

○ VOLUME 8 NUMBER 3, 2009

REVIEW

Cultural Alterity, Racial Embodiment and Commodity

Consumption

Eva Cherniavsky, *Incorporations: Race, Nation and the Body Politics of Capital*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Sam Dallyn

University of Essex

Cherniavsky's Incorporations provides an enormously rich array of theoretical engagements and insights encompassing a wide variety of different cultural examples. Central to her analysis is the complex relations between race, capital and gender within circuits of transnational capitalism as expressed in literature, animation and particularly cinema. Her broad range of cultural engagements and theoretical encounters makes for an extremely enjoyable read. One of the most welcome aspects of the book is its situating of particular cultural products in light of the complex transnational material frames of their production and consumption.

Cherniavsky's enormously rich collection of essays feels at times like an exercise in culture jamming. She pulls out moments from a diverse assortment of popular cultural forms to make theoretically rich and insightful compositions in different chapters. These chapters are largely self-contained in that they support one another but each is based on distinct cultural and theoretical considerations in literature, film and television animation. We drift from an engagement in colonialism and Subaltern Studies in a US frame to nationalism and globalisation; transnational labour and services; science fiction; a critique of Whiteness Studies, Leslie Mormon Silko and diasporas; American film noir; Rita Hayworth; Orson Welles; Steve Buscemi and finally Homer Simpson and commodity culture, in the space of a little under 150 pages of main text. The guiding themes for this diverse range of cultural and theoretical types are race, capital and embodiment. This kind of broad range of engagement is familiar to the

cultural studies oeuvre and it is nicely described by Shobat and Stam (1994: 8)—in a book that Cherniavsky (2006: 82, 165) consistently praises—as an attempt to create a ‘kind of musical echo effect whereby the same theme emerges in different contexts.’ One is perhaps left wondering in the process of reading such a broad range of diverse cultural engagement, just how systematic the aspects of the body politics of capital that Cherniavsky describes are. That is, more precisely, what the status of the examples are and how deep they run into the transnational system of production and consumption or whether they are rather derived primarily from interesting and diverse snap shots of the interstices of interesting culture and its expression of race and capital. These snap shots are taken from insightful literature (Silko and Butler), great noir (Welles and *A Touch of Evil*), and idiosyncratic neo-noir (the Coen brothers and *Fargo*), and ironical and culturally astute animation (*The Simpsons*). However, it is a style that makes for an enormously engaging and enjoyable read.

A crucial feature of the work is the disaggregation of raced embodiment and commodification as two central forms of analysis; she tends to critique other accounts for moving too quickly in conjoining the two in one piece of analysis, rather than exploring the complex, distinct interrelations between race and capital. It is this that she praises Subaltern Studies for. While racial differentiation at the centre is imbricated in class differentiation through colonialism, the stratification of colonial subject formation in both developing and developed societal orders disjoins race and class in ways that render a Euro-American race consciousness meaningless (Cherniavsky, 2006: 13). Put more simply, antiracist discourse in the first world does not speak for the double displacement of exploited labour in the regions of capital that are colonial and postcolonial. Most strikingly, Cherniavsky questions the erosion of the analytical distinction in relation to Marlene Dietrich’s ‘Hot Voodoo’ performance in *Blonde Venus* where her character, Helen Faraday, in a strange cabaret performance undresses from the costume of an ape to reveal a pale white figure with striking blonde wig. There is a clear implication of confinement within racialized topographies of gender and sexuality, because black bodies occupy figural limits in the scene and throughout the film and because Helen’s connection to blackness is merely figural (Cherniavsky, 2006: 91) as expressed in the film. However, as Faraday transforms to white blonde figure, other analysis moves too quickly, Cherniavsky argues, in seeing race as a trope of sexuality, prior to considering the status of the white body’s mediation (Cherniavsky, 2006: 92). It is this that leads the book to its distinctive object of investigation in cinema, through this more careful overlaid, perhaps even overdetermined, distinction between ‘the status of the white female star as commodity-image *and* the racial constitution of commodified embodiment’ (Cherniavsky, 2006: 92).

As she puts it herself in relation to this brief journey through cinema, mass consumption, ‘Americanism,’ television, mobile capital and marketing, ‘I would ... risk a vast generalization and propose that the commodities that accompany and order the appearance of black and

brown bodies on the screen are typically markers of ethnic style, while white bodies (in a prerogative established by the classic Hollywood texts) move through a field of commodities that seem to compete for their attention' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 132). A key move in the book is a certain paradox that is established in relation to Hollywood cinema: that the white glow that accompanied female stars '(re)enacts the breaching of bodily boundaries—the abstraction of the commodity-image from the singular human form—and remediates this, by countering the reduction of white embodiment to the inert, arrested condition of a consumable object' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 108). That is, the cinematic glow of whiteness that was associated with 1930s classic Hollywood cinema and onwards was a consumable object of a kind that was resistant to, beyond, purely bodily commodification, but itself became characterised through immersion into transnational commodity flows, as Hollywood spread as a transnational commodity. This is reflected perhaps most clearly by Dietrich's character Helen Faraday in *Blonde Venus*, a seemingly cold, distant object of desire, indifferent to the terms of her own mechanical reproduction in which 'the wholly indifferent subject is finally eclipsed by the image she disowns' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 99). In a metaphor Cherniavsky frequently returns to, derived from Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1969: 223), this kind of reproduction reflects the prying of an object from its shell, through transnational corporate commodification.

One of the most welcome theoretical aspects of the book is its emphasis on materialism or the conditions of production and consumption. Cherniavsky makes an important and valuable attempt to put studies of popular culture back into a complex material frame, in a sense partly emphasising Gramsci's (2005: 285) important point that 'hegemony is born in the factory.' Cherniavsky, in an earlier article, makes a sustained critique of accounts in feminist and psychoanalytic film studies that ignore the conditions of material production, as she notes regarding avant-garde cinema 'my point is that such oppositional visual culture, where it occurs, does not ensure any supposed relation of exteriority to the circuits of capitalist production, distribution and consumption' (Cherniavsky, 2000: 171). These insights into how the conditions of production and consumption shape cultural products at times in paradoxical ways emerge at various points. For example, at the beginning of her analysis of cinema she explores how Hollywood expanded into a transnational corporate entity, 'constituting the channels of imperial commerce' from 1916 onwards (Cherniavsky, 2006: 81). Also in the discussion of the production of *The Simpsons*, she notes that 'Film Roman subcontracts the labour-intensive aspect of production on the series, including the drawing and colouring of cells, to one of six "animation houses" in South Korea' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 134) in order to dramatically cut costs. An animation which makes incisive and insightful satirical points about consumption and embodiment at least in the context of the Western world, an analysis of which is drawn out in a gripping fashion by Cherniavsky, depends on outsourcing for its production, one of the defining strategies of transnational corporations (Cherniavsky, 2006: 167). This situating of cultural and counter-

cultural products within circuits of consumption and production also alludes implicitly to the role of the intellectual within circuits of transnational production. As she notes '*The Simpsons* appears committed to assuming the intellectual's function, proffering a noniterative version (text) of its own conditions of possibility' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 133). This alludes I think to the importance of the intellectual in cultural studies or social theory being prepared to reflexively and critically situate themselves within the conditions of reproduction and commodification, something which is too rarely explored in social theory.

It is worth noting that Cherniavsky's approach is not rooted in any kind of celebratory account of existing sub-cultural stable interiors of those who are racially dominant, for which she critiques Whiteness Studies. She argues instead for an approach that renders 'white subjects accountable for the territorializing operations of specular thought' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 62). This is better reflected, it seems, in unstable, problematised cultural formations that are heterogeneous and the moments at which this is expressed in different cultural forms. This is more implicit in the first chapter which strongly argues for the importance of Subaltern Studies in a US context, drawing principally on Spivak's seminal 'Can the subaltern speak?' in which Spivak clearly notes, 'the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous' (Spivak, 1988: 79). In the first instance Cherniavsky draws on the colonial aspects of the US state and society in certain key respects, for example, in the coding of an indigenous labour force as foreign (Mexican) and in the expansion of capital through importing the African as a captive labour force. As she notes, 'the United States arguably achieves hegemony through exercising a colonial dominance that systematically displaces both indigenous and nonwhite labour from the social and symbolic territory of the consensual Euro-American state' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 2). Her argument for the value of Subaltern Studies here is that it forbids the erosion of the distinction between colonialism and industrial capitalism in critical formulations (Cherniavsky, 2006: 13), this in turn goes with another distinction the book makes between manifestations of race and transnational commodification that play out in complex ways.

At the risk of simplifying an extremely rich text, I would say that a large portion of the book can be seen as an investigation or a discovery of different manifestations of unstable, dispossessed, cultural interior 'alteriors.' This is reflected in actors who possess a sort of interior alterity that manifests the heterogeneity (see Thomassen, 2005), the vexed, unstable interior boundaries, in social and political formations. Her first manifestation of interior alterity is the relation between the character Lilith and the Oankali, from Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. Lilith was also reportedly the name of the first woman in the original creation account of Genesis. Lilith refused sexual relations with Adam in the missionary position and fled; an episode that has been expunged from the scriptures (Cherniavsky, 2006: 156) with the possible exception of *Isaiah* 34:14-15, depending on the translation. Lilith constitutes a fascinating example of the ulterior

figure of the female in the bible. While Lilith's original status in the bible is much contested she does receive considerable mention along these lines in the medieval text 'The Alphabet of Ben Sira' (1998). *Dawn* is a story about the genetic adulteration of the human species in which an alien species, the Oankali, seek to mix genes. Cherniavsky marks this species' desire to trade genetic imprints by mixing with other life forms as reflecting the Euro-American subject refigured through planetary dislocations. Lilith is impregnated by this alternative life form giving rise to an 'articulation of permanently vexed interiority' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 22-3), in which she belongs but her child will always be an inter-species other. In the great Orson Welles noir, *A Touch of Evil*, the unstable interior of white masculinity as an alternative to Vargas's (Charlton Heston) liberal avowals and Quinlan's (Orson Welles) fascist ravings, we have the night clerk (Dennis Weaver) who exists in a mode of jittering, accelerated standstill in a motel on the Mexican-American border. As Cherniavsky notes 'the border traverses and unsettles white men's claims; that the borderlands are everywhere (there is no possible flight to the interior) ... the night clerk alone, among the film's white male protagonists, seems to know exactly where he stands' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 126-7). These two examples of unstable problematised interiority, and there are a variety of others I could have highlighted from the book, also serve to show the disembodied embodiment of capital's formations of vexed unstable interiors, in which transnational commodification constitutes unstable commodity insertion, disaggregating and at the same time expressing boundaries.

In one particular dramatic shift in Cherniavsky's commentary, which I think raises important questions regarding social ontology and cultural analysis, Cherniavsky moves from an interesting and engaging analysis of Barney—the Simpson's character who is invariably a drunken regular at Mo's bar—and his encounter with a pancake syrup figurine at a Monstromart, to Butler's critique of the concept of the Lacanian real. Barney encounters a range of Monstromart black syrup containers in the shape of Mrs Butterworth; Barney attempts to communicate with one of them and then nudges one on the shoulder, which then spills syrup onto the isles in a 'cramtastic' crimson tide, he then cries 'I've killed her' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 143). Cherniavsky argues that Mrs Butterworth's breaking involuntarily reinscribes Barney into a field of historically constituted social relations. It triggers a kind of resurgence of unspoken histories, since Mrs Butterworth reflects a black female other as commodity which Barney announces that he has just killed. And yet, quite what this killing means remains ambiguous. It constitutes a moment of awakening of unimpeachable experience, of a sense of guilt for subaltern histories that remain unspoken, within a world in which the white male is subsumed into the anonymity of the consumption of endless commodities, something that *The Simpsons* continually and astutely highlights particularly through Homer (Cherniavsky, 2006: 146-8). As she puts it 'the loss of organic embodiment deals a more decisive blow to the reproduction of white privilege, insofar as the commodities transform from thing to text to an archive of devastating knowledges that the white consumer can

neither hold off nor command' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 148). However, this leads Cherniavsky to an argument in favour of a more historically constituted, rather than invariable, understanding of the Lacanian real, this latter understanding for her constitutes an 'unrepentant will-to-totalization' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 168). For Butler, in an account which Cherniavsky seems to agree with, 'the real marks the place where specific categories of historical experience and symbolic activity have been policed and subjected to their forced desymbolization' (Cherniavsky, 2006: 146). The leaking of the syrup figure brings an eruption of this latter kind, as there is a hint that, for Barney, the moment presents a traumatic 'decrypting of subaltern histories sealed in the commodity artefact' (Cherniavsky 2006: 146) through a particular breakdown in the symbolic order. The brief critique of the Lacanian real seems to cross into territory that has already been discussed in Butler's exchanges with Laclau and Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony and Universality* (2000). However, one is left wondering if the 'will-to-totalization' Cherniavsky is expressing disagreement with is anything other than an attempt to find a social ontology, which raises the question of what the status of ontology, particularly social ontology, should be within cultural studies. The real is actually a postulate of the incompleteness of any will-to-totalization—discourses are never complete and total they are always failed/impossible so that the stability of the signifier and its ability to capture the object of desire is subverted (Contu and Willmott, 2006: 1772). Because of this incompleteness, the real accompanies any and every social and historical formation, its form or shape is not symbolically pre-determined in advance, for it constitutes the limits of a symbolic order. Yet this does not detract in any way from the moment at which there is a particular kind of expression or event that destabilises the limits of a social formation in everyday practices and the social or political urgency of this, it simply means that it does not take a pre-determined form. This left me wondering somewhat about what kind of social ontology is at work, at least implicitly, in Cherniavsky's book, since it is clearly more than a diverse theoretical assortment intended to reveal facets of fascinating cultural shapes in different popular entertainment forms. Given Cherniavsky's aversion to totalising ontology (Cherniavsky 2006: 168) her own social ontology becomes difficult to characterise comprehensively but it seems to draw on a rich, broadly constructivist feminism that is underpinned by a complex transnational materialism. Her approach also selectively employs insights from other approaches including Lacanian psychoanalysis. That said, it is the way this social ontology with its materialistic thrust is brought into rich engagement with different select cultural cases, in ways that allow these cases to run for themselves in their complexity, which makes for such a rewarding read.

Sam Dallyn is completing his PhD in the Ideology and Discourse Analysis Programme at the University of Essex.

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