

between the formal support of democratic freedoms and state repression (both under Stalinism and McCarthyism). In a letter to Constance Webb (included in this collection) James insists that by giving the working people access to great art the cultural industries are making the contrast with their exploitation in production only more dramatic. The experience of reaching out for dominant knowledge could encourage a social movement that would reach out for everything in defense of the general interest.

This protagonism of the social subject in the new world was characteristic of industrial capitalism according to James. In another of the essays included in this anthology - "Preface to Criticism" - the author outlines a method of analysis whose evolution will be manifested in *Beyond a Boundary*. In both cases, the role of the audience, working people with a central role in history, is underscored. As the performance is symbolic of a larger social conflict, it gives the audience a better understanding of reality by increasing its awareness of the relations between the parts of the whole. The event is the interaction among the performers and the audience - whether it is a film, drama, dance or sport competition. In *Beyond a Boundary* James discusses the role of the newspaper in connecting world issues with daily life, in forging the natural popular that Jesús Martín-Barbero would write about twenty-five years later. Another ingredient in the process of nation building is the continuity of the cultural practices that carried our people through slavery, which James discusses in relation to the writing of Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Ntozake Shange.

Like Julio Antonio Mella and Jose Carlos Mariátegui before him, James insisted that an economic crisis was also a period of cultural reorganization. Unlike Marcus Garvey, James thought that the popular sectors could find their own way in such a situation. Long before Antonio Gramsci, José Martí had written about the need to reappropriate the national popular in Latin America without falling prey to populism. This is the tradition to which Mella, Mariátegui, and James contributed with their understanding of culture and the popular. In more recent times, Anibal Quijano, Francisco Weffort, Octavio Ianni, and Walter Rodney have taken up the task.

In articles such as "Popular Art and the Cultural Tradition" included in this selection, James identifies the mass audience as an urban characteristic of monopoly capitalism, whose logic also organizes the cultural industries (particularly film). Since mass culture conditions the way that people make sense of their history, James thought that cultural criticism also had to connect with mass audiences, which, while divided by economic crisis and therefore denied access to decisive experiences, nonetheless kept filling the movie houses because films presented a contrast with their daily life. This is the integrated approach to the study of social processes of communication as social relations that Carlos Monsiváis and Jesús Martín-Barbero have continued and complemented.

According to Grimshaw, James had a method which started by rejecting the colonized middle class which was busy imitating their British masters. Through direct observation and conversation with the popular sectors, James collected detailed information about how they connected world history and everyday life. He then wrote to create a synthesis from these memories, a synthesis that locates the relation between the popular audience and cultural tradition in the context of social conflict. The discussion of his method can be found in the "Preface to Criticism" which is also in this volume. Whether the pretext was *Moby Dick* or cricket, the purpose of the research was to place the evolution of human goals and values in a historical context, in order to make sense of collective, conscious, organized action which succeeded because the leadership knew when to follow the working people.

In the late forties when James was discussing the relation between mass culture and working people to integrate creative work and social history, the construction of a method of cultural criticism which seeks to inform social intervention becomes apparent. As James identifies the links among daily life, mass culture and art, the creative role of the audience as economic and cultural protagonist becomes progressively clearer. Once again James proceeds by identifying the tradition that organizes the discussion and the conditions that raise the question about the relation between the individual and democracy; then he analyses why there is no suitable answer for the majority

within the existing relations of force. This is what he was writing about during the McCarthy period as he faced deportation, while others were denouncing their colleagues and principles to protect a tawdry career.

As a person of color from the West Indies, socialized outside the rigors of the British Empire, I have often turned to the writings of James and Walter Rodney in order to make sense of my Canadian experience. Their work has identified the difference between negotiable conditions of cultural consumption and non-negotiable conditions of production which deny the possibility of multiple interpretation is by the new social protagonists.

For those of us raised in the islands of the West Indies, adapting to the environment with ease and humour is a necessity. This was particularly the case under formal colonialism when the colonized lived on two worlds, especially the petit bourgeois elements involved in "cultural affairs." For the latter, everyday life was directed towards the pursuit of imperial standards. In one way or another they were the local collaborators of the colonial bureaucrats. With the new order of the unified imperial North the writers and commentators of mass culture are still an important issue in cultural studies. The publication of James' work gives us a point of reference and comparison with which to evaluate the current fashion of analyzing the lives of the uprooted.

C.L.R. James did well in the North, in spite of breaking the rules, and much of what he wrote about the cricketer Constantine in *Beyond a Boundary* could also be applied to him: "Without a nation, a national hero can expect little more than applause; a region that can not keep its best children at home does not deserve to have them." In these difficult times for Latin America, and especially for the Caribbean, the precise vision which informed James answers to our most pressing questions in a tradition which challenges the practice of the present generations.

*Santiago Valles is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University.*

## The Same Old Tradition

BY Alan O'Connor

John Tomlinson, *Cultural Imperialism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Everyone (or, at least, all readers of this magazine) would maintain that cultural imperialism is a bad thing. Intellectuals and media audiences (not exclusive categories) generally agree that countries with powerful media industries should not impose their products on Third World and traditional societies. John Tomlinson's main argument about the subject is that the protest against cultural imperialism is usually made by intellectuals and elites who, in the Third World as elsewhere, claim to speak for the ordinary person. The epigraph for his book is a remark by Gilles Deleuze to Michel Foucault: "You were the first to teach us something absolutely fundamental: the indignity of speaking for others." The over-all effect of the book is to leave the field to the organic intellectuals of the transnational media corporations who find no indignity in taking far-reaching decisions for others.

In 1989 Central Television in Birmingham, England sent out a Christmas card with a photograph of an aboriginal family watching television in a remote part of Australia. It is evening and the family sits outside, their faces lit up by the luminous screen. Tomlinson begins his book by remarking that many readers will interpret the photo as evidence of the imposition of Western culture on a remote aboriginal community. The text on the Christmas card suggests this, but also notes that the community has set up its own broadcasting organization—the Walpiri Media Association—"to try to defend its unique culture from western culture." Tomlinson begins and ends his book with this image because he wants to argue that something rather different is happening and it is not media imperialism. He uses the photograph as a way of catching out readers in their assumption that this aboriginal family is watching advertisements or some foreign television series. Readers are forced to question their assumptions because in this photograph the family actually might be watching its



own community-produced programming.

The strategy here is exactly that of cable television companies who defend their monopoly control over the selection and distribution of video signals by pointing out that they do have a channel for local or public access programming. Tomlinson says nothing about the resources, the legal situation and the programming of the Walpiri Media Association. He does not compare its resources with those of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The reason for this is apparently that although he had easy access to the photograph which was distributed in England by Central Television, he did not have access to Eric Michaels' monograph on the Walpiri Media Association. *For a Cultural Future* is published by Art & Text in Melbourne and is not widely distributed.

In his introduction, Tomlinson acknowledges the irony of writing a book on media imperialism from England and publishing it in one of the world's hegemonic languages. He deals with this by invoking Blaise Pascal's advice to a young nobleman about his position of privilege. The advice was to remember that in his dealings with others that he was a nobleman only by accident of birth. This astonishing turn of argument may divert the reader's attention from a serious practical limitation of this book. Tomlinson has written a book on cultural imperialism which draws only on materials published in the English language. The book is based on a very selective range of published sources.

Tomlinson turns his attention to writers on media imperialism such as Herbert Schiller and Armand Mattelart.

He makes two moves against their generalizing argument that U.S. media dominate the world. The first argument is to separate the realm of the economic from that of the cultural. Tomlinson bows before the evidence of political economy research. Transnational corporations, especially those based in the USA, by and large dominate the world in the production and distribution of mass media. However, he insists that this economic domination tells us nothing about its cultural domination. It is somewhat astonishing to find such an insistence on culture as being autonomous from economics. Such a claim was made in Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" essay. It has been widely criticized, by Raymond Williams among others, as hopelessly inadequate to the multiple ways in which culture and economy are intertwined in consumer societies in design, fashion, advertising, marketing and the operation of the media industries themselves. As a result of the limitations in Althusser's essays, cultural studies turned its attention to Gramsci and to studies of the institution of meaning, value and power.

Tomlinson's second argument against Schiller and Mattelart is the now-familiar one that the audience is active in interpreting and resisting the meanings embedded in the media product. Here Tomlinson draws on research into the "active audience" by Morley, Ang, Katz and Liebes. The widespread circulation among liberal intellectuals of a very small number of studies of audience reception of mass media deserves some serious scrutiny. What is it about these studies that has attracted such attention? Pierre Bourdieu has researched the use of art and culture in



France since the 1960s. Why is his work not given the same attention?

There are two types of research into the "active audience." The first stresses the role of individual psychology or life experience in the selective perception of media. The second seeks to show patterns of media use, which are invariably very complex, by education, occupation, geography (especially differences between city and country), gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity. Many of the studies of reception which are continually cited are unsystematic "pilot studies" or ethnographic research which because of their limited research design, exclude the possibility of discovering anything but personal preferences or very simple patterns in media use (especially differences between men and women). The Katz and Liebes study of *Dallas* viewers in Israel is more systematic but is flawed by the repetition of a much-criticized distinction between "traditional" and "modern" personalities from Katz's early work on media and national development in the Third World. Not surprisingly Katz and Liebes discovered that viewers of *Dallas* fall into two categories: traditional Arab viewers who see it as about an extended family like their own and modern Israeli and American viewers who continually foreground the fact that *Dallas* is fictional television.

Fuenzalida and Hermosilla's study of television viewers in Chile demonstrates the kind of complex structural pattern of individual responses and choices that a reader of Bourdieu might expect to find. They studied the reception of television among the following: poor urban women in the Greater Santiago area, *campesinos* in rural areas, rural youth, rural women and community leaders. These groups use and enjoy television in different ways, but are also sharply critical about how their own lives are never shown on the screen. They make many detailed and imaginative suggestions to improve television. The book is part of debates in Chile about the future of television in the post-Pinochet era.

Studies which stress individual choices in media preferences and reception are widely read and circulated among liberal intellectuals. But studies which show complex social structural patterns in media use and reception are generally ignored. Liberal intellectuals are unwilling to think through the complex inter-rela-

tionships of social class, gender, race and other factors because such work requires an intellectual commitment to the formation of complex theories of class and social structure and this goes against the grain of liberal assumptions.

One of the major criticisms leveled at cultural imperialism is that it is an attack on national culture. Here Tomlinson claims that Marxists have difficulty dealing with the topic and draws instead on Benedict Anderson's description of nationalism as a historically constructed "imagined community." Tomlinson makes another sharp distinction, this time between culture and politics. His point is that politics (the nation) does not relate one-to-one with culture (ethnic and other differences within the nation). This theoretical distinction is quite the reverse of the direction of an important Marxist thinker on national culture. Gramsci's whole point was to show the political implications of a "national popular" culture. What Gramsci wanted to point out is how popular culture is more or less linked with to one of several competing versions of national identity and how this is part of the complex processes of the cultural/political hegemony of the ruling bloc.

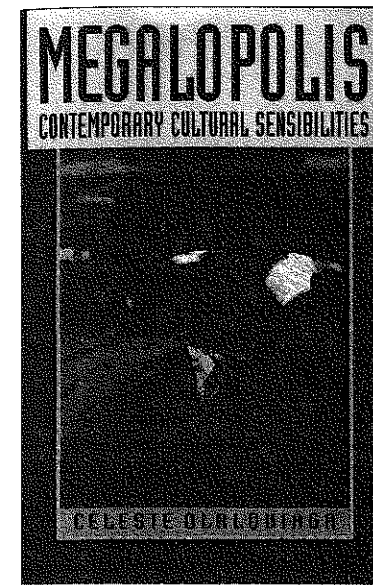
Tomlinson repeatedly refers in his book to "capitalist modernity." This is part of his argument for a shift in attention from space (geography and imperialism) to time (traditional and modern cultures). His account of capitalist modernity places very little emphasis on class inequality. He also neglects class and anti-colonial struggle as processes which form and transform collective identities. Instead, drawing on Marshall Berman, he focuses on the personal experience of modern culture which provokes a crisis of meaning at the level of the individual. At this point it becomes clear that Tomlinson actually has no sense of the collective nature of culture and that by "culture" he exclusively means processes of individual self-understanding. The major cultural issues for Tomlinson are not cultural at all, but are existential issues of the meaning of life: the purpose of one's own birth, life and death.

This leads to the conclusion of Tomlinson's book. His argument in the end is that the source of angst in the developing world is not cultural imperialism or media imperialism, not even capitalist culture, but the transition from a traditional to a modern society. The key difference

between the two is that in traditional society Tomlinson imagines that existential issues about the meaning of an individual life do not arise. Following a traditional lifestyle by definition means not questioning it because it is not one possible life but the only life. It is only in modern society that choices and possibilities open up and with that the individual existential questions of the meaning of it all.

This is, of course, exactly the position of pre-1960's anthropology and sociology of development. Levi-Strauss was enthusiastically read in the 1960s because he broke with this and insisted that the intellectual activity of "pre-modern" societies was the same as that of "modern" societies. Against the implicit racism of notions of primitive mentalities, Levi-Strauss showed that the intellectual activity of story-tellers and artists and healers in "pre-modern" societies has the same characteristics as modern science. Tomlinson has fallen back into the older position of an absolute difference. In sociology and the new field of media studies in the 1950s it was said that traditional societies were characterized by the social-psychological absence of "empathy." For Daniel Lerner, traditional societies remained the way they were only because their members could not even imagine that their lives (or anybody else's life) might be different. Tomlinson ends by taking the same position.

Alan O'Connor is a member of the Border/Lines Collective.



### Vicarious Sensibilities or Vicarious Criticism?

BY Alison Hearn

Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

*Megalopolis*, a collection of five essays, takes as its subject the postmodern "state of things." In each essay Olalquiaga explicates aspects of the contemporary postmodern 'condition' and gives examples from the urban scene as she perceives it; examples range from shopping malls, to World Fairs, to religious icons, to junk art, to Brazilian carnivals. The purpose of the book, Olalquiaga claims, "is to describe how such an apparently finite project as postmodernism, understood as the glorification of consumption, does in fact enable the articulation of novel and often contradictory experiences." Each chapter is just such a "description," with liberal amounts of orthodox postmodern theory thrown in for good measure. Olalquiaga unfailingly looks for the good, or momentarily liberatory, in the signifying practices and products she describes. But ironically, she is at her best when focusing on the baser, more violent and compromised aspects of contemporary culture.

The prologue of *Megalopolis* is a summary of the standard theoretical constructs of contemporary postmodern theory. What with the obligatory "flattening of

meaning and the exhaustion of modernism," "the celebration of difference in cultural identities," "the glorification of consumption as an autonomous practice," "the collapse of time into space," and "referential emptiness," we are inundated with a veritable smorgasbord of pomo formulations.

Perhaps the most central and, definitely, the most poignant of these formulations is Olalquiaga's description of the "vicariousness" of contemporary sensibilities and experiences. High technology has interfered with the directness of experience, highlighting the radical split between subject and object. This split is, itself, a result of "the breaking down of traditional referentiality." Our experience in postmodernity, is always and necessarily, indirect. In a state of perpetual "existential displacement," our modern vicarious experience is likened to "the kind of confusion Madame Bovary and Don Quijote developed between themselves and the characters of the literature they so loved to read."

Unfortunately, the concepts of vicariousness and identity confusion comprise a more fitting description of Olalquiaga's work than of contemporary sensibilities. Somehow *Megalopolis*, as either cultural theory or criticism (Olalquiaga would argue it is neither), falls flat. Olalquiaga is obviously wrestling with a confusion between her unique critical voice and those of all the myriad pomo critics that have come before her. The result is, what we might call, vicarious criticism.

In "Reach Out and Touch Someone" Olalquiaga tracks the ways in which high technology has reconstituted our modes of perception. The increasing dominance of visual images, the replacement of the verbal with the visual, and the new forms of simulated space are echoed in the psychological disorder of psychasthenia. This disorder involves a disturbance in the relationship between the body and its surroundings, where "the psychasthenic organism proceeds to abandon its own identity...by camouflaging itself into the milieu." Olalquiaga gives the standard (although puzzlingly simplistic) example of the shopping mall, where the homogeneity of one's environs is felt to induce a disorientation beginning with "the interminable, spiral search for a parking space (a place in which to place the self)."

In this chapter Olalquiaga also explores the compulsory postmodern theme of the interface between the organic and technological body. "The body has turned into the ruin of its own image," Olalquiaga asserts. Penetrated by technological form and infused with technology's imperatives, the organic body is on the verge of vanishing. Olalquiaga offers both monumentally insignificant and profoundly stirring examples of this vanishing organic body, and its fusion with technology. Olalquiaga cites breakdancing(?) as exemplary of the potentially liberatory and highly profitable cultural practices that have emerged out of the erosion between time and space, organic and technological. More significantly Olalquiaga provides a description of homelessness. This description constitutes one of the most moving and resonant paragraphs in *Megalopolis*:

*Perhaps the most striking account in the struggle over the vanishing body is its very literal manifestation in the fight over territory. In New York City, the value of people has sunk below that of objects, as growing numbers of homeless people - bodies without homes, dislocated to leave room for real-estate speculation - bear witness... This bodily displacement is even more violent than a war, because homelessness is a condition of slow deterioration and hardly appreciated heroisms. It is as if contemporary culture had developed a psychasthenic myopia by virtue of which people living on the street seem a natural extension of the urban scenario. (p.18)*

The most lighthearted and fluid bit of cultural analysis in *Megalopolis* is provided in the chapter "Holy Kitschen." Here, Olalquiaga leaves aside, temporarily, her fixation with postmodern clichés, and explores the phenomenon of religious icons as kitsch. It is in this discussion that Olalquiaga makes her strongest case for the concept of 'vicarious sensibilities.' She does so, interestingly, by employing the category of direct experience - one that is usually eschewed by postmodern critics.

For Olalquiaga, the postmodern sensibility attempts to compensate for the loss of emotionality, traditional referential meaning, and a sense of the 'real' by searching for goods and signs imbued with intense emotionality by "other times and peoples." And, although the concept of "authenticity" is inconsistent with much postmodern theory, Olalquiaga con-