BOOK REVIEW

Masculine Misuse

Raymond Malewitz. 2014, *The Practice of Misuse: Rugged Consumerism in Contemporary American Culture*, **Stanford: Stanford University Press. ISBN: 9780804791960 US$55.00**

Sarah Gleeson-White

University of Sydney

Corresponding author: Sarah Gleeson-White, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney, Sydney NSW 2005, Australia. sarah.gleeson-white@sydney.edu.au

In this fascinating examination of the ways literary (including theatrical) culture has engaged with the 'practice of misuse' from the 1960s through to the present, Raymond Malewitz invokes a new cultural figure to mediate between humans and objects: 'the rugged consumer'. With origins in the rugged individualism of the nineteenth-century frontiersman, the rugged consumer, who is invariably a white male, creatively misuses or repurposes objects to either left- or right-leaning ends to suit his own needs and desires beyond the purpose for which these objects might originally have been designed. Malewitz draws on both Heidegger and Bill Brown in his configuration of the rugged consumer. In his introduction to thing theory, Brown provides a number of macho scenarios in which we:

> *confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.*[1]

Malewitz goes a little further; not only does the rugged consumer 'call forth the thing from the object' but he has the potential to:

> *suspend the various networks of power that dictate the proper use of a given artifact and to allow those networks of power to be understood as contingent strategies that must*

---

1   Bill Brown, 'Introduction to "Thing Theory"', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, p. 4.

be perpetually renewed and reinforced rather than naturalized processes that persist untroubled through time and space. (6–7)

This compelling claim underpins the chapters that follow, a series of fine arguments pursued via elegant close readings of works by Sam Shepard, Thomas Pynchon, Chuck Palahniuk, Don De Lillo and Cormac McCarthy, a line-up noticeably lacking in women (although Margaret Atwood receives brief mention in the concluding chapter) and non-white writers and consumers.

The first chapter focuses on Shepard in the context of the off-off-Broadway theatre of the 1960s and 1970s whose 'repurposed theaters'—a cafe, clothing boutique, activist church—provided opportunities for young artists to practice tactical behaviours 'whether it be scavenging for theatrical props or stealing electricity from the New York City power grid'. (112) Malewitz begins by reading the detritus that appears in the opening scenes of several of Shepard's plays: *4 H Club*, *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* and *Red Cross*. Most critics have read these objects in terms of entropy; Malewitz, however, argues that 'objects on Shepard's stage are wrenched from the original contexts and placed within the sphere of art' to remind us that both humans and objects, and the relations among them, require 'constant renewal if they are to avoid the empty roles assigned to each by the dominant technocratic human-object interactions'. (75)

In the next chapter, Malewitz draws on the work of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett to further consider the social life of objects, in particular the productive relationship of nonhuman and human agents as it appears in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. He argues that the novel's objects—specifically, celluloid and the rocket—are not merely 'objects that carry out singular functions; they are also subjects within a network of dynamic and highly irregular interchanges'. (85) The great tragedy of the novel is, according to Malewitz, that these technologies 'are deprived of such an agency and become singular extensions of human will'. (81) Yet, in the end, *Gravity's Rainbow* attests to the fact that a 'Utopian change in perspective not only has the ability to effect change in our environmentally devastated world; it can also enable us to glimpse the world around us as a vibrant and fully democratic community of animate and inanimate bodies.' (111)

While the first two chapters focus on left-libertarian communities of 'rugged consumption' in opposition to governmental and industrial powers, the proceeding chapters are concerned with their counterpart: those individual rugged consumers who appear merely to recapitulate, to different degrees, the neoliberalism of the 1980s and 1990s, and thus function to index the failure of American liberalism. In Chapter 4, Malewitz reads Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and De Lillo's *Underworld* as depictions of 'the limits of rugged consumerism as a platform for structural rather than simply individual change'. (117) Situating these novels in a genealogy of the myth of the frontier, which re-emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, he identifies a conflicted rugged consumerism: on the one hand, an oppositional consumerism as each of the protagonists 'begins to manipulate the commodities that surround him' (118); and on the other, an acknowledgement of 'the clear overlap between do-it-yourself modes of production and the era's go-it-yourself neoliberal policies'. Rugged consumerism as depicted in both *Fight Club* and *Underworld*, then, 'often reinforces at the structural level what it undermines at the level of affect'. (118)

Chapter 5 considers more recent manifestations of the rugged consumer in the context of the rugged individualism of the frontier. Here, the rugged consumer intuits 'a new "moral philosophy" predicated upon free market systems, rugged individualism, and governmental

policies 'liberated' from the strictures of older modes of collectivist behaviors'. (151) Malewitz opens this chapter with a compelling reading of the television show *MacGyver* (1985–1992), the protagonist of which is a self-reliant special agent, 'a modern-day Daniel Boone', aligned with the neoliberal turn of the Reagan administration. Cormac McCarthy's oeuvre is the real focus of this chapter, however, particularly his 2005 *No Country for Old Men* with its well-known affection for *things*. McCarthy, Malewitz argues, 'dirties the heroic sheen of the rugged consumer' by depicting the *victims* of American neoliberalism; his characters become 'divorced from stable communities and productive identities by the structures of late capitalism'. (156) Indeed, they frequently 'creatively misuse' as a matter of nothing more than survival. There is thus nothing celebratory about or liberating in McCarthy's depictions of rugged consumers.

Malewitz concludes this admirably ambitious study of creative misuse in brief readings of two post-9/11 apocalyptic narratives, McCarthy's *The Road* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and in the process reminds us why the literary imagination matters: it 'offers partial solutions to the cognitive, industrial, and ecological endgames of late capitalism by not simply reflecting the current repurposing culture but also by asking us to reimagine the creative relationships between humans and all objects that populate our worlds'. (189) It is for this very reason, I'd suggest, that an account of misuse in works by women or ethnically identified writers is likely to reveal the limits of a model of consumption whose roots lie in the discourse of imperial expansion.

About the author

Sarah Gleeson-White is a senior lecturer in American Literature in the Department of English, University of Sydney. http://sydney.edu.au/arts/english/staff/profiles/sarah.gleeson-white.php

Bibliography

Brown, B., 'Introduction to "Thing Theory"', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1–22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/449030