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Megalopolis
Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities
Celeste Olalquiaga
University of Minnesota Press

Reviewed by Kakie Urch

The intertext for this review is, fittingly enough, a television advertisement for an amusement park. “Come to King’s Island,” says the voice, over video of two generations enjoying the same fake jungle flume, “where you and your kids exist in exactly the same world at exactly the same time.”

This ad’s presence on my television screen, situated in what has recently been dubbed the “5th most normal city in America, a perfect site for test-marketing,” supports one of the main assertions of Megalopolis: “Postmodernism lives.” In fact, the ad demonstrates the degree to which America has embraced the post-modern collapsing of boundaries—even if America sees the object of its embrace as nothing more than the safety bar on a fiberglass log flume.

This log flume and the way it brings generations “together” is an example of what Celeste Olalquiaga details in Megalopolis: the postmodern collapsing of spatial and temporal boundaries. In Megalopolis, Greenwich Village’s 14th street and Brazil are right around the corner—from each other and from the 1964 World’s Fair. In chapters devoted to science fiction, religious kitsch, and reified natural history, she details the signs of a living postmodernism: a collapsing of not only time and space, but art, culture and scientific thought. It is only fitting that a book examining this world in which the visual often signifies for and beyond the lingual is illustrated with an excellent selection of photographs, cartoons and advertising reprints.

Olalquiaga is strongest when outlining the semiology of advertisements and their position in and contribution to Megalopolis. Her analyses of the implications “Reach Out and Touch Someone” AT&T ads and Latinized marketing techniques are astute. The chapter on Tupinicipolice (a “retrofuturistic Indian metropolis” created for the Brazilian carnival) is brilliant. It refutes Frederic Jameson’s notion of contemporary pastiche, offering evidence that the Latin-American version of collage is anything but blank. Olalquiaga demonstrates that hybrid systems of signification in Latin cultures often are a subversion of media imperialism, combining parody and cynicism in their conscious adoption/adaptation. This chapter argues convincingly that “the habit of simultaneously processing different cultures in Latin American anticipated postmodern pastiche and recycling to the point where it could be affirmed that Latin American culture, like most post-colonial or marginalized cultures, was in some ways postmodern before the First World, a pre-postmodernity, so to speak” (84).

Unfortunately, Olalquiaga’s “prologue,” which begins her promising polemic with the still controversial statement that “Postmodernism lives,” spins into a version of the dissertation chapter in which the committee chair requires passing mention of every theoretician ever connected with the topic. Though situating of the author’s assumptions is important (and a vital commonplace of feminist criticism) its placement at this point in the argument is distracting. Olalquiaga’s own work is strong enough to make this formulized exercise unnecessary. Her interpretations and syntheses are clearly grounded in the theory of postmodernism, and themselves add to this body. The reader familiar with these theories will recognize them in the work. The writing is heavily grounded in the phraseology of postmodern criticism—a positive or a negative, depending on where you sit in the log flume.

Cultural Imperialism
A Critical Introduction
John Tomlinson
The Johns Hopkins University Press

Reviewed by Kakie Urch


Like Bordwell, Tomlinson lays bare the assumptions and methodologies that control a particular field of examination, proposing a redefinition of the field. He outlines the historical and philosophical backgrounds of
cultural change in chapters on media imperialism, nationality, capitalist culture, and modernity. These chapters undertake a complex, painstaking, but highly readable, analysis of the discourse, definitions, and totems of "cultural imperialism," the academic phenomenon.

Tomlinson proposes "modernity" as the new definition, one that encompasses the element the other theories tend to leave out: the subjectivity of the "imperialized". Tomlinson, in sections that he acknowledges will anger Marxist critics, debunks "media imperialism," deconstructs cornerstone studies like Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's "How To Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic" (1971) and Ien Ang's "Watching Dallas" (1985). In what is perhaps the book's most interesting point, Tomlinson demonstrates that studies of this type are premised on a receiver-less model — that is, they assume that the message thought to be sent is that which is received, giving all the subjectivity in the equation to the sender of the message. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the very critics who argue against this "imperialism" are practicing an imperialism of condensation themselves.

Tomlinson then examines the way in which the "preservation of nationality" is somewhat an artificial goal, showing that the culture which is desirable to "preserve" is often itself the product of cultural synthesis. The discourse of UNESCO is examined in this section, providing an apt example of the slipperiness of the concept and content of the nation state.

Tomlinson proposes a different view of cultural imperialism — one grounded in modernity, not what he defines as a somewhat simplistic Marxist view of a march of capitalism, or its media, but one defined as the "spread of modernity." This definition, according to Tomlinson, redefines the major industrialized nations as those that are culturally troubled, entering an era in which they "Think Locally and Act Globally," especially in environmental destruction. Thus, these nations that most cultural imperialism theories view as the "controllers" of media, cultures and capital are in fact out of control, as modernity spreads, requiring a rethinking of the simple "domination" or "imposition" model.

Tomlinson thoroughly examines his own subjectivity. Through a graceful presentation of Foucault's theories of the powerful violence of the discourse continuum, Tomlinson acknowledges his position in an elite group and examines the "boundaries" and "control" of its knowledge. It is the Foucauldian underpinning of the book's argument that makes its redefinition of the field plausible as a contemporary expansion of thought on the issue, rather than a simple reaction against Marxist thought.

Tomlinson's argument has an elegant structure. It unfolds seamlessly; when questions arise, answers are a paragraph away. The book offers clear summaries of major works, positioning them in their context, as it synthesizes a new analysis and definition. At 167 pages, it would be a good unifying text for an advanced undergraduate or introductory graduate course.

Missing from the discussion is an adequate address of the question of how much of anti-imperialist reactions in third-world nations are themselves cultural imports. Tomlinson also elides any address of cultural changes within regions of the capitalist "imperialist" nations themselves. (The changes in Appalachia and various U.S. African-American communities come to mind.) Also, Tomlinson's assertion that Nestle's African promotion of baby formula is benign and perhaps beneficial, seems completely off-base no matter how one redefines the field. More appropriate would be a discussion of the way in which promotion of these formulas in industrialized nations themselves fits into the discourse of "cultural imperialism".

Despite these gaps, and a somewhat reductive approach to Marxists in terming most of them reductive, John Tomlinson's Cultural Imperialism is a critical introduction: to a new era of thought on cultural change, necessitated by — what else? cultural changes. Those who cannot find merit in at least some of its points are simply protecting their paradigm.