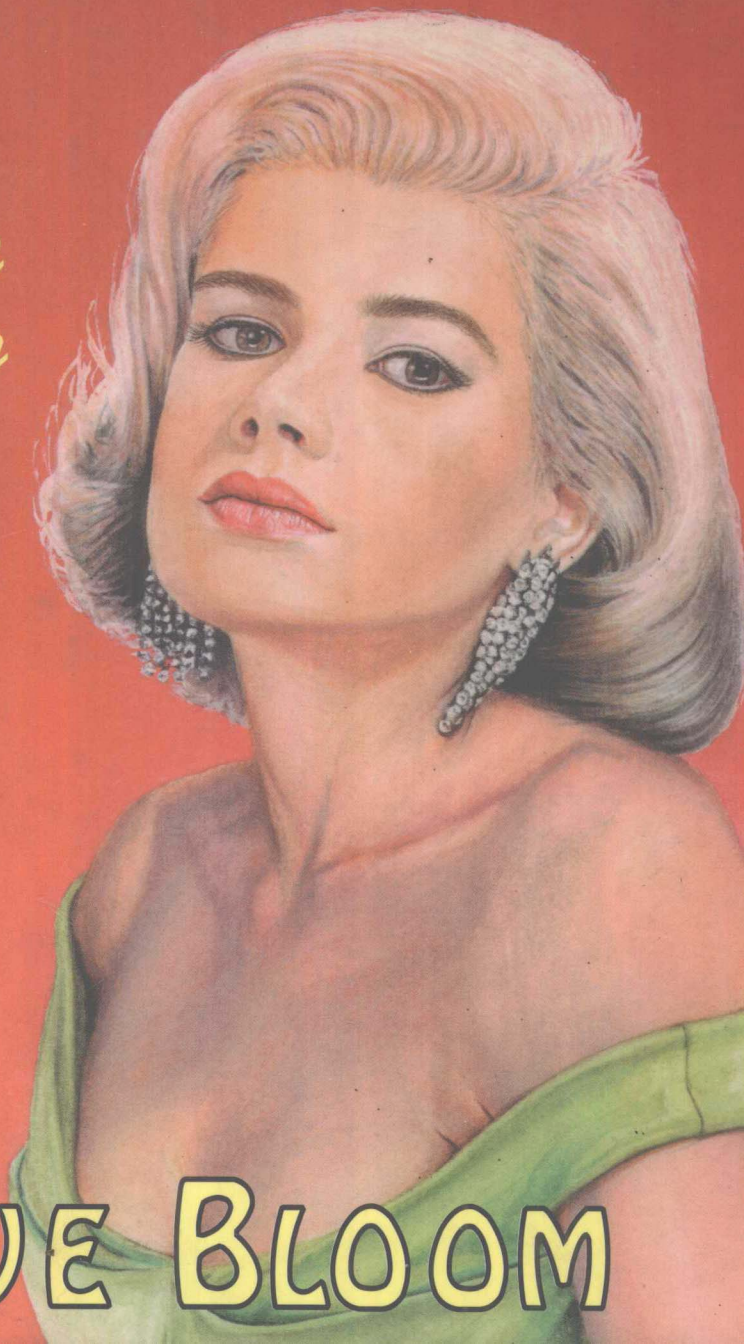


CULT FICTION

*Popular
Reading
and
Pulp
Theory*

CLIVE BLOOM



Cult Fiction

Popular Reading and Pulp Theory

Clive Bloom

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CULT FICTION

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
PART I: ET IN ARCADIA EGO	1
1 'Scuse me Mr H'officer: An Introduction	3
2 Throwing Rice at Brad and Janet: Illicit, Delinquent Pleasures	12
3 Turning the World Round: The Print Revolution	48
4 A River So Deep: Literacy, Language	71
5 Outlaws Against The Law Badge: Readers Reading	85
6 Smart Like Us: Culture and Kulcha	104
7 Living in Technicolor: The Rules of Pulp	132
PART II: ARS GRATIA ARTIS	157
8 The Ripper Writing: A Cream of a Nightmare Dream	159
9 West is East: Nayland Smith's Sinophobia and Sax Rohmer's Bank Balance	178
10 This Revolting Graveyard of the Universe: The Horror Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft	192
11 Harry and Marianne: The Never Ending Supernatural Soap	205
PART III: REQUIESCAT	219
12 The Death of Cult Fiction and the End of Theory	221
<i>Notes</i>	241
<i>Index</i>	257

Part I
Et In Arcadia Ego

1

'Scuse me Mr H'officer: An Introduction

Cult Fiction is an exploration of pulp literature and pulp mentalities: an investigation into the nature and theory of the contemporary mind in art and in life. Here the violent, erotic and sentimental excesses of contemporary life signify different facets of the modern experience played out in the gaudy pages of sensational and kitsch literature: novels, comic books, tabloid newspapers.

This book offers the reader a chance to investigate the underworld of literary production and from it find a new set of co-ordinates for questions regarding publishing and reading practices; ideas of genre; theories of commercial production; concerns regarding high and low culture, the canon and censorship; and the nature of the theories we use to explore the above areas. Concentrating on many disregarded and forgotten authors the book provides a theory of kitsch art that radically alters our perception both of literature and literary values while providing a panorama of an almost forgotten history: the history of pulp.

Pulp is not only a descriptive term for certain forms of publishing produced on poor quality paper, but it is also indicative of certain attitudes, reading habits and social concerns. For the aficionado, this literature is exemplified by those forms of magazine and paperback publication which flourished between the 1920s and 1950s in America and which should be distinguished from both dime novels, paperbacks per se and comic books. For academics, the term vaguely expresses a field of popular publishing neglected through the overemphasis placed upon canonic texts, while for cultural critics it often has meant the exemplary instance of mass culture's propensity to debase everything and exalt the lowest common denominator.

This study attempts to explore all these concerns and definitions, traverse them, broaden them and deepen them. It is axiomatic of this study that artistic movements and aesthetic concerns are intimately involved with social, commercial and perceptual history and that the formal questions we might ask cannot be asked without

some sense of *location* in questions necessarily not formal. As such, the study does not overemphasize the definition of genre nor that of production, nor that of social history but attempts to negotiate through these toward an opening out of the question beyond such narrow definitions of the subject.

I do, however, want to provide a dynamic model of cult fiction and of pulp – an aesthetic as well as a history of trash art which acknowledges its vibrancy and excitement and its own mores of taste, hierarchy and validity. In this way, trash art speaks for itself, but within those constituting frameworks of commercial necessity and ephemerality that mark all trash out for what it is.

One can see this book as attempting to outline a different literary history and provide a different set of aesthetic criteria in order to investigate the complexities of print as both entertainment and provider of information. Within this history of *information* I delineate a second tale of cultural and social negotiation and of Anglo-American reading habits in which the *suppression* of one form of literacy becomes a marked theme. Lastly I must stress my attempt to tease out the complex negotiations that occur within the publishing market, within literary forms and within class structures and human relationships that an investigation of this kind must take into account. Evidence for ephemeral enjoyments, including reading for pleasure (as against utility), is often thin and its assessment problematical, nevertheless I have conjectured only where a link is not available in evidence so much as in logic and where problems of structure required a paradigm offered by the evidence but ignored by other writers.

Literary history of the type found in these pages is a discipline which needs to remind itself constantly that literature is not merely historical evidence (far from it), but is of course, always itself and yet *in* history. Yet literature is a kind of historical evidence not merely for its own evolution but also for attitudes of mind. This is, therefore, a history of perception using literature as a highly specialized, highly attenuated and usually distanced evidence. Literature 'represents' only in a curiously non-imitative and non-representational manner. Thus it is itself and yet indicative of those wider movements it mediates and metamorphoses through the printed page. I have been conscientious to see literature both in and for itself and as a social force representing conditions of cultural change.

I have divided the following pages into three parts. The first part

offers the work's central argument and deals with questions of taste, publishing history and definitions; the second offers examples across a limited range of texts and genres in an effort to suggest both pulp's aesthetic concerns and pulp's attitudinal concerns. Part III is a requiem not only for pulp but also for a certain theoretical adventure. As readers will see, I delineate not just a history of that underclass of literary production usually known as pulp but I also give some hints as to the wider context of pulp aesthetics or trash art with examples from further afield. Although a history of print, this also gives an opening into other areas which are related.

More ambitiously, so most problematically, I have attempted to suggest a model which incorporates Anglo-American history and reading habits to show how intimately both sides of the Atlantic have shared (and been divided by) a common language. Too many studies ignore the basic importance of this linguistic relationship in their concern for one country's literary heritage. This book is about another as yet unsung heritage and consists of a history, a general theory and a series of examples. The examples are drawn from as many areas as possible but it is inevitable that certain areas, favoured by particular readers, may be less well covered than those readers might desire. For this I excuse myself on grounds that the book is designed as an argument, not a compendium. Books and authors are referred to for their illustrative value, their significance for the argument and their intrinsic interest, and inevitably they can only act as a sample. My terms neither include nor exclude bestsellers and blockbusters but where these are better dealt with in other studies I have ignored them, unless to dispute a point or take forward an argument. 'Popular' here does not mean merely common and much of my argument is taken up with writers and books neither commonly read nor bestsellers, but nevertheless determinedly popular by definitions concerned with market forces, mass reading habits and education, class divisions and attitudes at once political, social, cultural and always aesthetic.

The reader of this book will be well aware by the time they reach the last page that it has been about the context and history of popular reading habits, but it has been more than that and I have tried to explore the hidden byways of a literary history rarely taught in academia, hidden in second-hand bookstores and often only collected by a small band of enthusiastic 'amateurs' or left even by them to be finally bought by someone like me to whom the eccentric connection may just be the right one.

In one sense these pages contain an unseen map of bookshop visits in and around London as well as phone calls to mail order dealers and an occasional trip to a convention (both as a participant and as a spectator). I am not a dedicated fanatic but a fascinated bystander who is perhaps too ready to pick and choose, too *disengaged* ever to join the ranks of those whose life is measured in checklists, nevertheless my life too has been measured by popular fiction.

My life as an academic has divided itself between esoteric literary theory and esoteric literary 'trash' – a term I use in the same way that the gay community returned to the word 'queer'. Critical essays on spy novels, thrillers, comic books and horror stories and a continued interest in the popular and ephemeral has kept me returning to the well, a loyalty I cannot shake. Years in dusty bookshops tells one, as nothing else can, that all art dies eventually and that it is indeed no less mortal than the ephemera that surrounds it and no less vulnerable to being passed over in silence by the casual browser. Only seek and you will find! Every second-hand bookshop and junk shop with its shelf of decaying and musty paperbacks is a catacomb of the undead. A visit is a type of Gray's 'Elegy', an archaeological trip into the past of the ordinary, a reminder of one's mortality. In rereading or refinding long-forgotten and half-remembered writers one does a service not only to history but to a communal memory which is different from 'history' and which is shot through with an affection history does not feel.

But you need not get too mushy: there are huge numbers of books printed each year that are simply unreadable, some deserve forgetting and no longer exist as art but merely as history. In this book I have made choices, finding certain books either too dull or too empty for discussion; there is good and bad in everything and every pulp fan has his or her 'list' not only of the significant and worthy but also of those which keep their affection. I doubt if we can ever make the dead live again but we can give them a good send-off and perhaps in doing so learn something of the true place of the living in the schemes of social and literary culture.

I have not dealt with children's literature as a specific subcategory, indeed to do so would have been against the principles behind some of the ideas in this book. Instead, such literature is mentioned where it falls naturally within the argument in general or forms a bridge upon which adult and adolescent readers meet. It is a fact that all the arguments here rehearsed regarding adult reading matter can be applied to, or have already been applied to children's reading

matter; debates over quality, taste, the canon, morality and ethical acceptability as well as questions of content and style mirror such debates elsewhere regarding literature, its cultural significance and social importance.

It is ironic that, as with publishing for adults, there has long been a tradition of wilfully refusing to acknowledge why children read certain things, in effect to rescue books from both their readers and their authors. This tradition of *denial* still prevalent today, but especially so from the 1950s to late 1970s, was in its most virulent form an unconscious equation between the reading interests of foolish middle-class boys and girls and those of the inarticulate, semi-literate adult proletarian, such imaginary creatures represented by Enid Blyton and Mickey Spillane. How else could one such critic make such an equation: '... I would as soon consider including [Enid Blyton] in a study of children's literature as I would consider including say Mickey Spillane in a literature degree course.'¹ One is inclined to ask, despite changes in current university curricula how much has, or would change?

A word must be said, given some of my later arguments, about the omission of detailed information concerning the unstamped radical press of the early eighteen-hundreds. After 1815 newspapers carried a stamp or tax duty of 4d. (four pence) which meant working people could not afford to buy them. This effectively removed the chance of such people, the working middle classes, also joining in any real political debate. From the 1830s onwards, due to internal political pressures and inspired by the July Revolution in France there appeared a new wave of illegally printed and distributed unstamped newspapers selling for 1d. (one penny). By 1836 such papers had far exceeded sales of the legitimate press, were read right across the country in both town and countryside and were driven by a dissident movement of printers, booksellers, authors and illegal distribution centres. Many hundreds of people were fined or imprisoned or both but the 'tax on knowledge' was repealed and reduced to a general rate of one penny. Thus finally ended this highly popular form of subversive publishing.

Effective as popular means of radicalizing the unenfranchised 'the Unstamped ... were [also] a colourful and strident step towards cheap journalism and cheap literature'.² They were designed by such means to bring their readers to 'political and economic self-awareness' of, on the one hand, the oppressions of aristocracy and monopoly, or on the other the newer oppressions of exploitation

and property.³ In each case the attempt was to elevate the reader and to provide self-improvement and education.

While these productions could be considered an abortive attempt to create a *national* politicized consciousness among working people they were nevertheless a highly prophetic precursor of cost-effective production – ironically the very system they opposed. Reading was widened and encouraged if not elevated or overtly politicized. The reading public of the middle nineteenth century were still parochial in their political affiliations and it was only the monopolizing of ownership in the later years of the century that flattened out local divergence and nationalized the political attitudes of working people now able to participate, through reading, in a commonality of attitudes.

This commonality of attitudes, which allowed working people to participate in national affairs, occurred later in the century in the United States where from the 1870s a virtual state of anarchy existed between workers and their bosses. If the presses of Hearst and Pulitzer provided one sort of news, packed with 'personality' and 'sensation-mongering' as Matthew Arnold sourly remarked in his essays of the 1880s (collected 1888), then the growth of populism and radicalism during the same period also provided ground for cheap socialist and anti-capitalist newspapers, pamphlets and broadsheets aimed at uniting working people. Where Arnold found 'a community singularly free from the distinction of classes [and] singularly homogeneous', as well he might have been 'sponsored' by Andrew Carnegie, there was, in fact, a country divided on class and ethnic lines – divisions which proved irresolvable. Blacks and Whites read in their newspapers of suppressions and violence, reports reaching their climax in the collapse of 1893. Such reports and the obvious hardship of workers and their families made socialists of such as Eugene Debs and populists of Henry Vincent who started a journal in 1886 called *The American Non-Conformist and Kansas Industrial Liberator*, which aimed to 'tend to the education of the labouring classes'.⁴ The *National Economist* found 100 000 readers among working people and in the South newspapers appeared with names such as *The Comrade*, *the Toiler's Friend* and *Revolution*.⁵ Lectures were organized and books and pamphlets provided at a prodigious rate:

One gathers from yellowed pamphlets that the agrarian ideologists undertook to re-educate their countrymen from the ground

up. Dismissing 'history as taught in our schools' as 'practically valueless', they undertook to write it over – formidable columns of it, from the Greek down. With no more compunction they turned all hands to the revision of economics, political theory, law, and government.⁶

All in all, these attempts paralleled and finally blended into the Democratic Party platform, if they were not already suppressed by other means.

The legacy of the early radical press in Britain was a public able to afford nationally disseminated ideas provided, ironically, by the monopolistic ownership of press 'barons', a situation paralleled later in America. It is therefore entirely to miss the point to argue that press ownership is merely conservative, manipulative and degraded.⁷ While ownership was monopolized, consumption was always a matter of *local* negotiation – readers of popular papers were and are a peculiar mixture of gullibility and shrewd refusal (what Richard Hoggart might have called 'common sense'). The radical penny press did not simply vanish but rather it went underground, absorbed into the very sensibility of British reading habits. Opposed by temperament to the very nature of pulp, the cheap radical publisher's subversive nature modified into the illicit pleasures of gaudy literature – hardly, perhaps, educational or morally elevating, but effectively democratic for all that.⁸

Finally, the reader should be warned that I do not include a specific chapter on women's romantic fiction. This area has been a 'cause' among feminist critics and social historians for sufficient time for much of the argument to have become stale and commonplace. Such publishers as Mills & Boon are also self-reflexive in their attitudes and their promotional material itself has provided a wealth of information as to their aesthetic concerns. Thus, although some areas (the cheapest women's story magazines and film-story magazines) have been less explored by critics, I have let their testimony stand except where I take issue with their findings or believe they have insufficiently credited certain evidence.

Rarely is research work, even in the humanities, carried out in isolation. During the 1980s a number of significant studies emerged from the radical left which clearly showed the complexity inherent in working with 'popular' culture and the problematic discontinuities which emerge in such work.⁹ The links between culture, politics, class, gender, race and economic realities found themselves plotted