

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.

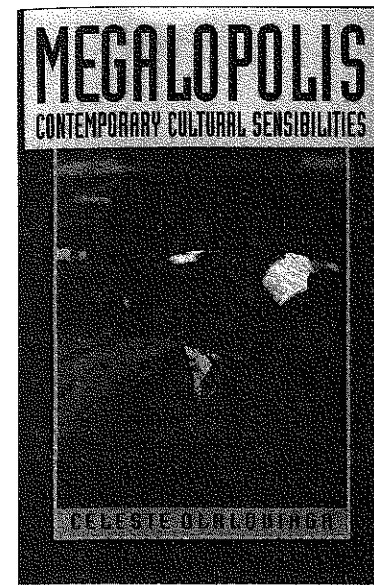
Tomlinson repeatedly refers in his book to "capitalist modernity." This is part of his argument for a shift in attention from space (geography and imperialism) to time (traditional and modern cultures). His account of capitalist modernity places very little emphasis on class inequality. He also neglects 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.

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### 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-

vincingly argues that religious imagery, in all of its blatant emotionality, provides an ideal point of intersection with kitsch art practice. Olalquiaga asserts that "(t)he link between religious imagery and kitsch is based on the dramatic character of their styles, whose function is to evoke unambiguously, dispelling ambivalence and abstraction." In this chapter Olalquiaga moves back and forth between postmodern orthodoxy and freestyle, critical eclecticism. Although Olalquiaga argues that postmodernism is a theoretical cannibal, in keeping with the annoying postmodern tendency to preempt criticism by deifying contradiction and dissonance and precluding all, at least theoretical, opposition, she thankfully reveals more than she manages to obscure in her discussion of the 'three degrees' of kitsch.

First degree kitsch religious iconography is that which is sold for its "straightforward iconic value." The relationship between "object and user is immediate, one of genuine belief"; consequently, the first degree kitsch religious object "must be treated with utmost respect." Second degree kitsch's value lies not in its connection to 'real' religious feeling, but rather in its self-referentiality. Neo-kitsch, Olalquiaga argues, involves "a perspective wherein appreciation of the 'ugly' conveys to the spectator an aura of refined decadence, an ironic enjoyment from a position of enlightened superiority." Third degree kitsch is the recycling of religious iconography by artists, true bricolage, where religious icons are 'recovered' by artists and imbued with 'new' meanings. Transcendental themes are replaced by political ones and the access to emotionality provided by religious iconography is exploited by artists and put to use accenting other 'artistic' interests.

Olalquiaga reverts to postmodern orthodoxy in the conclusion of this chapter, bestowing upon third degree kitsch the heavy responsibility of representing the fact that the "boundaries between reality and representation, themselves artificial, have been temporarily and perhaps permanently suspended." Again she shows remarkable and disturbing optimism in her claims for the power of art and cultural practice. We are told that "the exotic, colonized imagery...becomes part and parcel of the appropriator's imagination. Instead of appropriation annihilating what it absorbs, the absorbed invades the appropriating system and begins to consti-

tute and transform it." The coexistence of all three levels of kitsch, we are advised, creates a kind of cultural anarchy which can effectively "destabilize traditional hegemony." Rather than questioning the darker and infinitely more problematic economic and political processes through which the 'original' religious object becomes a stylized and valuable *object d'art*, Olalquiaga admonishes us, instead, to welcome this occurrence "as a sign of opening to and enjoyment of all that traditional culture worked so hard at leaving out."

The final essay in *Megalopolis*, entitled "Tupincopolis - The City of Retrofuturistic Indians," explores both the Latinization of North America and the development of Latin American postindustrial pop. Olalquiaga once again gives facile examples - the plethora of TexMex restaurants and music - to make a facile argument for the "fragmentary incorporation of Latino elements into a fairly technologized discourse" of North America. Her review of Latin American pop culture, however, makes the compelling argument that 'developing' or 'postcolonial' cultures have an understanding of postmodern pastiche, irony, and self-referentiality that can only come from years of submission to the imposition of foreign codes of behaviour and social organization. Both the ability to handle multiple codes, and a developed form of spectacular self-consciousness are "familiar to a culture that has been regarded 'from above' by colonization." Olalquiaga claims for these cultures the status of 'pre-postmodernity.'

Olalquiaga illustrates her argument about pre-postmodernity with examples from Latin American popular culture. Latin American postindustrial pop, Olalquiaga argues, is a form of cultural transvestism, the saturation of North American icons with new meanings. Examples of this genre of cultural practice range from the Mexican superhero figure "Superbarrio," who works against corruption, pollution, and for housing rights, to the appropriation of punk style by Chilean teenagers, to Aztec dancers in Niagara Falls, whose "ability to benefit from the icons of themselves by putting them on stage for a profit goes a lot further in undoing racist cliches than most theoretical deconstructions." Frustratingly, all of these examples are equally significant for Olalquiaga because they represent the fact that cultural icons can be "twisted and

turned to satisfy far more needs than the ones that produced those icons in the first place." Through this process "postcolonial cultures show...how the world can also be a scenario for their own directorial and spectatorial delight."

Olalquiaga is a cultural critic who grew up in South America and now resides in New York. Sadly, most of her insights demonstrate a thorough schooling in continental cultural theory and very little understanding of her indebtedness to her own 'pre-postmodernity.' It is only in the rare spaces between the calls to celebrate the liberatory potential of cultural practices and the recitations of the postmodern theoretical litany that one finds evidence of a resonant critical voice in *Megalopolis*. For the most part, *Megalopolis* contains all of the standard problems one has come to expect in this kind of contemporary postmodern cultural criticism: political hollowiness, an emphasis on and defense of cultural practice to the exclusion of all other forms of social organization (capitalism and consumerism as signifying systems to be plundered for 'new experiences'), the subsequent and inevitable superficiality of cultural 'description' (a keen sense of the obvious), and a strange kind of anti-theoretical, neo-sociological stance (the result of the view that postmodernism is not a theoretical take on the world, but simply is a state of things).

In spite of these problems, however, Olalquiaga achieves some moments of critical clarity and resonance. Her discussions of homelessness, kitsch, and pre-postmodernity are highlights of the book. Interestingly, it is when Olalquiaga addresses those categories of experiences that cannot easily be contained within the postmodern paradigm that her critical insights are most penetrating. *Megalopolis* is frustrating in the way it consistently recapitulates standard themes in postmodern criticism. But the promise in Olalquiaga's critical voice is that she might increasingly focus on those kinds of contemporary experience that resist appropriation by the postmodern gaze; and, as a result, may yet overcome her tendency toward vicarious criticism.

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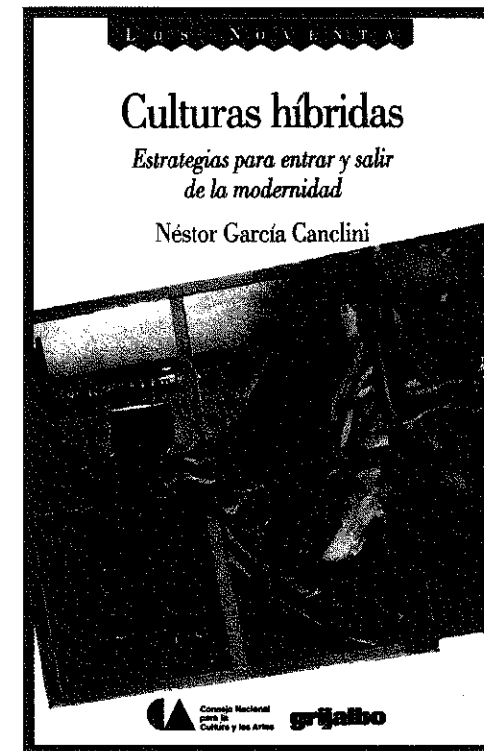
## The B/L List

of Recent Latin American Cultural Studies

Compiled by Alan O'Connor

**Néstor García Canclini**, *Las culturas populares en el capitalismo* (México, Nueva Imagen, 1982).

One of the key works of Latin American cultural studies. It examines the continued importance of traditional handicrafts (pottery, weaving etc.) in a semi-industrialized Mexico. Handicrafts provide an income supplement in the countryside which sometimes allows families to avoid migrating to the cities. Their production is an important conduit for expression and sometimes protest by their makers. Traditional handicrafts are an important part of the tourism industry. An urban elite uses handmade goods as a sign of distinction. Finally, handicrafts are used by the state as an ideological symbol of the Mexican nation. The book calls for increased control by handicraft producers of the economic value and conditions of display of their work.



**Néstor García Canclini**, *Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1990).

A theoretical reflection on hybrid cultures in Mexico and Latin America transformed by economic crisis, privatization and emigration. For García Canclini, categories are confused; things are no longer in place; resistance is agile. García Canclini's reflections include everything from national monuments to comic books.

**Jesús Martín-Barbero**, *De los medios a las mediaciones: Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía* (México: G. Gili, 1987). Provides a reading of European theorists for a Latin American context. Its main arguments are against a model of the "effects" of communication and for a realization of the complex mediations of mass media in an unevenly (under)developed continent. Stresses the "mixture" of indigenous, hispanic, Black and transnational cultures. A densely argued and influential book.

**Beatriz Sarlo**, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1988).

In her account of literary modernism in Argentina, Sarlo moves beyond the Eurocentric vision of Jorge Luis Borges to writing with more organic ties to the worlds of the immigrants who made up the city of Buenos Aires. Her "peripheral" modernism includes women writers, admiration for the Russian revolution and the margins of Buenos Aires which invade poetry, fiction and newspapers.

**Beatriz Sarlo**, *La Imaginación Técnica: Sueños modernos de la cultura argentina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nueva Visión, 1992).

A study of technology and social change in Argentinian writing of the 1920s and 1930s, including essays by Roberto Arlt and Horacio Quiroga. Radio imagined as technology and fantasy.

**Carlos Monsiváis**, "Notas sobre cultura popular en México," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1978): 98-118.

An important history of popular culture in Mexico City from popular and revolutionary music to middle-class dance halls and the cultural industries of radio and cinema. Influenced by the Frankfurt School, Monsiváis is a vital independent Mexican writer on culture and politics. Related collections of his essays include *Escenas de Pudor y Liviandad* and *Amor Perdida*. For an essay in English see "Landscape, I've Got the Drop on You!" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, Vol. 4 (1985): 236-46.

**Michèle and Armand Mattelart**, *The Carnival of Images: Brazilian Television Fiction* (Mass., Bergin and Garvey, 1990).

Whereas print media and radio were regional, television in the 1970s created the first sense of Brazil as a nation. The telenovela is the most important form of fictional TV in Brazil—and is frequently exported. Are telenovelas part of the cultural hegemony of the elite and its modernization strategy? This book argues that the answer is more complex. It is based on research into the production of television fiction and on recent Latin American theory, such as that of Martín-Barbero.

**Rubén Martínez**, *The Other Side: Fault Lines, Guerilla Saints and the True Heart of Rock 'n' Roll* (London, New York: Verso, 1992).

A book of linked essays, journals and poems written about El Salvador and Los Angeles. The common theme is cultural production whether it is a sermon by a radical priest with AIDS, graffiti by an L.A. "bomber," the film festival in Cuba, poetry by a lonely Central American refugee, or rock music in Mexico City. The detail of this writing challenges easy notions of multiple or postmodern identities as much as it does traditional ideas of national or ethnic identity. The title is Mexican slang for someone who is "the other way" and gay/bisexual issues surface at several points in the book.

**David William Foster**, *Gay and Lesbian Themes in Latin American Writing* (Austin: University of Texas, 1991).

This thoughtful book is the first overview of queer Latin American writing. Arranged thematically, it discusses the work of about two dozen writers.

**Paul Taylor** (ed.) *Hysterical Tears: Juan Davila* (London: GMP, 1985).

Art work by gay Chilean artist Juan Davila. The book includes a long interview with and essays by Paul Taylor and Nelly Richard.

