

Review: Splintered Visions

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Ponzanesi, Sandra. *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry: Icons, Markets, Mythologies.* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
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“Postcolonialism is dead, long live postcolonial studies.” After so many pronouncements on the death of postcolonial theory and the obligatory obituaries by so many of the most noted representatives of the field, it is refreshing to come across a book that neither glorifies postcolonial studies nor quickly assigns them to the dustbin of history. What the present volume does, and very well, is to present a lucid, sweeping overview: not just of the field of postcolonial studies but, more importantly, of the many and varied cultural productions associated with, informed by, or indeed central to, a postcolonial understanding of the world. The way Ponzanesi opens her study can be taken as a signpost for her careful attention to the debates in, around, and against postcolonial studies: “Many persuasive critics such as Arif Dirlik (1994), Aijaz Ahmad (1995), Neil Lazarus (2011), and Benita Parry (2004) have passionately addressed the complicity and connivance of the postcolonial field with Western hegemony”

(8). From its very inception Postcolonial Studies have been fraught with heated controversies involving the extent to which they might just be a form of liberal bourgeois appropriation of cultural forms of resistance that would ignore or even deny important issues such as the class struggle. *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* is not only very aware of such pitfalls but also rides calmly over them. It does so a bit too comfortably as I will argue in a moment, but what must be kept in mind is how this study both critiques postcolonial studies and advances them simultaneously. And it does so from within the field itself, rather than from outside. Indeed, Sandra Ponzanesi has been one of the most active and innovative critics developing postcolonial studies in Europe as her long list of significant publications attests to, focusing on questions of migration long before that became a hot topic for the press, on issues of gender and postcolonial studies, or on film studies and issues of violence. The present study builds on her previous work and significantly adds to it. The sweeping, clear discussion of what she rightly terms the postcolonial cultural industry is a much-needed overview that anyone with an interest in critical issues related to contemporary art, in its varied forms, must read.

The sheer amount of materials covered and the respective need for renewed contextualization might easily have rendered this book an amalgamation of *faits divers* and heterogeneous specialty interests. Instead, the six chapters into which the book is divided make for a very clear structure that avoids unnecessary repetition, yet allows for a cumulative reading: Ponzanesi goes from one aspect of the postcolonial cultural industry such as the machinery of literary prizes to another such as the practices of translation, culminating in an extended reflection on “postcolonial chick lit.” The range and scope of this study are noteworthy but so are the clarity and steadfast approach that make for engaging and stimulating reading. Someone with little previous knowledge of postcolonial studies as a whole or of one of its areas, such as film adaptations, covered in this book, will be able to follow without a problem. At the same time, scholars working in the field will equally profit from the sure way in which Ponzanesi treats the given materials and the controversies surrounding them. This is not an easy task at all and Ponzanesi is to be commended for the way

she bridges the gap between curious readers and advanced scholars in a way that makes a real contribution to the field while creating many possible links with other areas. The brief introduction is a very useful roadmap to the book, allowing readers to immediately orient themselves before delving into the deeper consideration of the interrelation between theory and practice covered in the first chapter. This chapter is very useful and engaging as it not only provides a solid grounding for the work that follows but also provides a sort of broad intellectual overview that takes position in a number of critical debates without ever falling into senseless polemics. The first chapter proper is a sort of expanded introduction that addresses theoretical and methodological questions. Ponzanesi carefully lays out how the term “cultural industry” originates in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer and also how it must be adapted for present circumstances, noting a number of criticisms levied at them, such as the rigid distinction between high and mass culture. At times of course one could wish that some issues were treated somewhat differently, more at length, or less schematically. This is very evident for instance in the second chapter, devoted to literary prizes, in which there are fairly small entries on a number of writers and of renowned literary prizes, from Wole Soyinka to Assia Djebar, Nadine Gordimer to Zadie Smith and a few others who have entered the current canon. Yes, the entries are schematic because they have to cover much ground in a limited amount of space. Naturally, the choice of authors, though fully understandable, could still be debated. Yet, the reverse side of such minor complaints is that a reader who might not be acquainted with all of the writers or prizes, will greatly benefit from the information provided and, indeed, from the way in which it is presented. Although this is in no way conceived as a reference work, it could also be used as such by many scholars and students whose fields might intersect with postcolonial studies. And one very important element of this chapter and chapter 4 is that they do not limit their analysis to the better known (in the West) prizes such as the Nobel, but also include others such as “the African Noma Literary Prize or the Indian Sahitya Akademi Award” (49).

The third chapter, on “Boutique Postcolonialism: Cultural Value and Canon”, is crucial to the entire study and is rightly placed

at its center, since basically all of the issues treated in the book revolve around this conjunction of the exotic with the normative, the transformation of the exceptional into the fetishized and commoditized common. One would be tempted to refer to it as a form of banality of consumerism were it not for the overtones with Arendt's banality of evil. Surely, no matter how perverse and even disgusting the appropriation of radical alterity by the exhausted old western center might be, its damage is of a completely different order. Besides, as Ponzanesi also reflects, simply demonizing the practices of the cultural industry leads nowhere and ultimately fails to recognize the potential always there for actual change and subversion, or the actual complicity of those voices that balance the tight rope between assuming a position of resistance and letting themselves be co-opted in exchange for material rewards. It is important to see how Ponzanesi starts by quoting at some length from Timothy Brennan's 1997 book *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* concerning the pervasive and perverse effect of a demand for non-western writers to serve as examples to western audiences in a process that completely conditions their very production (79). Yet, by the chapter's end, Ponzanesi concludes that the commercial thirst for new writers and new tales is poised on the ambivalence of a supposed tokenism for shortlisted black, female, or diasporic authors, but also on the necessity of their inclusion as a clear indication of societal and aesthetic changes at large (89).

Chapter 4 on "Advertising the Margins: Translation and Minority Cultures" and chapter 5 on "The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Postcolonial Film Adaptations" demonstrate well how the present study is imbricated on years of work in the field of postcolonial studies. Critical interventions into film studies and theoretical gender issues wrap up the book, moving away from the strictly canonical or literary into the visual and popular. In both cases the richness of the discussion leads one to wonder whether the chapters might not constitute a first step into more developed studies of their respective subject matter. Of course, when Ponzanesi states that "It is [...] high time to investigate postcolonial cinema both through theoretical debates and through the close analysis of films" (113) one must keep in mind that this has not only been going on for a considerable amount of

time already but that Ponzanesi herself has been a major contributor. Perhaps this is just a case of how the need to provide necessary grounding for the incipient reader might jostle established scholars. Nonetheless, Ponzanesi's reflections on what constitutes postcolonial film are significant and stand out again by their clarity that manages to avoid oversimplification. In the chapter's conclusion its value as well as its shortcoming are lucidly presented. The attempt at definition, the inclusion of a few case studies, all point towards a pedagogical efficiency that will be greatly appreciated by instructors putting together courses on postcolonial cinema (adaptations) and by their students. However, as Ponzanesi fully realizes, the chapter does not provide any "structured theory of postcolonial adaptation" (155).

That realization, perhaps even more so than at any other moment in the book, and certainly more so than in the concluding, and longer chapter on "Postcolonial ChickLit: Postfeminism or Consumerism?", serves as a lucid assessment of the difficulties the present study exposes without escaping. Indeed, perhaps it never really would be possible to fully escape those issues since this very study itself is yet another commodity, fully inserted into a publishing, academic marketplace. The last chapter starts precisely from such a node and it is worthwhile citing at length:

Chicklit has indeed been seen as a purely commercial phenomenon with no bearing on literary credibility or aesthetic expectations. However, chicklit, written by women, about women and for women, remains an ambivalent and elusive category, particularly if we take discourses around female emancipation, sexual pleasure and career as a starting point for analyzing the genre. (156)

However, whereas this chapter manages such constraints very well so as to reflect generally on the genre but with a very clear focus on a few particular examples from India, the previous one, on film adaptations, leaves a reader wondering where the study might be heading next. Surely, there is a heuristic aspect to that and if one were to pinpoint a chapter that does not fulfill the expectations it raises that would

rather be chapter 4 on “Advertising the Margins: Translation and Minority Cultures,” which simply is too ambitious. Much more space would be needed to do justice to the issues raised than a short chapter and although it is clear why it had to be included, one wishes it had benefited from the lucidity concerning its shortcomings that shines at the end of the next chapter. Does this take away from the significance, value, and interest of the book as whole? Certainly not. If anything it points out the need to develop many of the areas covered by this study even if in a somewhat abbreviated fashion. Likewise, some readers, myself included, might wish for a more robust engagement with what, after all, seems to provide the theoretical starting point for the book: Adorno’s views on the cultural industry. It might be worth remembering Adorno’s lucid comment in the *Minima Moralia* that “The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass” (50). Leaving aside for the moment any debate on whether Adorno was right or not in his critique of mass culture, Ponzanesi simply rides easily over it in a way that fails to engage with the large amount of critical work built on it and not just criticizing it. Similarly, one might wish that the current study made some more use of the vast array of studies that emphasize a materialist approach to the subject at hand such as those by some of the authors Ponzanesi mentions at the beginning, say Benita Parry’s 2004 *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* or Neil Lazarus’ 2011 *The Postcolonial Unconscious*. But it is always facile for a reader to list things any given book could also have included. *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry* builds not only on the author’s previous work but joins other significant interventions such as those by Graham Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), which it complements in a number of ways, not the least of which is a developed consideration of gender issues. Even if one may have wished for a more splintered vision in an Adornian sense, the current book is a vibrant and intellectually stimulating contribution to the field of postcolonial studies that provides much needed correctives and points the way to important new areas of study to be developed further. It is certainly required reading for anyone wanting to engage seriously with postcolonial studies at all rather than sing yet another elegy.

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