

as an example to promote dialogue and harmony rather than clash and hegemony between civilizations. His book is a welcome and timely contribution not only to English studies, but also to the fields of cultural studies, women's studies, and studies in world literature.

Peter Swirski

From Lowbrow to Nobrow

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Reviewed by Selina Lai

If a good work to T. S. Eliot is one that embraces integrity in tradition yet transcends time and place in its reinvention, then the six coherent chapters of Peter Swirski's *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* are an indispensable read. The first half of the book is a synthetic overview of highbrow and lowbrow art and their kinship. Chapter one uncovers the historical facts behind the functioning of popular fiction, and chapter two analyzes the emergent nobrow aesthetics, while chapter three focuses on the discussion of genres. In the latter half of the book, the writer analyzes three "nobrow" works: Karel Čapek's *War With the Newts* (1936), Raymond Chandler's *Playback* (1958), and Stanislaw Lem's *The Chain of Chance* (1976). *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* not only compels its audience to rethink the idea of genre and the significance of popular art, but opens new cultural ground with myriad discussions.

Highbrow art and its scholars have long held a prejudice against its lowbrow kin. Comparing the two has been regarded as "mixing crab-apples and Sunkist oranges: fruitless at best, incommensurable at worst" (6). Using a synthesis of more than a century of aesthetic arguments, Swirski questions the presumption that *popular equals generic equals bad*. He proposes nobrow as a new analytic, pragmatic, and cultural category whereby "authors simultaneously target both extremes of the literary spectrum" (10). Already by the first decades of the twentieth century, the distinction between the two had diffused into what Swirski names *artertainment*.

Original and thought provoking at every step, Swirski begins with a cross-national look at the development trend in the publishing industry to account for the partial treatment and reception of genre literature, as well as what affects beliefs still that undermine many institutional curricula. While the public is concerned with decreasing literacy and the demise of books in the U.S., Swirski's meticulous research shows otherwise. In the world of inundated print where competition is keen, many writers try to satisfy mainstream tastes to obtain enough readership. While inferior writing is often associated with genre literature, the writer seeks justification by positioning it between popular and canonical art in *relative terms*.

Swirski intrigues his audience with four critiques on *trivialliteratur* claiming that it (1) mass produces for profit making; (2) borrows from “serious” fiction and lures away talents; (3) poses an emotional and cognitive threat to readers and readership; and (4) lowers the cultural level of the reading public. He contends that commercialism happens in “highart” too due to a lack of government subsidies and wealthy patrons. Whereas many genre writers who address social problems and politics could not care less about filling their pockets, some attempt ambitious projects to make a difference. He holds that reading is a “matter of choice rather than cultural and ideological brain-washing” (57).

Swirski then invites his audience to adopt a pragmatic approach to the concept genre, which he denies to be empirically definable. For ten years the author championed a groundbreaking approach to the study of literary texts that relies deeply on mathematic game theory. Here, he once again proposes an original and immediately applicable model of genre as a “cooperative two-person non-zero-sum game.” While reading is a free-form game that involves ambiguity, vagueness, and even radical misinterpretation, writers also react for or against genres to communicate their (reflexive) intentions to the readers.

Flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic, *War With the Newts*, *Playback*, and *The Chain of Chance* are chosen as much for chronological continuity as for being representative of literary trends that cross national, political, and linguistic boundaries. What connects the Czech, the American, and the Pole in the American literati is their refusal to succumb to either academic or the “bestseller-and-moccacino chains” formula. Swirski heeds the rules Čapek uses in his social satire, and ingeniously observes Chandler’s reversal of such rules in his work. Likewise, Lem goes as far as to subvert “not only the structural but the moral imperative of detective literature: the meting out of justice” (154).

With an impressive array of statistics and well-chosen illustrations and case studies, this interdisciplinary study breaks from traditional academic discussion of popular art and the literary canon. Another source of pleasure is Swirski’s crisp, wry, and dashing prose; for an academic book, this one reads like a piece of racy journalism—or a detective story of its own. *From Lowbrow to Nobrow* will be widely enjoyed by both academics and the public, and will likely become an indispensable textbook in every classroom where literature is taught. The writer recalls his countless readings of Ed McBain, Marti Cruz Smith, and Brain Azzarello/Eduardo Riso and describes them as refreshing discoveries, filled with anticipation and aesthetic satisfaction every time. The same goes for *From Lowbrow to Nobrow*.