

Review of 'art, literature and culture from a marxist perspective'

Abstract

This review-essay contends that 'Art, Literature and Culture from a Marxist Perspective' by Tony McKenna is an original and sophisticated contribution to Marxist aesthetic theory. The book provides essential readings of a number of seminal cultural products from an impressive range of genres. The author devises pioneering theoretical analyses of books, films and television series that are integral to the lives of millions in the Western world but which hitherto have been neglected by radical criticism. The book also alludes to crucial strategic debates on the left regarding the nature of contemporary capitalist society and possible methods of facilitating a transition to socialism. This review analyses a selection of McKenna's chapters and provides a synopsis of his key ideas on each product. The essay seeks to place the book in the wider context of Marxist aesthetic theory. The review argues a distillation of the ideas contained in the work would be an asset to Marxists engaged in theoretical and practical activity.

Keywords: aesthetics, universality, capitalism, culture, revolution

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Introduction

'Everything that concerns people' was Gramsci's memorably terse response to an inquiry about his interests.¹ The statement could easily serve as a suitable sub-title for Tony McKenna's highly readable collection of articles on aspects of contemporary culture through a Marxist lens. The author sets out to assert the validity of a historical materialist perspective on an impressive range of recent cultural products including films, television series, novels and artists. McKenna's book is perfectly tailored for socialists in the workplace who might find themselves either theoretically under-equipped or disinclined to participate in that white-collar ritual known as 'the water-cooler moment'. If you have ever listened in on colleagues discussing Zeitgeist shows such as 'Breaking Bad' or 'The Walking Dead' and struggled to think of a means to subtly divert their conversation onto a political plane, this is the book for you! More seriously, McKenna has succeeded in constructing a valuable contribution to Marxist aesthetics and a powerful confirmation of the explanatory power of historical materialism. The book is informed by a sophisticated but accessible synthesis of Kantian and Hegelian paradigms in the philosophy of art that is lightly applied to multimedia artifacts and personalities, threaded together by a refreshing affirmation of the desirability of some form of global political transformation. The cumulative effect of the essays is a powerful reminder of the ongoing ability of a non-dogmatic and nuanced brand of Marxism to offer coherent explanations of significant moments and processes in the cultural life of Western capitalism as it approaches the third decade of the twenty-first century.

McKenna comprehensively punctures the myth that Marxist cultural criticism has to be deterministic in its anchoring of all forms of artistic output in the socio-economic foundations of society. He emphatically demonstrates that a sophisticated Marxist aesthetic can be deployed that retains the artistic autonomy of the creative impulse, while retaining an awareness that cultural artifacts never exist in a vacuum. They always incorporate, albeit indirectly, traces of the

social and political concerns of their age. As McKenna puts it, with characteristic elegance: 'one must try to identify within the work of art the crystallization of a broader historic necessity...But at the same time, we should be aware that those elements are manifested only in a fantastical, individualized and profoundly unconscious form which can never be read directly and mechanically from its historical basis'.²

McKenna's theoretical foundation innovatively adopts Kant's 'purposeful-purposelessness' definition of art, integrated with a Hegelian understanding of cultural products as symptomatic of the 'world spirit'. From the former, the author affirms that authentic art, in whatever genre, must conform to generalized principles of 'equilibrium, symmetry and balance'. From Hegel, McKenna derives the supplementary view that 'greatness lies in its ability to preserve in a moment of eternity the historical contradictions and mood of the epoch more generally'.³ The author does not claim all the cultural products he discusses are necessarily worthy of 'greatness' but they do, in some form, all creatively reveal aspects of the nature of our current epoch.⁴⁻⁷

The tragic absence of a sense of universality among a previous generation of the forces of liberation is the subject of one of McKenna's chapters. Tupac Shakur is presented as a non-fictional personality who, in many ways, matches the global reach of the central protagonist of 'The Hunger Games'. Murdered in mysterious circumstances in 1996, the US rap star's cultural impact has not been affected by his death.⁸⁻¹¹ It could be argued, inevitably, that his untimely demise aged 29 has only served to enshrine his memory in the eyes of his legions of fans and bestowed martyr status on him. Similar to the most interesting characters in 'Game of Thrones', the author contends that Tupac's lasting relevance is related to his life-long struggle to overcome the contradictions of his personal and political environment. McKenna's rightfully rejects those on the left who casually dismiss rap music as little more than misogynistic and inchoate noise, devoid of musical merit. A materialist analysis of the aesthetic form operating in the genre, he argues, must incorporate a

sense of its 'historicity',¹² rooted in the turbulent course of the US civil rights movement in the twentieth century. When Tupac was born in 1971, the non-violent wing of the movement, inspired above all by Martin Luther King, had virtually exhausted its political momentum, and was being overtaken by the more explicitly revolutionary approach of the Black Panthers. Tupac's mother had been an active member of the latter organisation but drifted out of politics, as he grew up, due to a debilitating crack addiction. McKenna relates how the movement was gradually neutralised by the US state, with a combination of co-optation by the Democrat Party and lethal force by the police and intelligence agencies. Tupac's generation were left politically rudderless and many of its members opted to pursue a very different route out of poverty: Figures such as Puff Daddy explicitly located black empowerment within the narrow limits of individual success and the spirit of entrepreneurialism... Puff Daddy's hero was Donald Trump rather than Angela Davis or Malcolm X and he went on to found a music label and achieve wealth both as an artist and businessperson'.¹³

The reason Tupac is worthy of the attention of the left is that, although he shared the disillusionment of the post-Panthers generation and was drawn to the possibility of personal enrichment, he retained a sense of the emancipatory impulse of the 1960s and sought to articulate it in his music. McKenna persuasively argues that as the revolutionary movement of the previous generation was neutered or crushed, its spirit was sublimated into the primary aesthetic output of the children of that generation; namely rap music. The author describes how Tupac's lyrics frequently allude with a sense of loss to the leaders and battles of the previous era, such as Huey Newton, co-founder of the Panthers:

It's time to fight back

That's what Huey said

Two shots in the dark now Huey's dead¹⁴

McKenna also reminds us that Tupac risked considerable ridicule and opprobrium within the rap circuit by electing to write a song about his mother, in defiance of the misogyny and machismo that characterises the milieu. The song, 'Keep Ya Head Up' pays tribute to black women, trapped in poverty, who never give up the struggle to provide for their households:

'I give a holler to my sisters on welfare. Tupac cares and don't nobody else care'¹⁵

The author is not oblivious to the traces of blatant sexism and homophobia that Tupac himself could be guilty of perpetuating, but interestingly McKenna attributes many of these to the singer's departure from his native New York and relocation to the less-politically engaged West Coast in his final years. Tupac's tragedy was that although he was personally rooted in the heritage of the black resistance of the 1960s, there was no comparable vehicle of radicalism that could provide an outlet for his political instincts in his adult life. With audacious insight, McKenna turns to Hegel to comprehend this process at work: Tupac was... Losing contact with historical spirit-as Hegel calls it-the universal element which provided the animating principle of his art. Bereft of that, Tupac was all too quick to revert to the depressingly familiar idiom of 'hos' and 'bitches' and to embrace the riches and prestige of his newly acquired superstar status.¹⁶

If we are to interpret the emergence of Katniss Everdeen as

a crystallization of the global desire for 'system-change', we could lament Tupac as a victim of the absence of such a totalising perspective in a previous era. The sense of waste that overshadows his memory should not detract from admiration for the aesthetic value of his music, as McKenna poignantly observes at the end of his chapter on the singer: That sense of the transcendent is something every artist strives for, the moment in which the paraphernalia of your own self seems to peel away and you feel somehow through your activity you have articulated the form and shape of a higher development'.¹⁷

It would be difficult to think of a more contrasting cultural figure to Tupac Shakur than Harry Potter. However, such is the confidence and dexterity with which McKenna handles trends in contemporary capitalist culture that his section on JK Rowling's eponymous hero is as intriguing as the one on the rap star. Once more, the author performs a valuable role in providing a cogent explanation for the unprecedented success of a notable cultural phenomenon that has thus far received negligible, if any, attention from the ranks of Marxist commentators. This may very likely be due to misguided intellectual snobbery but it is surely an obligation for a theory that aspires to explain 'everything that concerns people' to provide reasons why children and adults around the world would queue in their tens of thousands after midnight for copies of a book. McKenna persuasively argues the phenomenon has to be of interest to the left as 'Harry Potter manages to embody some of the most important historical characteristics of the modern epoch from within the context of what is ostensibly a beautifully dark and richly woven childhood fantasy'.¹⁸

McKenna clearly does not accept the view of those in radical circles who might argue the stories are childish, trivial and unworthy of sustained attention, but he does have some sympathy for those who question their originality and artistic merit. He draws attention to notable creative failings in both the books and the spin-off movies such as the 'rather vacant central character', the 'bland and obvious depictions of good and evil', and Rowling's 'naïve political sensibilities'.¹⁹ Such criticism are perceptive but have probably occurred to countless sceptics of the series. The real insight of McKenna's analysis comes from a bravura dissection of the character of Voldemort, the stories' nemesis, and his relation to fascism in the twentieth century. It is unlikely anyone else has written an article on Harry Potter than includes extensive references to Trotsky's analysis of the rise of Mussolini and Hitler! The process threaded through the stories whereby the dark magician incrementally assumes corporeal form and transmutes from an abstract, distant threat into a visceral and murderous entity is interpreted as paralleling the manner in which fascism can insidiously emerge in institutions of the capitalist state such as the police and the army. The author recounts how: Voldemort's 'deeds traverse the path from the abstract to the concrete in a similar fashion in that they no longer flow from his innate evilness but occur as a specific set of actions endowed by an ideological framework, forged in and through the conflict between the opposed social agencies realised as a living whole'.²⁰

Although the author only references Trotsky a handful of times, the essays collected in this volume are very much in the dialectical spirit of the Russian revolutionary's writings on art and culture. In 'Literature and Revolution', Trotsky famously remarks that the higher cultural level of a socialist society would mean that potentially all its citizens could aspire to the achievements of Aristotle, Goethe or Marx.²² Perhaps it is time to update the sentiment and, thanks to the author, envisage a post-revolutionary world in which versions

of Katniss Everdeen, Tupac Shakur and Sherlock Holmes are commonplace. Many might view such a prospect as outlandish, but as McKenna helpfully reminds us, 'art is the medium in which history dreams'.²³

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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