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An Impure Criticism

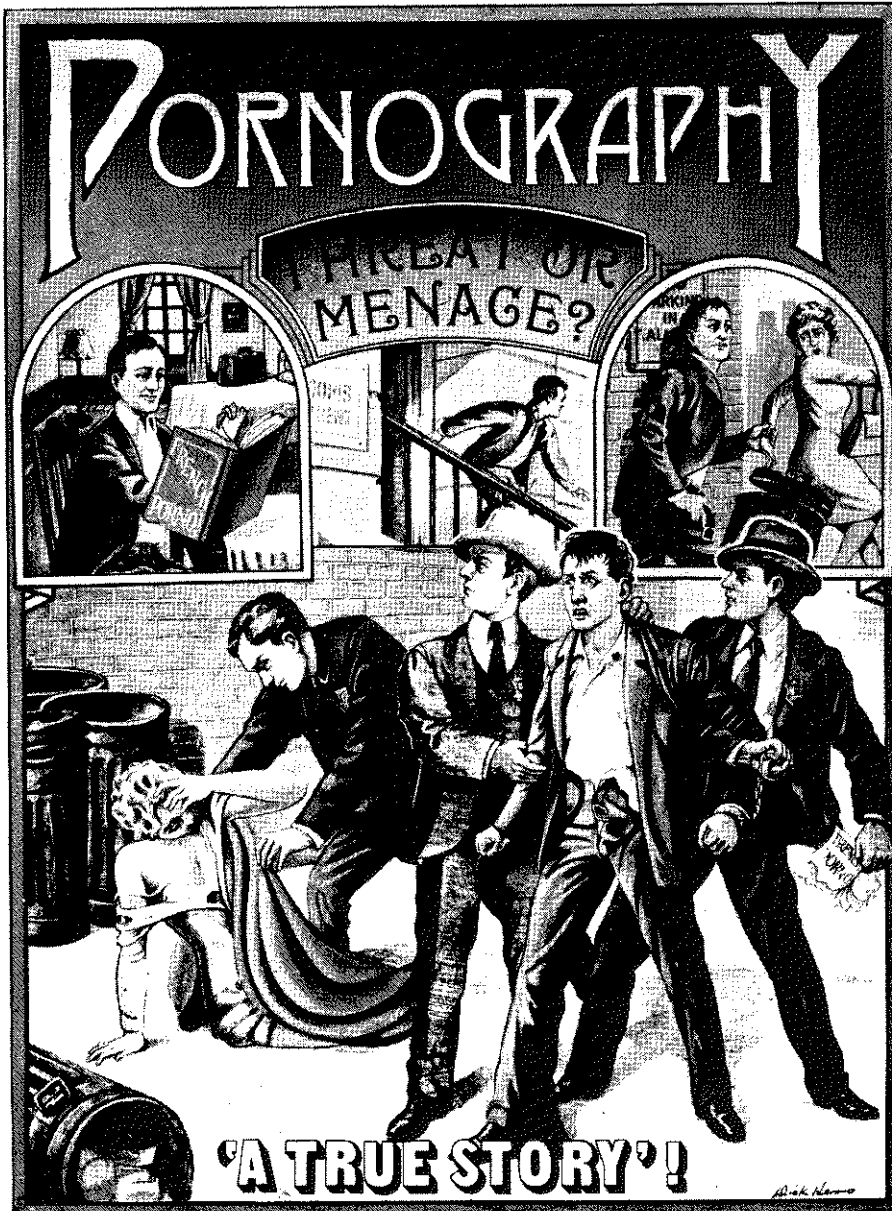
**No Respect:
Intellectuals and
Popular Culture**
by Andrew Ross

New York & London: Routledge, 1989,
269 pp.

What links together such disparate events as the US espionage show trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the mass culture debates of the 1950s, bebop jazz, television game show scandals, cultural imperialism, the Pop and camp moments of popular culture, and current debates on pornography? In *No Respect*, these are several of the symbolic moments through which Andrew Ross tracks the "traditional antagonisms" between intellectuals and "popular culture" in the US. Ross's wide-ranging analysis describes a selective but carefully intertwined series of epochal events and movements, and attempts to undermine *en route* the tension between "popular 'anti-intellectualism' on the one hand, and educated 'disdain' on the other."

When Rodney Dangerfield returns to university as an overaged benefactor-turned-student in the film *Back to School* (1986), he is given "no respect." But Dangerfield draws on his own life experiences to contest the pretentious academic claims to knowledge of the professoriate, conceding "no respect" to those who have power over him. While Dangerfield's obstinate rejection of the academic regime of transcendental truths is symbolic of popular distrust for intellectuals, his dubious reception in the university is symptomatic of high culture disdain for vulgar common sense. And though Dangerfield's narrative works to poke some fun at the dry seriousness of the university, Ross points out that it also serves finally to fortify the cultural authority of those who "know best."

With *No Respect*, Ross is trying to chart a course for "American Cultural Studies" which can navigate the treacherous waters between "the prestigious but undemocratic, Europeanized contempt for 'mass culture'" and "the more celebratory native tradition of gee-whizzery." Ross suggests



that it is not enough for histories of popular culture to focus solely on the producers and consumers of cultural messages and products, but they must also include traditional intellectuals, the arbiters of cultural taste, "those experts in culture whose traditional business is to define what is popular and what is legitimate, who patrol the ever shifting borders of popular and legitimate taste, who supervise the passports, the temporary visas, the cultural identities, the threatening 'alien' elements, and the deportation orders, and who occasionally make their own adventurer forays across the borders."

Ross draws on the work of French critic Pierre Bourdieu to show how "categories of taste, which police the differentiated middleground, are also categories of cultural power which play upon every suggestive trace of difference in order to tap the sources of indignity, on the one hand, and 'hauteur' on the other." Cultural power in this context is "the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste." Thus, intellectuals have had to invent a *cordon sanitaire* for their "adventurist forays" into the world of the popular, adapting to this purpose categories of intellectual taste like "hip," "camp," "bad" or "sick" taste. Ross remarks that "hip is the first on the block to know

what's going on, but it wouldn't be seen dead at a block party." If Bourdieu is taken far enough it becomes apparent "that the exercise of taste not only presupposes distinctive social categories," but it "helps to create them." Indeed some of these categories of taste "have also served as initially powerful conduits for expression of social desire that would otherwise be considered illegitimate," as in the case of the "hip" and "camp" moments of the civil rights and gay rights movements.

No Respect tracks the relationship of intellectuals to the so-called popular culture in the US from the 1930s to the present. The book is episodic by design, made up of a series of "close readings" of "iconic moments" in recent cultural history. Although annoying at times, the leap-frogging narrative nonetheless allows Ross to resist closure, shifting instead from one allegory to another, each of which serves to inflect the introductory theoretical chapter in a distinct way. Ross deals with "four, primarily generational, cultural moments" which are not methodologically governed by "strict or absolute



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definitions of the role or function of intellectuals." These are: the intellectuals of the Old Left and bohemian intellectuals of the Underground subcultures; the counterculture and the New Left; Pop intellectuals and celebrities; intellectuals of the liberation movements. Rather than try to sum up each of these historical trajectories, Ross's brand of "impure criticism" makes it "necessary at times to refuse any high theoretical ground or vantage point" and instead "to enter into the fray."

Ross launches directly into an account of the show trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, describing the reaction of cold war liberals such as Leslie Fiedler to what was perceived as the Rosenbergs' middlebrow tendencies. Says Ross: "For the intellectual, 'ordinary,' like middlebrow, is not a code in itself; it is defined against, or is signified by its transgression or corruption of other codes like those of the 'vernacular' or the 'literary.'" That the Rosenbergs were aligned with the Popular Front and its cultural "levelling" eschewal of "serious" art was bad enough, but that they wrote public letters proclaiming their faith in the popular made them threatening to US anti-Stalinists. Somehow, Ethel's proclamation that "we are the first victims of American Fascism" just did not mesh with the image of an 'ordinary' couple who liked folk music and the Dodgers. Ross points out that while the Rosenbergs weathered one of the greatest show trials in US history, they were simultaneously tried and condemned on literary grounds by critics such as Fiedler. And, to complicate matters, critics of Fiedler such as Harold Rosenberg and Morris Dickstein "tend to reproduce the critical strategy" by which the Rosenbergs were stripped "of all their contents," hence condemning Fiedler to the same "critical death" to which he had sentenced the Rosenbergs.

What is required in this context is a more self-reflective cultural politics that does not limit itself to arm's-length discussions of an imagined, or imaginary, "popular." This seems to be Ross's motive for focussing on the role of intellectuals, a social grouping in which he is deeply implicated. Ross also identifies a larger project which cultural studies must come to terms with: "the problem of petty bourgeois taste, culture and expression remains to this day a largely neglected question of cultural studies and a formidable obstacle to left cultural politics." Unfortunately, for all of Ross's incisive readings of popular movements and their reception "chez les intellectuels," he tends to fall short in his discussion of how intellectual currents are felt by common folk. His references to "committing critical speech to common, vernacular ground" and "not pricing one's discourse out of the market of popular meanings" are hardly born out in this volume and, though not promised, underscore a point which bears mention: this book is written by a professional intellectual and is addressed primarily to an academic or artistic audience. If no one else is listening, then Ross is condemned, like a dog biting its tail, to live the lie which he tells, that an "impure

criticism" can ever be more than a theoretical whistling in the wind.

On the other hand, Ross's episodic history makes for interesting reading and I, for one, am convinced by his case for an "impure" version of critical theory. Others have, of course, already labelled this same rhetorical stance; Stuart Hall recently referred to this as "engaging in the dirtiness of the semiotic game" (U. Mass.-Amherst, Feb. 27, 1989). For Ross, an "impure criticism" requires "putting aside the big social picture, forsaking polemical purity, speaking out of character, taking the messy part of consumption at the cost of a neat critical analysis of production." To facilitate this analysis, Ross borrows the concept of the conservative unconscious from psychoanalysis, an unconscious that can learn, but that "just cannot be taught in any direct way." As played through popular culture, this is the ground where

horetz. In "Candid Cameras," Ross tackles, among other things, monolithic theories of media imperialism like that of Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (*How to Read Donald Duck*, 1975) which do not leave room for oppositional readings. In "Uses of Camp," Ross links pop and camp as two crucial moments in popular culture, describing camp on the one hand as "that category of cultural taste which shaped, defined, and negotiated the way in which sixties intellectuals were able to 'pass' as subscribers to the throwaway Pop aesthetic," and on the other hand as having had implications for the sexual liberation movements in general, and for the sexual politics of gay men in particular. These movements, in turn, have influenced Ross's own cultural politics and the central thesis of *No Respect* itself: "the spirit of resistance on the part of civil rights, the women's and gay liberation movements to vertical

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people's contradictory feelings of resentment and deference to knowledge and authority "are transformed into pleasure which is often more immediately satisfying than it is 'politically correct.'" Another feature of "impure criticism" is that it allows Ross to directly address issues of race, gender and ("marginal") sexuality in his cultural politics, as reflected across the range of cultural moments in *No Respect*, where popular culture and new social movements nearly intersect. As a WASP-male-identified-person (who tries to be anti-racist, gay-positive and feminist), I find some comfort in this development, that the new-found centrality of formerly marginal voices in contemporary questions of race, class and gender should not necessarily preclude the participation of formerly central, now negotiated, voices.

In "Hip and the Long Front of Color," a study which evokes Dick Hebdige's "phantom history of race relations" in *Subculture* (1979), Ross describes what he refers to as the "overexchanged and overbartered record of miscegenated cultural production," symbolized most vividly in the white hipster figures of Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac and Norman Pod-

forms of left organization and to centralizing explanations of power, has quite clearly shaped my often unfavorable treatment of the vanguardist intellectual tradition."

Ross closes his case on the feminist "anti-antiporn" intellectuals who embody a "more exemplary model of intellectual engagement and activism," in contrast to the vanguardist "tradition of suspicion, recruitment and disaffiliation." Says Ross: "what the anti-antiporn position embodies could be read as a full bill of rights for a new social contract between intellectuals and popular culture, or, conversely, as an epitaph for older ones." Ross hails a generation of "new intellectuals" who valorize popular culture as a site of contestation, and who recognize the uneven development of contradictions of life in capitalist cultures; in short, the emergence of the progenitors of a "political criticism" which will enable "a more popular, less guilt-ridden, cultural politics for our times."

Theirs is the agenda of the "liberatory

imagination," a stance which fundamentally departs from the "libertarian imagination" in imagining an alternative world, in imagining that there could be "anything else."

According to Ross, it is crucial for intellectuals to forsake "the intellectual option of hectoring from on high," to learn to live with contradictions. This is an ongoing theme of Ross's work, a sustained critique of "political correctness." In *Men in Feminism* (Jardine and Smith, 1987), Ross speaks of the "invocations of correctness and fears of incorrectness alike," reflected in the MLA sessions on "Men in Feminism," which characterize the negotiations of women and men over a space for men in feminism. Ross finds it ironic that strict notions of "correct" politics, this spectre of feminism's own historical repudiation of Left-Leninist thinking, would now emerge from within the feminist community. However, regardless of how many times we say that the unconscious is fundamentally conservative, that we must wait for the unconscious to learn because it will not be taught, these are hypothetical and ahistorical assertions. One does not have to read much Andrea Dworkin to feel the anger seething beneath the perhaps essentialist, closed prose. Nor should it be a surprise that the anger (and fear) which motivated "Take Back the Night" marches across North America should find its way into text. Anti-antiporn feminists may be right in bringing pleasure back to the fore, and also in claiming something in common between feminism and pornography, both of which have insisted that women are sexual beings and have made sex an experience open to public examination and debate. However, these same anti-antiporn feminists would hardly repudiate issues of danger as a formative influence to the women's liberation movement.

This may seem patently obvious to Andrew Ross, and to the many readers who are familiar with the contours of the pornography debate. Nonetheless, it calls into question Ross's own political correctness in choosing to minimize the resonance which the anti-porn position has for both intellectuals and "ordinary" folk. In my view the weak link of his discussion of "The Popularity of Pornography" is his reference to Al Goldstein, "the ebullient publisher of *Screw*," "who boasted, in 1973, that if he caught his wife cheating on him, he would probably 'break her legs off and pull her clit off and shove it in her left ear.'" Ross states that "while obviously horrific" this comment "can be read as a contextual reference, unconscious or otherwise, to the displacement of the clitoris into the heroine of *Deep Throat*." Whether Goldstein, an organic intellectual of the pornography industry, had to wait to discover the clitoris at a film targeted to "an audience with higher interests than the simple pleasure of arousal" is questionable; more disturbing, however, is the ongoing conflation of sexual education and liberation with misogyny. Of course, this is the nasty side of "impure criticism," that "what the truck driver wants" might entail contradictory positions which are

offensive, not only to intellectuals with a liberatory agenda, but also to those at the receiving end of racism, sexism and other bigotries.

It seems that *No Respect* does quite a few of the things it takes other intellectuals to task for: it has its own "highly priced discourse," its own "correctness" and its own "big social picture." However, in calling for a self-reflective cultural politics for our times, *No Respect* is both refreshing and elucidating. Ross's book is, after all, a manifesto for more than just critical reflection; it also calls for action. It interpellates its readers as the "new intellectuals" with a "liberatory imagination," but without the "preachy disdain of technology, popular culture, and everyday materialism" of an earlier generation. With Foucault, Ross suggests that as "specific intellectuals" we must limit our site of intervention to specific struggles that demand our specific knowledge and expertise. And in the case of "professional humanists," the area of contestation is "our specialist influence over the shaping of ethical knowledge and the education of taste." The task, according to Ross, is for professional intellectuals to find some "common ground" with a broader popular base. Ross warns: "But the challenge of such a politics is greater than ever, because, in an age of expert rule, the popular is perhaps the one field in which intellectuals are least likely to be experts." ♦

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Hollywood Narrative in the 1940s

Power and Paranoia
by Dana Polan

New York: Columbia University Press,
1986, 336 pp.

Social historians and scholars of the Classical Hollywood cinema will find a wealth of useful information in Dana Polan's exhaustive and somewhat eclectic reexamination of American popular culture in the 1940s. *Power and Paranoia* is an attempt to give a fairly exhaustive analysis of some 700 films and numerous cultural documents released between 1940 and 1950.

Interweaving the work of a veritable who's who of social theory from Marx to Foucault, a cursory reading of hundreds of films and dozens of books, and a critical engagement with the work of other film theorists, the book is extremely ambitious in scope.

The author sets out to produce a "historical deconstruction" of some of the narrative strategies deployed by the American culture industry, especially the Hollywood cinema, during the decade that included the Second World War and the immediate post-war period. As Polan puts it:

I want to look at the ways that a dominant power and a disturbing paranoia interweave and find each to be a parodic image of the other. Power here is the power of a narrative system especially — the power that narrative structure specifically possesses to write an image of life as coherent, teleological, univocal ... Paranoia here will first be a fear of narrative, and the particular social representations it works to uphold, against all that threatens the unity of its logical framework.

In other words, Polan wants to show how the strategies of containment employed by the Hollywood cinema began to be unravelled by the social pressures of this rather unsettled period in American history. There is already a wealth of scholarship that places this shift in the American cinema at the end of the Second World War.