

by FRED INGLIS

Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain 1930-39: A round of cheap diversions?

by Robert James

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There has long been a struggle going on between the soul of strong intelligences with decent feelings and the deathly conventions and leaden diction of required form in doctoral dissertations. Robert James is beyond doubt decent-spirited and generously intelligent, but his natural talents only just overcome the cumbrous machinery of approved research production.

His vast topic is less culture in its now all-encompassing sense, more and simply, movies and fiction. It makes one glum to see that the now assorted disciplines of the human sciences prefaced by the adjective 'cultural' have so far forgotten their sacred books that Richard Hoggart's classic *Uses of Literacy* is here reduced to a mere mention.

For Hoggart, like Jonathan Rose in his splendid *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, also scanted in these pages, should have compelled James to abandon the crass and commonplace deployment of 'consumer' as the practitioner of culture, and turned back to Hoggart's 'uses'. People have a *use* for culture, and taste entails judgement, a significant action of the moral self.

It is not at all the case that the admirable James is scared of these words, even if it's a bit of a surprise to find the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' here applied with a casual innocence I haven't seen for a long time. But he is nailed down too often by the awful old boilerplate of methodology in cultural studies here invoked in the drone of traditional liturgy: "We must always keep in mind the dialectical play between agency and structure, between production and consumption".

The dead weight of his intellectual tradition notwithstanding, James is indomitable and assiduous in pursuit of historical fact. He reviews with mild and justified distaste the official disapproval by government committees and by professionally superior commentators of working class taste in movies and novels; he then dives deep below the surfaces of the ample records of library borrowing and movies on show to be found, one is thrilled to learn,

in South Welsh Mining Institutes, in the local press and library committee minutes of thirties Derby, and the gratifyingly full records of titles and attendances at the thriving cinemas of naval and dockyard Portsmouth.

James doesn't entertain, as he should, the certainty that these were trans-class audiences and readerships. In addition he repudiates the condescension with which a cultural critic like the old termagant Queenie Leavis dismisses so much imaginative life of the day (strictures on her part, be it said, spoken over all social classes) as 'escapism', although it is worth asking, why not? when there was so bloody much that was horrible to escape from.

It is however at this point that James's method and tradition let him down. He italicises as deep puzzles the concepts of 'pleasure', 'experience' and – most crucially – the 'fit' between passion and narrative, but then, no doubt warned off by his superior, doesn't pursue these into the exploration of the heartfelt happiness, huge excitement and fulfilling tearfulness which bad old escapism certainly brought with it. He lists in copious and fascinating detail the names of books and movies, but never opens their pages and looks hard and delightedly at them for our illumination and by way of what used to be so well called, 'practical criticism'.

For and from the record, James's book is a mine of golden information. But he hasn't allowed himself to weigh the meaning of his booty.