

UCDscholarcast

Series 1: (Spring 2008)

The Art of Popular Culture: From ‘The Meeting of the Waters’ to *Riverdance*

Series Editor: P.J. Mathews

© UCDscholarcast

Anne Fogarty

Joyce and Popular Culture

In the "Ithaca" episode of *Ulysses*, we are asked what Bloom's last thoughts might be before he falls asleep. Bloom who is currently employed as an advertising canvasser for the *Freeman's Journal* has spent much of the day designing and placing an advertisement for Alexander Keyes. Ironically but fittingly his final waking moments focus on the composition of the perfect advertisement:

What were habitually his final meditations?

Of some one sole unique advertisement to cause passers by to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient means not exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life. (*U* 17.592)

Bloom's sleepy musing seems utterly modern. His aim of creating an advertisement that keeps pace with the speed of contemporary existence is of course mildly comic, a distortion of his more humdrum daytime activity. But it is also an appropriate ambition in this epic of modern life. At this juncture as at many others, Joyce's *Ulysses* not only captures aspects of everyday living in 1904 but uncannily anticipates the further developments of late capitalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Synchronising commodities with consumer desires remains the driving force of capitalist economies. In this seeming insight into Bloom's unconscious in "Ithaca", Joyce at once captures the essence of twentieth-century society and mockingly lays it bare.¹

The Dublin that Joyce depicts teeters between a stagnating traditionalism and the accelerated advent of the modern. *Ulysses*, as a consequence, does not just represent all of the multiple aspects of a consumerist society. It also abounds in references to popular culture. *Ulysses* is rich in allusions to music hall songs, pornographic novels, nineteenth-century theatrical melodramas, silent cinema, women's romances, and Irish nationalist ballads. Joyce with his encyclopedic vision captures the detail of everyday existence. Almost perversely he homes in on objects and cultural events that would otherwise be forgotten. As readers, we are invited to engage with a wide spectrum of popular culture. Yet, we are also required to be adepts in the canon of Western culture. *Ulysses* reworks and rewrites many of its prominent texts. Most famously, it uses aspects of Homer's *Odyssey* as its scaffolding. It also mines it as a reservoir for symbolic plots and images. Numerous other writers and artists are of course subsumed into the fabric of the text, including Ibsen, Dante, Shakespeare, and Wagner. In reading Joyce's works we draw on competing or even clashing cultural frameworks. Joycean textuality indiscriminately and anarchically interweaves high and low culture. But his characters are for the most part taken up by the trivia of everyday life and routine acts of consumption. *Ulysses* telescopes and cannibalises many of the masterpieces of Western culture for its own purposes. It also elaborately uncovers the degree to which mass or popular culture configures and determines modern consciousness. Advertising jingles are as memorable and of as much weight in *Ulysses* - "What is home without Plumtree's Potted Meat" (*U* 17.560), for example - as opera arias or quotations from Shakespeare.²

What then are we to make of Joyce's vision of popular culture? As R.Brandon Kershner points out, one could argue that his works increasingly foreground popular culture rather than high art ("Joyce, Music and Popular Culture"). Where the lofty pretensions of Stephen Dedalus colour the fields of reference in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* by contrast concentrate more readily on and embrace all kinds of cultural ephemera and detritus, including guidebooks, songs, folk mythology, children's rhymes, journalism, and advertisements.

Joyce's works provocatively break down the divisions between the notional spheres of high art and popular culture. His writings also systematically undermine any fastidiousness about the artefacts of mass entertainment that his readers might entertain. However, they do not simply reduce culture to inert catalogues or redundant lists of abstruse points of reference. Rather, in Joyce's texts popular culture is represented as a dynamic force. It may pervade the consciousness of his characters or inform his narratives and stylistic experiments. But it remains a contested forcefield. Popular culture is not simply imposed from without but reconfigured from within and made part of a series of clashing viewpoints and warring articulations.³

At the turn of the twentieth century, debates about popular culture in Ireland were necessarily bound up with the politics of nationalism. In his much-cited and frequently misrepresented essay, "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland", Douglas Hyde argued that the Irish desire for political independence from England was incongruous. He held that the aim of achieving political sovereignty made little sense given the unquestioning adoption of English language and culture by the Irish. Hyde condemned the failure of his country people to appreciate Gaelic music, language, and customs. However, above all, he deplored the extent to which the acceptance of foreign influence meant succumbing to the latterday products of mass culture. He intoned especially against the English popular press: "We must set our face sternly against penny dreadfuls, shilling shockers, and still more the garbage of vulgar English weeklies like *Bow Bells* and the *Police Intelligence*"(169).

Although it is usually assumed that their thinking is utterly divergent, Joyce's essays and lectures on the politics of Irish culture mirror many of Douglas Hyde's points of view but come to very different conclusions. In "The Day of the Rabblement", an essay that Joyce composed while still a student at University College Dublin, he famously attacked the objectives and achievements of the Irish Literary Theatre (later to become the Abbey Theatre) and of the Literary Revival in general. His chief reason for this denunciation was the belief that the literary theatre had caved in to populism. As a result he declared that it must be considered to be the "property of the rabblement of the most belated race in Europe" (50). His analysis of writers linked with the Revival such as W. B. Yeats or George Moore – authors whom he actually admired – was equally dismissive and merely reinforced his belief that no Irish artist was capable of producing work that was radical or new. In "Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages", a lecture that he delivered some six years later in 1907 at the Università Popolare Trieste, his views are somewhat more tempered. Akin to Douglas Hyde, he demonstrates the cultural achievements of the Irish both in their own language and through their work as Christian missionaries on the Continent. He stresses the antiquity of Irish civilization but also emphasizes that it is "an immense woven fabric" (118) made up of different elements taken from other cultures and traditions. He concludes that no race or language can be deemed pure or virgin and that nationality must find its justification in something more stable and lasting than blood or human speech. Like Douglas Hyde, Joyce stresses the difference of the Irish and their separate history and culture. Like Hyde, too, he notes the current vacuum or disarray in Irish art. But unlike Hyde he refuses to be prescriptive. And, above all, he does not advocate a retreat to a monoglot Irish-speaking insularity. Indeed, it is precisely the impurity of Irish culture that he values. He is later to exploit this very impurity in his fictions and to draw out the admixture of clashing elements that constitute Irish sociality.

The accounts of mass culture and modernity put forward by the first Frankfurt school of criticism are still apposite in considering the opposing dimensions of Joyce's representations of the troubled cultural milieus of his characters. In their famous essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno mounted a devastating critique of the ideological underpinnings of the mass media, including the cinema, journalism and the popular press. They contended that modern mass culture induces conformism in consumers. It standardises responses and aesthetic forms and precludes the development of anything new, radical, or deviant. Mass culture, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is an all-enveloping means of domination and social regulation. It takes over people's inner lives and rules out the possibility of dissent or opposition. They conclude that mass culture has succeeded in reifying human emotions

and desires. At the end of their essay, they sum up their pessimistic assessment as follows:

The most intimate reactions of human beings have been so thoroughly reified that the idea of anything specific in themselves now persists only as an utterly abstract notion: personality scarcely signifies anything any more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odor and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through it.
(167)

The views of Walter Benjamin are no less trenchant but he allows for greater gaps between ideology and the individual. In his great unfinished study of nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin approaches the task of cultural investigation as a psychoanalyst would by amassing a vast quantity of data describing its objects and events. For Benjamin, modern culture is a kind of collective dream or, as he terms it, a phantasmagoria. The arcades, new elaborate glass and steel corridors of shops, function for him as one of the chief metaphors for the way in which mass culture operates and for the means by which it can be dissected. The shops in these arcades become museums for the objects and fetishised goods of capitalism. This new sexualised economy, Benjamin notes, depends on the creation of ornate thresholds, portals, and doorways. Yet the illusory and treacherous settings that capitalism creates for the sale of goods also permit alternative modes of perception. To the salesperson or shopkeeper Benjamin opposes the figure of the collector. The latter amasses objects and removes them from their context thereby severing the link to the exchange values of the market. In the process, they become dialectical images and open up points of intersection between past and present. They become exposed to us in a new way in what Benjamin calls the "now of recognizability" (xii). Thus, the collector for Benjamin is someone who is a by-product of capitalism and mass culture but is yet capable of laying bare its meanings. In part, too, the collector can be seen as an epitome of everyone who inhabits mass culture as we all perforce become depositories of its artifacts and meanings.

In Joyce's texts, his characters may be seen as positioned between these two conflicting views of mass culture. They succumb to its effects and are controlled by its potent projections of desire, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue. But they are also often in the more self-aware and self-critical position of the collector described by Benjamin. Hence, they have the ability to penetrate at least to a degree the illusions of capitalism. They can use its fetishised commodities to uncover problematic aspects of contemporary Irish colonial politics or to point to troubling links between past and present.

Culture in "An Encounter", the second story of *Dubliners*, is depicted as a series of conflicting spheres which defy any notion of ethnic purity or of a watertight national identity. The very first sentence is intended as a jolt to those who promoted a belief in a sacrosanct, neatly bounded Irishness: "It was Joe Dillon who introduced the Wild West to us" (11). Joe Dillon, who later ironically turns out to have a vocation for the priesthood, supplies his brother's school friends with British adventure magazines for boys, including *The Union Jack*, *Pluck*, and *The Halfpenny Marvel*. The discovery of one of these magazines called *The Apache Chief* by Fr. Butler during a lesson at school invites the priest's scorn and anger. He condemns such reading material on class grounds as the province of "National School boys" (12), that is the reserve of the poor and working class. Even though these stories feed the imaginations of the ill-assorted group of friends in the story and give expression to their feelings of unruliness and dissent, culture in "An Encounter" is linked more with friction and oppression than with uniformity or escape. The narrator himself admits that he does not share the preferences of his friends for Westerns which he seems to see as juvenile. Rather, he prefers American detective stories. It is not just the case, then, that the boys have succumbed to the products of British imperial culture – the lure of other imperialisms also are a factor. The deeply disturbing encounter with the green-eyed man near the Dodder in Ringsend revolves around another notional cultural curriculum and reading regime. A confusing discussion of culture and its parameters ensues when the man admits to his literary predilections for Thomas Moore, Walter Scott, and Bulwer-Lytton. His more orthodox taste and inclusion even

of an Irish author, however, are at odds with his perversity and threatening nature. The narrator when questioned pretends to have the same reading preferences as this disturbing acquaintance, thus uneasily assenting to yet another set of cultural influences despite himself. He later, of course, finds himself discomfited by the man's disturbing monologue with its intimations of pederasty and sexual sadism. Questions of literary taste and value and of proper reading material remain unresolved and blurred in this story. So too does the nature of the unsavoury transgression with which the so-called "queer old josser" (16) is connected and the root cause of the guilt that the narrator endures at the end of the tale. Culture in "An Encounter" is something that has constantly to be renegotiated and defended. It also acts as an ambiguous index of the uneasily aligned domains of perversion, desire, difference, and failure.⁴

Similar themes are addressed in "Araby", the following story in *Dubliners*. The assorted reading material that has been abandoned by the nameless dead priest is noted at the beginning of the tale. Like in "An Encounter" we have a sense of a cultural curriculum being announced and put under scrutiny. The priest who was a former tenant in the protagonist's house has left a motley collection of books behind: *The Abbot* by Walter Scott, *The Devout Communicant*, and *The Memoirs of Vidocq*. Apparently appropriate Catholic literature such as Scott's novel about a page boy serving Mary Queen of Scots, sits uneasily alongside the pseudo-autobiography of the mysterious and shady François-Jules Vidocq who was supposedly a criminal, informer, and detective. Culture once again is depicted as inchoate and rooted in the illicit. The narrator, however, links himself with a high-minded romantic idealism that is almost feudal in nature. He nurtures an unbending devotion to Mangan's sister who is at once an object of desire and of sexual fixation. His quest to get to the Araby bazaar in Ballsbridge is depicted as a test of his ardour, a necessary pilgrimage by which he can prove himself worthy of his love. The bazaar with its tinges of orientalist exoticism acts as a phantom embodiment of the boy's inexpressible and sublimated desire. Joyce, in fact, provides us with a very attenuated account of this 1894 charity bazaar which, as Stephanie Rains has shown, was an elaborate showcase for the burgeoning consumer culture in late nineteenth-century Ireland. Instead of seeing it as a beacon of modernity, the narrator is repelled by its commercialism and its patent imperialist overtones- the English accents of the stallholders, we learn, are jarring to him. His hopes dashed and his money well nigh gone, he sees himself at the end of the story as "a creature driven and derided by vanity" (24). Joyce, however, leaves the nature of his disturbing epiphany unclear. Has the boy gained an unsettling insight into the vulgarity and debasement of modern culture and its ideological underpinnings in the manner of Horkheimer and Adorno? Or does he still cling to his idealism despite his discovery of the tawdriness of the Araby bazaar, his one-time goal?⁵

In *Ulysses*, popular culture, desire, and capitalism are even more tightly interwoven than in *Dubliners*. In "Wandering Rocks", Bloom is titillated by *Sweets of Sin*, the pornographic novel that he purchases as a kind of peace offering to Molly. His internal citation of passages seems to indicate that he is simply replicating the stock reactions of someone buying a commodified object pre-designed by the market. But as he samples passages from the book, they become expressive of his thwarted desire for Molly. Moreover, Joyce undercuts his ersatz pleasure in the overblown sexual descriptions of the novel when he proceeds to purchase it. The hawking "phlegmy cough" of the shopman and the "dingy curtains" (*U* 10.194) of his shop provide an ironic counterpoint to the intermingled emotions conjured up by Bloom's self-indulgent but wistful browsing of the erotic novel. The neediness and penury of Dublin puncture the illusion of unadulterated pleasure peddled by *Sweets of Sin*.

The "Nausicaa" episode similarly interfuses perspectives and cross-contaminates several genres from popular fiction. Gerty MacDowell and Leopold Bloom mutually act as objects of desire for each other and play roles in scripts that are alternatively romantic and pornographic. Gerty is at once defined by the varying London fashion magazines that she reads and the romantic stories of the "manly man" (*U* 13.288) and compliant self-sacrificing wives for which she has a liking. Yet, the material details of her actual life constitute a different register and provide a counter-narrative that renders her romantic aspirations and fantasies poignant as well as comic. We learn of her

father's alcoholism, for example, and his "deeds of violence" (*U* 13.290) and of the "raging splitting headaches" (*U* 13.291) to which her mother is prone and which she tries to alleviate. Also, the emphasis on her strained attempts to reproduce English fashion exposes the degree to which the magazines that she reads are subject to appropriation and dislocation in a colonial context. The "slightly shopsoiled" (*U* 13.287) ribbon bought at Clery's Summer sale to trim her "little love of a hat" (*U* 13.287) undercuts the effusive vocabulary derived from fashion journalism. Further, the feminine nicety and prudishness of such publications are also cancelled out by the pornographic scenario that Joyce envisages. The exchange of glances and looks between Gerty and Bloom - "she saw that he saw" (*U* 13. 300)- moreover grants a certain agency to Gerty in this stolen and comically rendered erotic game.⁶ The ultimate revelation of Gerty's lameness furnishes us with another dissonant frame. Retrospectively, her romantic daydreams and desire for fashionable perfection are revealed to be compensatory fantasies that hold at bay her knowledge that she is unlikely ever to acquire the marital status for which she yearns.

The "Penelope" episode acts as a further complex meditation on capitalism and modernity and the degree to which mass culture has moulded and commandeered individual desires and emotions. Molly Bloom's monologue is at once an expression of frustrated consumer longing and the uncovering of a human yearning that far exceeds any of the needs that she voices.⁷ Molly looks forward to the forthcoming concert in Belfast with Blazes Boylan because "it would be exciting going round with him shopping buying those things in a new city" (*U* 18. 617). She also points up the impoverishment of her existence and longs for a life of prosperity and unbridled spending that matches up to the illusions created by women's magazines: "Sure you cant get on in this world without style... when I get it I'll lash it around" (*U* 18.618). But the phantasmagoria of a consumer economy are set in a dialectical relation to other revealing images of human desire such as the "old rubbishy dress" (*U* 18. 619) that Molly is forced to wear at concerts or the "little woolly jacket" (*U* 18.640) she knitted for Rudy and in which she finally laid him to rest. The sudden upwelling of desire at the end of the "Penelope" episode may seem like a final summation of her unappeased state and of the fact that she is irreducibly linked to a consumerist economy. Yet it also countermands the dissatisfaction that she has expressed throughout. Her closing lines may transform desire into nostalgia. But in their brief but emphatic gesture towards futurity "and yes I said yes I will yes" (*U* 18. 644) they reveal the liberatory and utopian dimension of her querulous neediness.

An eager fan once reputedly rushed up to James Joyce and asked if he could shake the hand of the the man who wrote *Ulysses*. Joyce tartly replied that he could but that it had done many other things as well. As the anecdote suggests, high art and the seemingly more debased aspects of everyday life are for Joyce intimately cross-connected. Yet popular culture is never simply a seamless web for Joyce providing further ambit for the endless semiosis of modernist fiction. Rather, Joyce shows that popular culture is unstable and subject to a constant process of appropriation and renegotiation. This is especially the case in a colonial culture which takes over mass products supplied by the imperial centre. Above all, Joyce exposes the conflicting aspects of popular culture. He makes us aware of the flimsiness and falsity of the illusions that it creates in the manner of Horkheimer and Adorno. But he also – like the collector of the detritus of modernity that Benjamin envisages – opens up the "now of recognizability" buried in all of the castoff objects and texts of modern popular culture and of the individuals who actively participate in and respond to it.

NOTES

- 1 For a history of the genesis and development of critical interest in popular culture in Joyce's works see Gregory M. Downing. See Cheryl Herr for a pioneering reassessment of the politics of popular culture in *Ulysses*.
- 2 On advertising in Joyce, see Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading*.
- 3 For a discussion of varying views of popular culture, ranging from the assessment that it is a model of power to the more hopeful belief that it can function as a site of resistance, see John Fiske 20-21.
- 4 See R.Brandon Kershner, *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder* for a detailed discussion of the references to popular and pseudo-culture in "An Encounter" 31-46.
- 5 R.Brandon Kershner in *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder* (46-60) undertakes a detailed examination of the popular romances alluded to in "Araby" and sees them as refuted and ironised by the commercial realities with which the narrator is ultimately confronted.
- 6 Andrew Gibson (127-49) constructs an astute and nuanced account of the numerous cultural cross-currents in "Nausicaa" and argues that Gerty MacDowell, as a consequence, is not simply objectified. Katherine Mullin (140-70) in an original and provocative intervention considers how early technology such as the mutoscope might also partially empower the female viewer.
- 7 Jennifer Wicke in "Who's She When She's at Home?: Molly Bloom and the Work of Consumption" analyses the degree to which "Penelope" hinges on the needs and desires of the marketplace.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. London: Allen Lane, 1973. 120-67.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Downing, Gregory M. "Joycean Pop Culture: Fragments Toward an Institutional History and Futurology." In *Ulysses in Critical Perspective*. Ed. Michael Patrick Gillespie and A. Nicholas Fargnoli. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006. 117-34.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Gibson, Andrew. *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Herr, Cheryl. *Joyce's Anatomy of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Hyde, Douglas. "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland." *Language, Lore and Lyrics: Essays and Lectures*. Ed. Breandán Ó Conaire. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1986. 153-70.
- Joyce, James. "The Day of the Rabblement". In *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* 50-52.
- . *Dubliners*. Ed. Jeri Johnson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- . "Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages." In *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing* 108-26.

---. *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writing*. Ed. Kevin Barry. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

---. *Ulysses*. Ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al. London: The Bodley Head, 1986.

Kershner, R. Brandon. *Joyce, Bakhtin, and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989.

---. "Joyce, Music and Popular Culture." *A Companion to James Joyce*. Ed. Richard Brown. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 270-85.

Kershner, R.B., ed. *Joyce and Popular Culture*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996.

Mullin, Katherine. *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Rains, Stephanie. "Modernity and Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: The Araby Bazaar and 1890s Popular Visual culture." *Early Popular Visual Culture* 5.3 (2007): 285-300.

Wicke, Jennifer. *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

---. "Who's She When She's at Home?: Molly Bloom and the Work of Consumption." *James Joyce Quarterly* 28 (1991): 749-63.