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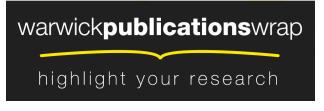http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/56489

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Collins, Jim (2010) *Bring on the books for everybody: How literary culture became popular culture*, **Durham & London: Duke University Press**

The book industry shares with the arts sector a feeling of perpetual siege and decline. On the evidence of this book, for the former, this narrative contrasts with a reality of commercial boom-times enabled by an expanding and inclusive popular literary culture. Building on foundations laid in his earlier works on the commercial successes of 'high' culture, Jim Collins here skilfully outlines a new 'ecology' of the literary field which takes full account of emerging ways in which literary works are circulated and read.

The book is focussed on the US but many of the transformations will be familiar to British and European readers. The rise of chain book stores, television book clubs, the digitalising of reading and recommendations, via the e-Reader and *Amazon* and the re-emergence of the literary adaptation on film and TV are all, according to Collins, contributing to significant changes to the 'infrastructure' of contemporary reading. These changes, he argues, require the re-thinking of enduring assumptions about the relative status and site of literary culture. The book locates the changing interactions between old and new forms of cultural technology in the context of debates about 'convergence culture' following Jenkins (2006). This approach reveals some telling manifestations of the relationships between literature, film, new media and commerce –such as Nobel laureate Tony Morrison advertising Kindles or Jane Austen's appearance on a Hollywood 'power list'. The occasionally playful and ironic analysis, interspersed with some revealing reflections on the author's own practices as a teacher, researcher and reader, makes for a lively and thought-provoking read.

Collins' location within academic film studies comes through in three central chapters which explore the historical relationship between literature and film. These outline the rejection of a patrician (British) literary culture by early US film producers –and latterly cinephiles- in the formation of taste cultures for film. An equal and opposite reaction to this rejection is subsequently found in the 'Miramaxization' of the movies, which has led to an increasingly symbiotic contemporary relationship between film producers and literary publishers. The result is a hybrid cine-literary culture in which adaptations of complex literary works (*No Country for Old Men*, *Atonement*) can appeal across traditionally antagonistic taste cultures, allowing them to be, at the same time, art films, popular genre films, prize-winners and, importantly, literary texts. Collins also reveals, through analysis of *Shakespeare in Love*, *The English Patient* and *The Hours* that processes of adaptation do not simplify literary texts as critics might have claimed in the past. Instead, the inter-relationships between books and films suggest that these media are *partners* in the processes by which 'the literary' as a taste formation is circulated. The literary is visualised – but also literature, literary production and 'the life of books' are, in films like *The Hours*, *The Reader*, *Capote*, in various ways *dramatised*. There is some rhetorical gloss given to this argument – if this book was a film one might find some audience members screaming at the screen at the suggestion of *Shakespeare in Love* as 'literary' - but the broader point, that visual media and literary taste cultures need now to be thought of as mutually reinforcing forces in the literary infrastructure, is convincing.

This challenge to the myth that literary, visual and commercial cultures are somehow separate and pure also allows the book to contribute to on-going debates about the place of the literary in policy narratives. A recurring motif of the book is a critique of the simplicity of the NEA's *Reading at Risk* evidence for literary decline which had been co-opted by recent policy bodies and initiatives, including the UK's National Year of Reading in 2008. Collins importantly points out that the identification of reading – and, in the case of the NEA, *literary* reading in particular as one element of an educative project (along with going to the museum or classical music concert) belies the extent to which contemporary literary readers also associate their tastes with watching television, shopping, lifestyle magazines etc. Collins argues that 'the relationship between reading literary fiction and this particular range of associated tastes needs to be explored more fully, because both are predicated on the search for self-defining aesthetic pleasures that are themselves dependent on quality consumerism, outside the sanctified spaces of the academy and the museum'(236). A policy imperative which encourages people to engage with literary culture because it is, in some way, good for them, doesn't quite capture that more nuanced reality.

In two closing chapters Collins presents an intriguing account of the contemporary 'post-literary' culture revealed through the analysis of highly visible writers and books - the 'devoutly literary bestsellers' in which a love of books and literature becomes the subjects of the narratives. Such texts (e.g. *Shadow of the Wind*, *Saturday*) contribute to a re-imagining of literariness as a consumable lifestyle accoutrement. 'Post-literary writers' (Collins identifies Candice Bushell, Nick Hornby, Tom Perrota amongst others) associate themselves with the writers of the past (Henry James, Edith Wharton, Jane Austen) and their characters often face dilemmas which are somehow solved through the reading of, and learning the lessons from, the great books of the past. The author becomes a kind of curator or guide, in this conception, and literary reading becomes a kind of therapy or self-help. The recognition of books as special resources in this process, though, goes alongside marketing and promotion strategies which place books alongside other kinds of lifestyle commodities, ripe for use in the crafting of a contemporary aesthetic identity and a tastefully appointed 'room of one's own'. This is an extension, drawing on Colin Campbell's (1987) work, of the often ignored historical inter-relations between the historical development of literary reading as a past-time and the development of consumerism itself. The nostalgia for a pure literary past becomes a means for contemporary readers to distinguish themselves from an apparently less literary present – even as the evidence of the success of literary culture in terms of book sales and media visibility – suggests that the literary is very firmly embedded in contemporary consumer culture.

This is the kind of analysis with which to ruin dinner parties – and is none the worse for that. At the same time, though, just because books, DVDs, designer furniture and fashion coalesce in the imagination of literary marketeers, it does not necessarily follow that readers, viewers and consumers buy into a taste culture entire – or that new cultural taste formations have entirely replaced or usurped established ones. A general criticism of the book might be that, aside from some revealing speculation that emerges from debate with his students and an 'ethnography' of Amazon reviews, much of the argument rests on Collins' interpretation of the semiotic universes in which specific books, writers or films are located. Whilst the arguments are compelling, we might need more evidence about actual readers and their practices to be wholly convinced that these cultural and technological developments do anything more than enable the increased participation of the already participating, - of what Wendy Griswold(2008) has identified as the

'reading class'. As a timely starting point for a conversation about a changing literary landscape and as a challenge to the priorities and assumptions of literary/literacy policy makers, though, this book is a valuable resource.

Campbell, C. (1987) *The romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Griswold, Wendy (2008) *Regionalism and the reading class*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2006) *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*, New York: New York University Press.

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