Dead Lively

The analysis of mass culture has much to offer of profound significance to historical-materialist thought, not least because what Marx referred to as the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' involved in the fetishisation of commodities seem particularly materialised in our relationships with the products of popular culture. However, while popular culture is undoubtedly an important area of enquiry, the precise methodology with which to analyse it is less clear. Indeed, as Esther Leslie remarks in her prelude to *Hollywood Flatlands*, from a historical-materialist perspective, cultural studies, as commonly practised, can appear something of an 'ill-discipline' (p. 4). That is because its outlook remains evaluative and therefore idealist, rather than analytical and therefore materialist. Her explicit target in this respect are 'the professionals of popular culture', who promote a 'phony war between high culture and popular or low or mass culture' (p. 4), a war which serves to maintain, even when it reverses them, value judgements that mystify our political relations with cultural products. Under such binary reversals, the newly elevated masses, the popular or the low, do not question the existence of the élite, the select, or the lofty, so much as usurp their place. Wagner is kicked off, Kylie is put on, but the pedestal remains, supporting a new content with the same old form. The logic of the previous formation is thereby maintained, along with the false split between the perceived immanent value of élite art practice and the transcendent value inherent to mass entertainment, a split that mystifies their shared historical origins as well as their relation to both capitalism and the commodity-form. Indeed, beneath the dense vocabulary of much contemporary criticism, there seems to be little logical advance on Matthew Arnold.

While not saying so explicitly, Leslie’s analysis suggests that cultural studies compounds the error when it accuses revolutionary cultural critics of also maintaining a belief in this evaluative binary. However, unlike the postmodern ironists, the Left is seen as always coming down on the side of the high over the low in the application

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of its theory. Marxism thus stands accused of being so mesmerised by the ideological role of mass culture that the possibilities and pleasures borne by this culture are all subsumed under the critique of its homogenised and hegemonic political functions. Consequently, Marxism is presented as an overwhelmingly iconoclastic if not miserabilist practice which thinks a priori that the ideological price to be paid for commodity pleasures is too high. Like every puritanism, it just does not understand or approve of fun.

Through a mixture of original archival research, close textual analysis and theoretical explication, Leslie challenges such mixtures of fallacy and distortion, not least by revealing the historic amnesia of the postmodern orthodoxy. She describes how, far from denouncing mass culture, key artistic, critical and revolutionary figures were actively engaged in the analysis of animation from its very beginnings. Not only does Leslie demonstrate how avant-garde art practice and commodity production overlapped and influenced one another in the production of the cartoon film, she further describes how the cartoon film influenced both artists and revolutionary critics in return, and how all these practices only make sense when viewed as part of the same social weave – the lived experience of industrial capitalism at a particular historical conjuncture. As one would expect from Leslie, she engages deeply with both Walter Benjamin’s and Theodor Adorno’s extensive thinking on and around this topic, revealing a far more polyvalent analysis of commercial cartoons than the one suggested by the customary ‘Fear and Loathing in Frankfurt’ approach to critical theory. Although cartoons, like all mass culture, were implicated in the pacification of revolutionary social change and offered a clear example of the interpenetration of commercial and (bourgeois) aesthetic criteria, the sheer energy of the estranged and fantastic ontology of the cartoon world nevertheless harboured utopian possibilities of transformation. Hollywood Flatlands details the responses of Siegfried Kracauer, Sergei Eisenstein and even Leni Riefenstahl to the phenomenon of animation, accompanying them with more surprising encounters, as in Leslie’s presentation of Goethe’s colour theory. Likewise, the animation industry’s history of technical innovation, labour disputes and commercial development is clearly set out. Thus, while the precise cultural object of the book is the cartoon film, Leslie’s analysis develops a number of wider historical trajectories, not least of which is the mapping of the effects of massification on aesthetic, economic and political criteria as played out in the historical development of the animated film form. In so doing, she offers a far more politically nuanced notion of the pleasures and problematics of the cartoon experience than those provided by the

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2 This paradoxical orthodoxy, which combines the fetishisation of the contemporary with the homogenisation of the historic specificity on which such newness supposedly rests, would appear central to a number of the foundational texts of postmodernism, not least Jean-François Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition (1979) and Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man (1992). One of the most sustained Marxist critiques of this denial of reality and concomitant historical amnesia remains the work of Alex Callinicos, in particular Against Postmodernism (1989) and Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History (1995).