

DANIEL HOROWITZ, *Consuming Pleasures: Intellectuals and Popular Culture in the Post-war World* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012), xii + 491 pp.

Almost from its eighteenth-century beginnings, the rise of a commercialized literary market has polarized critics into despisers and defenders—those who associate ‘mass culture’ with the mindless consumption of easy pleasures (in contrast to the emancipatory pleasures of a high-cultural aesthetic) and those who praise ‘popular culture’ for its down-to-earth connection with the soul of common folk (in contrast to an austere and detached avant-garde). Daniel Horowitz’s *Consuming Pleasures*, an intellectual history of post-WWII cultural criticism in the United States (in transatlantic perspective), seeks to historicize this dichotomy by tracing a shift from the despising to the defending attitude between the 1950s and the 1970s. He suggests that during this period “writers came to envision popular culture and consumer culture in fresh and provocative ways,” which led them to critique “cultural hierarchies and moralistic approaches to commercial culture” and to emphasize “playfulness and pleasure” (1) as legitimate goals of literary-aesthetic reception. It does not come as a surprise that the 1960s weakened some of the more rigid cultural hierarchies, but Horowitz contextualizes the shifting critical climate in a number of significant post-WWII developments: the social transitions that accompany the rise of consumer culture, the changing position of literary criticism as a source of cultural legitimacy within the humanities and social sciences, the tensions of political ideologies in the Cold War period, and an evolving sense of what it means to speak about the popular.

Horowitz’s main interest lies in the changing views of consumption, an interest he pursued in two of his critically acclaimed earlier books. His study on *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes towards the Consumer Society in America, 1875-1940* (Baltimore, 1985) showed how the economic transformation of the United States between the Gilded Age and WWII was accompanied by a profound dread of the commercialization of life: where an earlier generation of nineteenth-century social critics (from Tocqueville to Veblen) framed the moral dangers of money with images of a lower-class lack of restraint, early twentieth-century observers worried about

how the rise of a consumer culture might reduce the American middle classes to passive followers of emotionally empty conventions. In *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Amherst, 2004), Horowitz then traced the intellectual’s suspicion of unrestrained consumption into the second half of the twentieth century. The present volume seems to be a companion piece of sorts, focusing on how the more traditional moralistic attitude of cultural consumption was gradually displaced by a “[p]ostmora[l]” sensibility, when between 1955 and 1975 “American writers shifted their attention from an emphasis on self-restraint to the achievement of satisfaction through commercial goods and experiences” (x).

Horowitz’s inquiry begins with Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White’s landmark anthology *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957). A “locus classicus” (19) of the mass culture debates during the 1950s, this volume combined contributions by Theodor W. Adorno, Leslie Fiedler, Herbert Gans, Clement Greenberg, Irving Howe, Dwight Macdonald, Marshal McLuhan, José Ortega y Gasset, David Riesman, and Edmund Wilson. As Horowitz demonstrates, the Rosenberg-White anthology spanned the whole range of the despiser/defender rhetorical repertoire, and its argumentative poles were represented by the editors’ opposing viewpoints. Rosenberg’s vision of mass-cultural feminization, fetishization, and totalitarianism stood against White’s debunking of elite paranoia (already Socrates denounced contemporary youth for their luxuries) and emancipatory pretension (many German Nazis and Soviet communists had high-brow tastes, too) (cf. 24). After illuminating chapters on Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Marshall McLuhan, early Jürgen Habermas, Walter Benjamin, and C.L.R. James, Horowitz connects the debate’s argumentative drift to the influence of David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950). Riesman’s sociological study was mainly received as a declension story about modern apathy: until the late nineteenth century (an age of production rather than consumption), people tended to internalize authority during their formative years, which helped them to grow into tough-minded, self-reliant individuals who followed an inner compass of norms and values. When social modernization heightened people’s radar for manners and conventions, even grown

adults tended to remain hyper-sensitive to the external authority of consumption-defined and mass-media inculcated peer pressure: twentieth-century Americans declined into “other-directed” individuals with feminine sensibilities and a fluid sense of selfhood. Other-directed people were primarily driven by “diffuse anxiety”<sup>1</sup> rather than clear convictions. Horowitz’s point, however, is that Riesman’s more lasting relevance for the shifting critical climate consisted in the fact that below its more iconic declension story, the *Lonely Crowd* celebrated “the possibilities presented by consumption unfettered by the constraints of moralism or scarcity” (127). For example, Horowitz suggests that Riesman anticipated the counterculture of the 1960s by considering sexuality as the other-directed personality’s “last frontier” against apathy (130).

A second stage in the evolving sense of popular culture during the 1950s that *Consuming Pleasures* brings to the fore emerges with the publication of Richard Hoggart’s literary ethnography *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life* (1957), which Horowitz characterizes as a game-changing event in the formation of cultural studies. Hoggart had been schooled within an Arnoldian-Leavisite critical tradition that stressed literature’s relevance for the cultivation of society’s cultural health. As a ‘scholarship boy’ who grew up in humble circumstances and worked for years in adult education, he fashioned a warm-hearted ethnography of working-class culture that countered the Leavisite condescension towards lay readers and popular literature. Hoggart’s book was path-breaking for the cultural studies movement because it used the tools of Leavisite literary analysis to praise the vigor, beauty, and organic communitarianism of working-class lived experience. But Hoggart also remained committed to a more traditional project of culture critique: he distinguished, as Horowitz puts it, “between commercial culture that was good, because its authenticity rested on its connection to the working class, and that which was not, because it was imposed by capitalism” (181). Unable to transcend the limits of his subjective taste, or his affective relation to his own social background, Hoggart drew up “a dramatic and depressing contrast between a vibrant British

pre-1940 working class culture and one threatened after World War II” by the “candy-floss world” of a modern culture industry (182).

The discussion of Hoggart is a high point in *Consuming Pleasures*, which presents *The Uses of Literacy* as a centerpiece in its narrative of evolving cultural studies. Hoggart is seen as caught between breakthrough and relapse—he has defeated the highbrowism of an older generation only to suffer a failure of nerve vis-à-vis the new cultural practices of the young. But how do we get from Hoggart’s limited breakthrough to a fuller affirmation of consuming pleasures? Horowitz suggests a number of avenues: the first is a “shift from the views of culture that relied on literary criticism to those informed by anthropology and sociology” (235). Horowitz represents this shift with reference to Stuart Hall’s and Paddy Whannel’s *The Popular Arts* (1964), a work that demonstrates that the younger generation of the Birmingham school was more at home than Hoggart with popular music and film, and Herbert Gans’s rejection of the high-low distinction (in a mid-1960s essay that later crystallized into *Popular Culture and High Culture*, 1974) and reappraisal of lower-middle-class suburbia (for example, in *The Levittowners*, 1967). A second thread Horowitz pursues is the incorporation of consumer culture by an international art world, which he associates with the rise of Pop Art in the United States and the writings and exhibitions of the Independent Group of artists in Britain (Richard Hamilton, for example, whose iconic 1956 collage of modern consumer items, entitled “Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?,” serves as Horowitz’s book cover). A third line of development includes Tom Wolfe’s celebration of lower-class pastimes such as stock car racing (*The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, 1965) and Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi’s embrace of the neon culture of Las Vegas (*Learning from Las Vegas*, 1972). Wolfe and Venturi exemplify for Horowitz the cultural establishment’s growing fascination with styles of consumer bricolage coming from below.

As one may gather from the juxtaposition of Tom Wolfe and Herbert Gans, Horowitz’s line-up of authors seems less inevitable as we move through the second half of his book. Why, for instance, should Susan Sontag’s career be representative of what Horowitz calls the rise of “Sexuality and a New Sensibility”

<sup>1</sup> David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1950): 26; emphasis in orig.

(306)? Is his in-depth discussion of Habermas's early journalism rooted in anything deeper than the serendipity of archival visits? And where are the more iconic protagonists of the postmodernism and counterculture debates (Leslie Fielder, say, or the Beats)? Still, Horowitz's intellectual biographies do illuminate and complicate the larger trajectory that separates the 1950s mass culture debate from the 1970s celebration of lifestyle consumption, and even his more remote selections (his discussion of Eco's and Barthes's 1950s journalism, for example) produce interesting and sometimes surprising insights. Horowitz's careful evasion of the decline or liberation narratives that structure these debates is helpful and refreshing.

One of the more intriguing dimensions of generational succession that *Consuming Pleasures* invokes is whether Hoggart's dilemma is not so much a failure of nerve as a structural problem of cultural critique that is still with

us. As opposed to the more detached anthropological or cultural-history survey of higher and lower taste cultures (which in Horowitz's book is represented by the studies of Herbert Gans), the logic of critique implies the sort of emphatic engagement with aesthetic forms that inevitably produces a felt division between higher and lower cultural objects. Surely Hoggart's acute sense that the newer lifestyles are culturally empty follows a generational shift of sensibilities and practices that would seem hardly specific to Birmingham or the 1950s. The dilemma that continues to haunt the genre of cultural critique is this: the more we apply our aesthetico-moral sensibilities to evaluate a 'scene' of cultural production, the harder it is for us realistically to gauge how much of our nausea or rapture is at all relevant beyond our most immediate community of practice.

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