-primitivism of many of the debates on aesthetics and politics from the '30s. Thus what runs throughout the book is less an Adornian dialectics than a reworked notion of the aesthetics of transgression. Stallabrass's defence of graffiti is loosely reminiscent of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, just as his evaluation of amateur photography remains very close to Lefebvre's endorsement of photographic naturalism as politically more progressive than the avant-garde. As with early Bakhtin and Lefebvre, Stallabrass treats popular cultural practices as oppositional to the overwrought and etiolated intellectual concerns of official, professionalised forms and languages. Subversion lies in unself-conscious playfulness. Such ‘primitivism’ though is not so much counter-hegemonic as anti-hegemonic. The issue is not that graf-

fiti and amateur photography do not at some level contest bourgeois categories of competence and value in art, but that this contestation is always orientated to the ‘unformed’ as radical in itself. In the name of authenticity contestation is identified as a form of ‘not knowing’. These problems are at their sharpest in the chapter on trash.

This chapter is the theoretical core of the book. It is also the point where Stallabrass's aesthetic ‘primitivism’ is connected in an explicit fashion to the questions of art and cultural theory. If Bakhtin and Lefebvre play a formative role, here it is Bataille refracted through Benjamin's theory of allegory and Michael Thompson's ‘Theory of Rubbish’. Bataille's theory of the unformed or informol is well known: the ignoble, the excremental, the impure, what he called the base, were the means whereby the fixed hierarchies of bourgeois rationalism might be rent and destabilised. This direct embrace of the abject and lowly clearly has affinities with Benjamin's allegorisation of the cultural fragment as the symptomatic ruin of modernity's shattered whole. Both positions look to what is remaindered or ‘beyond’ received cultural codes and forms of attention as a means of symbolic interruption. Since the 1930s and Surrealism this allegorisation of the remnant as ruin has flowed into many practices: Warhol, early conceptualism, critical postmodernism, contemporary post-conceptual work. But, following his subordination of the specialist to the popular, Stallabrass is less interested in the ‘primitive’ or philistine as a problem of ideological positionality internal to the dynamics of art, power and knowledge, than in a defence of trash as the universal other of bourgeois culture itself. As he says: “To look to destruction for the positive, and for critique in garbage, is one way of saying how bad things are”. In other words, to recognise trash as the remains of the commodity's allure is to break with the false perceptions of fetishism and therefore to release the ruin's allegorical potential. But if this allegorical power is not to be found in the avant-garde, where is it to be found?: in the street itself. The broken shell of the commodity lying in the skip, the mound of rotting rubbish and discarded household goods on the pavement, functions as part of a continuous, unconscious, permanent act of criticism of the culture.

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 replays, therefore, one of the most routinised aspects 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. Thus he appears to believe that every time we pass a rubbish dump (or for 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 pushes 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 a cultural politics from. Indeed in a certain way Stallabrass's ‘primitivism’ reminds me of that leap in faith the early Lukacs was left defending in his writing on class consciousness and commodification. For Lukacs, with the expansion of the commodity form and the rise of modern forms of social control and administration, workers' consciousness of capitalism as a total system is subject to the iron logic of atomisation and fragmentation, it would therefore have to take an extraordinary leap in revolutionary understanding for this to change. In Stallabrass's cultural politics the individual's relationship to rubbish seems to function in a similar kind of way to Lukacs' millenarian understanding of history; unconcerned with specific questions of agency and representation rubbish-as-a-site-of-consciousness raising becomes strangely hollow and compensatory.

And this is the fundamental problem with *GARGANTUA*. Stallabrass is not at all concerned with art as a set of immanent and institutional problems, even if he accepts the explanatory power of Adorno's ‘aesthetic paradox’, or law of the divided whole. It leaves him then with a highly attenuated base from which to practice and theorise art, an inflexible model of mass culture as banalised coercion, and a romanticised cultural politics in which an undifferentiated account of the ‘primitive’ carries a universal utopian content. From this it is clear that Stallabrass is responding to many of the substantive issues that are currently preoccupying contemporary art theory in the wake of the expansion of the power of mass culture in the '80s and '90s, and the exhaustion of '80s counter-hegemonic art strategies. Yet because of his over generalised attack on mass culture, the avant-garde and contemporary cultural studies, he is left stranded with good intentions and an over formalised sense of the structural constraints on an ‘art of the every day’ in a divided society.

John Roberts