Rethinking C.L.R. James

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Negativities of the Popular: C.L.R. James and the Limits of "Cultural Studies"

Neil Larsen

The renewed interest in C.L.R. James that began toward the end of his life and has continued to grow in the years since his death in 1989 verifies his still hugely under-rated importance as a modern critical intelligence. But it has about it something of a Victorian intrigue: the death of a patriarch reveals the existence, previously known only to a few, of an unsuspectedly sumptuous intellectual inheritance. And as James's authorized representatives (both figuratively and—in the persons of his literary executor and his amanuensis—literally) begin the gradual process of disbursing this truly dazzling fortune, a host of potential heirs gathers to claim a legacy. Since the legacy is intellectual, and to that degree in the public domain, the issue is not so much who inherits what but rather who inherits the right to classify or situate James within the current welter of competing and colliding doctrines and theoretical enterprises. Of course, thanks to James's stupendous intellectual and ethical range, there may just be enough of him to go around: James the Pan-Africanist; James the Caribbean historian, raconteur and social analyst; James the sports commentator and philosopher; James the (post-) Trotskyist political theorist; James the Americanist; James the dialectician, etc., etc. But what, it will then be asked, is the "deep structure" at work in this panoply? Who is the C.L.R. James who found it possible to become so many versions of himself? Who . . . and whose?

Disclaiming either the right or the competence to answer such questions once and for all, I nevertheless would like to use the occasion of this essay to argue against the legitimacy of one potential claimant to the Jamesian legacy. Or to be yet more blunt about it: I would like both to anticipate and to
preemptively critique the statement that, especially with the re-publication of James’s writings on North American popular culture in *American Civilization* and *The C.L.R. James Reader*, one can almost hear forming on the lips of more than one aspiring legatee: that James belongs, albeit ancestrally, to the thing we now call “Cultural Studies.”

Why does this matter? Why bother to do battle here, on James’s behalf, against what is seemingly no more than a bookseller’s shelf-label? Doesn’t James’s critical defense of mass or popular culture, especially during his period of residence in the United States (1938–53), lend some point to classing him along with figures such as Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and, with respect to American popular culture in particular, a John Fiske or Andrew Ross? My answer is that, while there is every reason to read James as part of any critical study of popular culture, there are no fewer for noting the almost diametrically opposed theoretical and political perspectives from which James and the above named adepts of Cultural Studies approach the thing itself. Indeed, if honestly and carefully read on its own terms, James’s own distinctive approach to popular culture shows up just what may be wrong with Cultural Studies today as generally practiced—and how the field might be critically re-oriented. As Stuart Hall has recently written, we most “honor” James by “taking his ideas seriously and debating them, extending them, quarreling them, and making them live again.” This is just my intention here. Indeed, it strikes me that we must take this one step further and explore the possibility that, in giving due value to James’s ideas, we must also necessarily examine more critically the value of others with which they sharply conflict.

What is this approach to culture, then, and wherein lies its distinctiveness? My answer, necessarily abstract and short of context at this point, is twofold: first, that James’s cultural criticism represents a singular extension of dialectical reasoning into customary notions of the “popular”; secondly, that on the strength of such reasoning, James is able to think beyond the standpoint of Cultural Studies to a genuinely popular aesthetic. In both respects, of course, James invites significant comparison, not only to the contemporary representatives of Cultural Studies, but to such monuments of “Western Marxism” as Lukács, Gramsci, Adorno and—in a particularly striking manner—to Walter Benjamin. It may well be some time before James is mentioned in the same breath with these exalted names, and the often sketchy, sporadic and topical character of James’s cultural theory and criticism doesn’t help matters here. But, if I am right about James, then I think we will be justified in claiming for him a more universal importance as cultural theorist (postcolonial and otherwise) than even some of his strongest advocates might want to concede. There are only a handful of thinkers who have equaled James’s mastery of dialectical thinking and method; and of these, none, I think, has thought as hard and passionately about popular culture, especially in the United States.

Rather than begin my argument for James as would-be dialectical “other” to Cultural Studies on a directly conceptual plane, however, let me start somewhat more intuitively with what might be called the everyday paradox of popular culture, especially as experienced by Marxist-influenced intellectuals. In my case, this paradox presents itself like this: I go—it is the early 1990s—to a film that has had some popular success, say to Tim Burton’s *Batman* or, to complicate things a little further, to a “progressive” hit like Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*. In my assumed capacity as “vanguard intellectual” (real or imagined), I keep a vigilant eye out for what I know, virtually a priori, will be the apology for the existing order, whether straightforwardly chauvinistic and philistine or cleverly baited with some socially critical “issue.” As the film rolls, however, I almost invariably find such an apology to be implicated in at least two unforeseen ways. There is, first of all, the sheer seductive pull of the sensory spectacle as something pleasurable in itself, and, if necessarily, still not obviously connectable to a given ideological viewpoint. Is such pleasure legitimate, or is it somehow complicit with bad politics? Beyond that, however, is the fact that, at least in enough cases to be more than an anomaly, the film narrative often seems to articulate many of my own progressive political expectations or demands almost seamlessly into its more general capacity to entertain or engross the viewer, almost as if the director and/or screen-writer had anticipated during production itself each of my incipient critical objections. In the end, of course, the pact with the existing order is kept, or seemingly so. *Batman*’s para-police actions save Gotham City from the Joker’s politics of nihilist rebellion and gratuitous evil (remember the scene of vandalism in the art museum). Or, to take the more complex case, the peaceable “cultural” politics of desire represented by the cross-dressing Dill finally rescue the hero Fergus from the terrorist, fixed-identity “political” politics of his ex-girlfriend and IRA militant, pushing the question that “political” politics asks (but that radical nationalism cannot answer) safely beyond the narrative horizon itself. But the fact remains that in order to make such apologies at all plausible, the film itself has had to couch its final “sell-out” by conceding almost everything else. *Batman* and the Gotham City forces of public order prevail, but the triumph of Good is at best a matter of indifference, at worst a parody of itself, barely preferable to or even distinguishable from the Evil over which it triumphs. The politics of militant, extra-legal opposition may end up in the worst kinds of moral lapses and social pathologies, but it is hardly a vision of restored, bourgeois legality and moral rectitude that balances this half-truth in the conclusion of *The Crying Game*.

The resulting state of mind, as one exits the theater, is thus ambivalent. One’s “vanguard” suspicions have been confirmed, perhaps, but not in a way that would encourage the “vulgar marxist” belief in movies as conscious,
capitalist propaganda or even the more sophisticated theory of mass culture as subject to strict but unconscious laws of ideological containment. Such laws clearly exist, but what a trip to the movies seems always to confirm is that, within limits, their terms are continuously being stretched and adapted ("re-negotiated," as contemporary jargon has it), so that one can never quite predict how and where the hook will be baited and set.

What do we conclude from this? One possibility, of course, is the knee-jerk Adornianism or high-aesthetic mandarinism that pronounces this as further proof of the complete debasement of both terms—"vanguard" and the popular—in our post-catastrophic moment. The mistake would not be to detect the surprisingly strong pull of certain social truths in mass culture, but to suppose such "truths" to be anything other than, in the spirit of The Dialectic of Enlightenment, the ultimate decoys of an "administered universe."

But, as anyone who has ever seriously entertained it discovers, it is hard to know how to go on living with such a view, much less working with it in any oppositional mode. Thus the only practical conclusion would seem to be that culture under capitalism has far greater autonomy than Marxists have traditionally supposed; that the popularity of culture, while subject to intense manipulation, is nevertheless largely genuine. To an extent that seems almost inexplicable; given what we know, or think we know, about the political and economic constraints placed upon it, popular culture, in the shape of Hollywood at least, seems prepared to concede practically every battle over social values to progressive popular opinion—at the same time that it requires from this opinion a kind of half-hearted pledge of allegiance to the existing order.

The quick and easy intellectual appeal of Cultural Studies is that it unabashedly rests on the effort to square such an experience of popular culture with Marxist or "vanguard" theories of culture as ideologically or hegemonomically saturated or contained, and enjoins a kind of critical relaxation. It is not necessarily that Marxists have been wrong in pointing to class division as an inexorable pressure on cultural activity in general, or even that the alternative society they envision can have no bearing on cultural questions. But does this require that every popular-cultural practice be somehow implicated in the larger drama, that it be read as a mere emplotment of the Marxist "grand récit"? Who are the intellectuals, after all, to tell people what they should like, especially if they already like, say, The Crying Game or maybe Do the Right Thing? John Fiske, who, in works such as Understanding Popular Culture and Reading the Popular, has sought to give programmatic expression to this posture, writes in the latter work as follows:

Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interest of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology.2

I think this is a fairly exact and forthright statement of the premises of Cultural Studies.3 "Made from below," "outside social control," the "struggle to make social meanings," etc.; this is the basic litany that many have learned to recite to themselves when faced with the paradox of culture evoked above. It is, in fact—as Andrew Ross has argued in No Respect—a new, "vernacular" style of critical intellectual that is proclaimed in statements of this type, one who drops the "vanguard" a prioris altogether, and experiences the "pleasure" of popular culture without any lingering political self-mortifications.4

A cursory reading of his writings on popular culture in the United States might indeed seem to support the view of James as a prophetic anticipation of Cultural Studies in its present mode. At a time (the 1940s and 1950s) when one or another version of left-wing aesthetic vanguardism, whether à la The Dialectic of Enlightenment or The Partisan Review, had gained an intellectual ascendancy in the Western metropolis, James could write in his Notes on American Civilization that the masses were not the "passive recipients" of culture; that popular culture was an "expression of mass response" and not a form of indoctrination or commercial mesmerism.5 In American Civilization, as well as in his comments on popular culture in the United States recorded in his letters to Constanze Webb and to various literary critics (see The C.L.R. James Reader), James reveals himself as an avid and unapologetic consumer of Hollywood, comic strips and pulp-fiction. And while he can express some qualified admiration for modernist "geniuses" of the order of Joyce, Hemingway and Eliot (see American Civilization, p. 119), James's final verdict—that modernist art and literature is historically a dead letter because it expresses only "one-half" of modernity—makes not the slightest concession to the aggressive canonization of modernism then in process. The truly great modern artists for James are the creators of a new "popular art" epitomized in film, above all, Chaplin.

But beyond this admiration of American popular culture and a refusal to be converted to the new left-intellectual creed of vanguard modernism (one that found particularly willing converts among many of James's fellow Trotskyites, including Trotsky himself), any anto-facto affinity for Cultural Studies on James's part comes to an end. The obvious point of divergence here can be indicated in a word: aesthetics. For despite James's rejection of modernist or vanguard aestheticism, his approach to popular culture at no point abdicates the task of aesthetic judgment per se. The very same popular culture whose historical and social ascendancy he insists upon, over and against the desuetude of the modernist "geniuses," is likewise conceded by
James (as, for example, in the case of the pulp fiction of Frank Yerby) to be frequently “as bad as it can be” (American Civilization, p. 119). Indeed, James’s use throughout American Civilization of the term “popular arts” rather than “culture”—for which the qualifier “mass” is reserved—should already have alerted the Cultural Studies intellectual to the danger lurking in James’s “vernacular” tendencies. Clearly, the “popular” and the “aesthetic,” while still sharply divided in an age of Dick Tracy and Rita Hayworth, do not for that reason constitute, for James, an antinomial opposition.

They are, to use Adorno’s somehow irresistible metaphor, “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up.” But whereas Adorno excludes, as now deluded, the faith in an eventual union of the “halves,” it is clear that James not only believes in the possibility of such union but sees it as itself the crucial problem for cultural and aesthetic criticism. The aim of critique ceases to be either the defense or the condemnation of the existing culture, as such. Rather, it is to probe the latter’s contradictions in such a way as to identify both those aspects of culture that anticipate and advance the movement towards a higher stage of social existence as well as those that act to impede this movement.

Contrast this sort of thinking again to Fiske’s, writing now in his contribution to the Routledge Cultural Studies reader. Here Fiske propounds the concept of “distance” as a “key marker of difference between high and low culture,” or, in the terms already in use above, between “art” and the “popular.” “High culture,” writes Fiske, maintains a “distance between the art object and reader/spectator,” one that “devalues socially and historically specific reading practices in favor of a transcendent appreciation or aesthetic sensibility with claims to universality.” Distance thus implies a strict separation of the “aesthetic” and the “socially and historically specific,” or, in what counts as the latter’s conceptual equivalent, “everyday life.” The “aesthetic” is a privileged experience available only to those “able to separate their culture from the social and economic conditions of the everyday and those who cannot.” The “culture of the people,” however, “denies categorical boundaries [“distances”] between art and life: popular art is part of the everyday, not distanced from it” (“Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life,” ibid.).

Once again it requires some careful thought to “distance” this line of cultural critique from James’s, particularly when one recalls passages in American Civilization in which the latter rhapsodizes about “day to day correspondences between ordinary experiences . . . and their transmutations into aesthetic form,” and the “integration of the social and aesthetic aspects of life” (p. 139). But for James, of course, such “integration” is an outcome which, although in some strictly formal respects already a reality, can only be fully realized in the event of a revolutionary break with bourgeois society—indeed, of a break with the very stage of capitalism that, in settings such as the United States, has created and set in motion the cultural “forces of production” that are the condition of “integration” itself. Cancellation of the “distance” between artistic and social forms must, if not precisely wait upon, then at least effect itself as part of the broader integration of the social and the private brought about by a society without—or at least tending to be without—classes. James is quite coy about using the terms socialism or communism (for reasons that ultimately strike me as opportunistic, despite what was evidently James’s tactical calculation that a terminologically sanitized American Civilization would help him win a secure residency in the United States); but the “classically” Marxist (and, therefore, richly Hegelian) approach to the question of “integration” and “distance” is, despite the note of American “exceptionalism,” the essential moment here. Fiske, on the other hand, while blatant in his plebeian, and anything but national-civilizational sympathies, reasons entirely in the manner of a positivist, “vulgar” sociology in which the “popular” is simply read off as immediacy, as the “everyday,” etc., while the “aesthetic” is relegated to rigid, conceptual isolation as idealized “transcendence.” (What we have, in effect, is the antinomial ideology of modernism itself, but here with its normative polarities reversed.)

Fiske—and with him the conceptual main body of Cultural Studies—hurls terms such as “socially and historically specific,” “social and economic conditions,” etc., against his would-be “elitist” and aestheticist antagonists, but these terms remain, theoretically speaking, the emptiest of abstractions. Society, although self-evidently split up into the familiar dualities of elite and popular, high and low cultures, the transcendent and the immediate, has become merely their inert, passive receptacle. Nothing pertaining to the historical or economic character of the society, to society as determinate negativity, could, for Fiske, serve to explain such dualities. “High” and “low” are purely empirical positivities, self-evident “facts.” Society is the whole that contains them, but is not the whole expressed, or contained in them. Not that Fiske, or Cultural Studies, for that matter, would go on record as opposing the revolutionary ethic of a classless society—and not, necessarily, that they wouldn’t either. It is just that for Cultural Studies the question itself does not arise. The “torn halves” not only do not “add up”; their “adding up” no longer occurs to anyone. We can, it seems, do quite nicely with just the one half, thank you—modernism’s “other half,” in fact—secure in our eternal habitus of “resistance.” “Resistance,” but with no “transcendence,” please, nothing “universal.” Here the “distance” separating Cultural Studies from James and the tradition of dialectical and Marxist-humanist thought to which he belongs is vast indeed.

But given, then, that James’s concept of “popular art” is emphatically contrary to Fiske’s anti-aesthetic cultural populism, what is it that makes it, as I think it is, in all ways preferable to the latter? To answer this question
fully requires that we consider more carefully here how James's conception of the "popular" itself differs from that of Fiske and from the culturally inflected populism of Cultural Studies generally.

What is it, we might begin by asking, that justifies the ascription "popular" when speaking of "culture," whether as a total or as a merely local reality? No one would dispute that, on the most immediate plane, a purely quantitative measure or threshold is involved here. More people, at present, watch MTV than listen, say, to the symphonies of Shostakovitch—enough, at any rate, to qualify the former as popular with respect to the latter. The "popular" in this sense is effectively a statistical category.

But, it may then be asked, given the statistical fact of popularity, what, if any, is the qualitative content of this category? If both MTV and, say, Ken Burns's television documentary The Civil War measure out as popular, as against Shostakovitch, is there some basis on which to distinguish their shared popularity with respect to content? Are they "popular" for the same reasons, and, if not, how is this to be explained or theorized? In other words, who or what is the "people" whose cultural predilections render some instance of culture "popular" or not? Is the category "the people" a purely quantitative determination, so that the many watchers of MTV are "the people" and the few listeners to Shostakovitch are not? And, if not, what is meant by such a category? Can the "popular" itself vary as to its quality or content? Are the "people" the same "people" from one moment of consumption to the next?

One way of answering this question, of course, is to deny to "the people" itself anything more than a statistical reality, and to take the view that all qualitative allusions to "the people" or the "popular" are strictly myths or deceptions in the service of one ideology or another. One thinks of the ritual invocation of "the American people" by our North American political class of frauds when bent on winning approval of what all understand to be unpopular policies. Here, clearly enough, the "people" is itself a mere case of fraud, having nothing—generally, not even the statistical reality—to back it up. It may be objected here, of course, that the "people" of popular culture is not so easily dismissed as fraudulent in this blatant sense—to which one perhaps then responds that, although MTV, The Civil War, etc. may each have its "public" of consumers, nothing about this fact justifies identifying these as consubstantial with the self-same "people," nor does it permit even the hypothetical possibility of such a universal. A would-be Marxist version of this scepticism insists on class as the only objective social category, while an analogously "vulgar" liberalism accepts only the monadic individual as occupying this space.

At this point there is a temptation to digress into the various efforts of modern, post-liberal social and political theory to determine the, so to speak, ontological status of the "popular," from Leninist and Gramscian notions of the people as class-alliance, or hegemonic, or historical "bloc," to what are currently the more fashionable, Lacanian and Althusserian notions of the people as a subjective, but perhaps still structurally necessary entity. To be sure, Cultural Studies would not be what it is today if Althusser's widely adopted theory of ideology as a subject-forming "interpellation" had not made it possible to see in popular culture (or think one was seeing) not merely a statistical measure but a kind of agency for the "construction" of the "people" itself. For the sake of brevity, however, I will bracket this discussion and, focusing on the argument at hand, propose the following line of reasoning as a tentative point of consensus:

Assuming that (a) we accept it as true that the "popularity" of popular culture is a qualitative and not merely a quantitative determination, that is, that the "popular" has some substantively social as opposed to a merely statistical reality, then (b) we must make allowance in our thinking for the further possibility—if not necessity—that these two aspects of the "popular," each of which is logically implied in the other, will not coincide in a given culture or in any of its local instances. That is, shifting vantage points somewhat, popular culture may be popular in form but fail to attain a popularity of content. Moreover, we must allow as possible the inverse situation here too: an instance of culture popular in content, but unpopular in form.

This same point may be expressed somewhat differently in the observation that the very "people" whose reality is a necessary postulate, both formally and substantively, in theorizing popular culture, is itself a radically historical and dynamic entity and therefore never inertly self-identical. The "people," that is, may itself exist as something abstract and formal while lacking a substantive or concrete reality.

To say of culture that it is "popular" is thus never a simple question of identity, but always prompts the further question of whether such popularity is merely formal, or describes a quality of content as well. Or, better formulated, the question now becomes: How far has the popularity of culture progressed from a one-sided abstractness toward the full, concrete and dialectical "unity of form and content"? Is the popularity of culture something realized in the course of culture's own process of inner-development and self-realization? Has the "people" become the truth of "its" culture, and not merely its outward, formal appearance?

Many a (post-) contemporary reader, well-schooled in the suspicion of classical dialectics, will, of course, find consensus on these points out of the question. But even they, I think, will have to agree that the reasoning I have laid out here effectively coincides with James's own, even if its terminology and level of abstraction are uncharacteristic of James's cultural criticism.

Specifying further, in fact, we might summarize James's theory of popular culture in the United States as, very broadly, that of a culture that is formally popular but concretely, substantively un- or even anti-popular. The form of
popular culture for James is, generally conceived, its quality of mass mechanical reproducibility (its mass media), while its content becomes its ability to both express and develop what James will refer to as the “personality.” Of course, as we shall see, the necessary interpenetration of form and content makes this already too gross and mechanical a formulation, but it gives some idea of the overall theoretical configuration here. Take the particular case of film in the United States, the cultural medium that for James (as for Walter Benjamin) epitomizes the new age of “mechanical reproduction” and that is the clearest instance of a “modern popular art.” According to James, the film art of a Chaplin, Griffith or Disney is popular because of its ability to express, through the use of the “most elementary symbols” (e.g., Chaplin’s Little Tramp) the most “complicated social structures” (American Civilization, p. 142). A “simplification of the medium due to great social changes” makes possible an “increase in the total complexity of the relations which can be built from it” (pp. 140–1).

This is, as James himself concedes, a difficult relationship to lay hold of, but its particular importance for us here is that it attributes to cultural form or medium not simply a suitability for popular consumption but the power to obtain from an “elementary symbol” a representational complexity and richness that, in another medium, say the novel, would be impossible or far more difficult to achieve. It is not just that the people go to the movies rather than read novels. That is the merely statistical, formal reality of popular culture. Rather, it is that in the movies the popular audience finds the formal devices it needs—and here I refer to the fundamental formal properties of film narrative, although James never discusses these in any great detail—to integrate the simple and the complex, or, as James in his more Hegelian mode might have put it, synthesize the particular and the universal, appearance and essence, etc. The fundamental conception here is astonishingly close, if not identical in substance, to Benjamin’s, as articulated in a well-known passage from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: “Mechanical reproduction changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction to a Chaplin movie. . . . The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public.”

In an ironic sense, the new more complex medium is revolutionary precisely because of its ability to render with an almost total immediacy the real and complex relationships of contemporary life. As James writes of Chaplin in American Civilization:

He is new because of his primitiveness, the elemental quality of his medium—pantomime. He strikes deeper than mere wit or dramatic situation. Yet from this primitive element he has created some of the most subtle and complicated constructions of our time, and the care he lavishes on every inch of his films is known. (p. 133)

A novel, clearly, is formally more advanced, less “primitive” than a simple pantomime. This fact, however, deprives the novel of the power to produce certain “elementary” and highly immediate aesthetic effects, thus limiting its popular range and potential. A film, on the other hand, can recuperate the immediacy of the pantomime without sacrificing the greater formal development of the novel. Film’s popularity therefore is not simply a measure of the unpopularity of novels, but an actualization of the popular resources latent but trapped in the novel form itself, as well as in other, more traditional narrative media.

James, of course, sees in Chaplin more than a great formal innovator. Chaplin not only realizes, as had no one before him, the latent potential of his medium, but harnesses this potential for what James clearly considers to be profoundly democratic and popular ends. In Chaplin, popular form and popular content evidently do achieve something like a dialectical synthesis. Or, in any case, popular form and content attain to a level of integration that subsequent film-making will not be able to reproduce. After Chaplin, Hollywood begins its decline into the artistically inferior genre of the gangster thriller and the “star system.” The historical watershed for James here is the Depression, and what he at one point calls the “social defeat” embodied in it: the historic failure of the North American proletariat to find the revolutionary solution to capitalist crisis. Chaplin himself succumbs albeit innocently to this historical tragedy: James, in a typical iconoclasism, considers City Lights to be his last great film. In Modern Times, says James, Chaplin tried but failed to “laugh off” the Depression’s class violence. “The finest comedy is possible only where the author is comic because if he were not, the environment would become tragic or collapse altogether” (American Civilization, p. 134). By the time of Modern Times, this collapse is a fait accompli. The “social defeat” of the Depression had “killed” Chaplin “as it had killed all genuine creativity in the cinema” (ibid.). Moreover, James continues,

The social conditions in general and the special conditions under which movies were now produced and distributed prevented the mass from giving that direct impulse which it exercised in the early days. Instead, we have a complete inversion, the mass exposing its rage, anger and hostility, its desire to smash the impasse in which it finds itself, and making this the outstanding new characteristic. (p. 136)

This is a construction of United States film history that many, among them certainly the purveyors of Cultural Studies, will be disinclined to accept. And it of course begs questions such as whether and how James would have (or did) revise(d) his view in the wake of the 60s “cultural revolution.” But, leaving these possible discrepancies aside, such periodization nevertheless
serves to illustrate here James's underlying theoretical originality and importance. For what he in effect concludes is that the popular essence, that is, the democratic and revolutionary energies latent in a cultural form, will, in given historical circumstances, fail to manifest themselves as content. What happens instead is, of course, not a reversion per se, for the formal modifications, once actualized, are effectively irreversible, but, to use James's precise term, a "perversion" (American Civilization, p. 149) of the form/content dialectic in which the "deepest desires of the mass cannot find expression" (p. 148)—a "simultaneous opening and closing of the possibilities for 'individual personality'" (p. 147). The new movies epitomized in the gangster thriller are no less "popular" in the vulgar statistical sense—on the contrary. But they now express as content something profoundly unpopular in that through them the "people" is no longer, as with Chaplin, presented with the aesthetic elements out of which to build up its own content as "individual personality." The new popular culture only serves, for a people deprived of "a sense of active living," as "aesthetic compensation for loss of individual freedom" (American Civilization, p. 123). This is, despite what appears to be its stark, formulaic moralism (too much "sex and violence" in the movies: James's "puritan soul" on patrol), a difficult but extraordinarily important moment in James's theoretical argument. What it hinges on is, in precise terms, James's idea—basic to his entire critique of "American civilization"—that the true measure of popular culture is its ability not simply to socialize or collectivize the benefits of "civilization" but to convert these into a form that the democratic or popular individual can appropriate and internalize. "Personality" is probably an unfortunate term here, insofar as, for us at least, it has been reduced to a kind of pop-psychological cliche. But what James means by it is clearly something far removed from some individual checklist of psychologically descriptive norms. The "personality" is precisely the form taken in the modern, social individual by the progressive movement of history—by the evolving and vastly more expansive social powers and freedoms of a post-capitalist, classless mode of social being in statu nascendi. But as the embryonic form taken by—let us, against James's druthers, abbreviate it as—communist society in the popular individual, "personality" is at the same time the fully realized content, or essence, of popular culture. "Personality" describes that end towards which popular culture must, however unconsciously, progress if its popularity is to be more than formal and superficial.

As soon as this progressive movement is reversed, however—and James explicitly locates this moment in the United States as occurring between 1929 and 1932—popular culture, while retaining its more highly developed form, begins to manifest a sinister new content. Here James lacks any single precise term, but we might perhaps devise one of our own by borrowing from Cultural Studies: the individual not as "personality" but as "fan." Moreover, we know James's corresponding socio-political category in this instance: the "totalitarian." The people, "deprived of any serious treatment of the problems that overwhelm it" (American Civilization, p. 146) and limited in its cultural self-expression to the "individualistic responses to violence" elicited by the gangster movie and to the cult of the "synthetic individuals" spawned by the Hollywood star-system, suffers in its own subjective make-up a "profound dislocation of society." The same socio-cultural developments that produce the individual as "fan" are, for James, the "psychological preparation on a vast scale of ... the totalitarian state" (p. 148)—a state, as we might now interpolate it, likewise popular in form but supremely anti-popular in content.

But to return now to Fiske and the fundamental critical premise of Cultural Studies: popular culture as, despite its capitalist profitability, made "from below ... by subordinate peoples in their own interests" not "imposed from without or above," etc. May we not now stipulate as a defining feature of Cultural Studies its general unwillingness or incapacity to think the "popular" along the dialectical lines worked out in James's cultural criticism? Fiske's "reading" of the popular suffers a virtually total reification: the immediately, statistically "popular" is all there is, or rather, the popular form and popular content of culture are simply collapsed into one another in the spontaneous and empirical givens of "everyday life." This is, again, not to conclude that Fiskean Cultural Studies is blind to the contradictions of popular culture—to those, say, between the elite, aestheticizing "habitus" of culture and its immediate, popular everyday counterparts of "pleasure" and "resistance." But Cultural Studies seems unable to think such contradiction except as something extrinsic in its relation to popular culture as a whole. Social contradiction is allowed as a political phenomenon, if not along class then along populist or "radical democratic" lines. The intrinsic relation of politics to culture, however, is itself distorted by a kind of pseudo-Marxist sociology that conceives popular culture as a politics in cultural form rather than a self-acting, determinate form or mediation of the social ground or totality that is generative of politics and culture both. The crowning irony of Cultural Studies is that, in order to think culture as politics, something it regards itself as having accomplished by the simple advocacy of the "popular," the "subordinate," etc. in a cultural context, it must revert (if that is not already too generous a word) to a theory of society itself as merely the formal truth, the inert framework of their inter-relation.

What is at issue in Cultural Studies is "politics" as social form but not the social essence or truth—the "utopia"—out of which any genuinely emancipatory politics must be built. Moreover, this abstract, reified social form comes to be identified, unconsciously but faute de mieux, with our own "actually existing" society—i.e., with society as any liberal ideologue commonsensically understands it. Fiske's "popular" thus tacitly invokes the
“people” of the liberal, ruling ideology itself: not just the “people” that expresses its sovereign “interests” through its “freedom” to consume—“It is the people,” writes Fiske, “who finally decide which commodities to use in their culture” (Reading the Popular, p. 5)—but through its “freedom” to vote, to speak, etc. And, as with the political interests of the people, so with its cultural interests: the idea that between such interest in itself (as content) and its expression in some instance of culture (as form) there is not always and necessarily a perfect coincidence has become not just counter-intuitive but effectively unthinkable. Again, the divergence here between Cultural Studies and James is elemental. Throughout his writings on popular culture, James will refer to a “new pattern,” to “entirely new conditions” in the “relation of art to society” (see The C.L.R. James Reader, p. 221; American Civilization, p. 119). Yet Cultural Studies, for all its obsession with the new, with the latest popular trend as against the hoary aesthetic icons of tradition, sees nothing of this new relation itself. To be exact, it cannot see any such relation because, given its social-theoretical purview, there is nothing for it to see: the relation to society, as conceived by liberal ideology, is only the relation to an abstract, formal generality—and thus, ultimately, the positive self-identity, the reflexive or self-relation of the thing to be related and nothing more.

Cultural Studies, that is, while advancing boldly beyond the aesthetic formalism of the avant garde that Fiske associates with the idea of “distance,” does so only to revert to a form of cultural positivism: the cultural expression of the “people” must simply be affirmed as is, independently of any critical standards that come to this culture “from without.” It is implied, in other words, that the people does not itself experience, as part of its own social and cultural existence, the “distance” (that is, alienation) that separates the various, superficially autonomous spheres of social life. The “people” is presented as if immune to social negativities. To reiterate a point made earlier, Cultural Studies thus ironically resembles, in its extreme, one-sided formalism, the modernist aestheticism it outwards forswears. The difference is merely that where the “high culture” of modernism rejects “low” or popular culture for its primitivism as a “language of form,” Cultural Studies embraces it for essentially the same reason. The “opposition” here hinges on how one judges—whether ethically, politically or aesthetically—an absolute positivity of form as such. Looking at the question in this way, we can construe the greater conceptual and critical power of James’s cultural theory as residing not just in a popular-cultural dialectic of form and content but in a theory of the radical negativity of popular culture. What popular culture in the capitalist democracy of the United States is—its formal popularity—must not be simply refused (the openly reactionary stance of the modernist vanguard) but neither must it be permitted, as in Cultural Studies, to obscure that which it is not: popular in its content. Popular culture, for James, creates demands that it ultimately must fail to satisfy; it promises “personality” to its consumers, but necessarily breaks its promise, thus calling forth the aggressively irrationalist populism of “fandom.” But it is just this negativity, just the fact that it clears a space that it itself cannot occupy, that makes popular culture into a potentially “popular art,” that makes it a progressive moment relative to the elite culture whose negation it posits.

With this, I think, we are in a position to measure more tangibly the relative adequacy of Cultural Studies and of Jamesian cultural theory as solutions to, or methods for resolving, the paradox of popular culture analyzed above. This paradox we sought to characterize as the ambiguity or sense of dislocation that results from the attempt to render consistent the seemingly limitless porosity of popular culture to non- or counter-hegemonic “meanings” with the no less compelling theoretical certainty of popular culture’s obedience to laws of capitalist social and ideological reproduction. How, in other words, does popular culture continually “get away with” its irreverence for power, unless this power itself either does not extend to culture or is something altogether different from what one—thinking as Marx at least—supposed it to be? We have seen how Cultural Studies attempts to resolve the issue.

Following James, however, we are led to the conclusion that, in fact, we already err in posing the problem in this way. This error is our spontaneous assumption that the transgressive “meanings” of popular culture reside in the latter as their positive content. The reality pointed to by James is that, on the contrary, such “meanings” are not positive presences in popular culture at all, but are the results of an absence, of a negation. They are the product, not of what this culture “means” (as in Fiske’s notion of popular culture as the “struggle to make social meanings”) but of what, in the most determinate sense, it does not mean. “Society,” writes James, “has obviously reached that stage where formal concepts of social living are in such direct opposition to what people so obviously feel that it is ripe for drastic social transformation” (American Civilization, p. 130). That this situation exists does not, of course, ensure that such “drastic transformations” will occur as a matter of course, or that the “people” has consciously grasped its full, objective reality. The possibility, indeed the probability, is that before gaining such consciousness the “people” will instead simply “feel” its way towards release from its “impasse” and that the “transformation” in the offing is some variant of fascism. Earlier in the same text, James notes that the masses will no longer tolerate open capitalist propaganda in movies or comic-strips, but that they accept it as a species of unwritten law that the great political issues of the day not be portrayed. This he describes as a state of “armed neutrality”: “each [side] agrees to leave these topics alone” (American Civilization, pp. 122–3). This, it should be stressed, is perhaps already too cut-and-dry a formulation in that it leaves unposed the question of how such “portrayal” might nevertheless assume a strictly formal, negative configuration in the narratives of
cultural hegemony. Moreover, it begs the further question of just what it is that determines a mass acquiescence in remaining “neutral.” But it is sufficient to indicate what James is driving at here: the critical necessity to grasp such a condition of negativity and absence as, in James’s words, “the fundamental determinant of the artistic content and form of mass culture” (ibid.).

Consider, again, the example of The Crying Game. When its hero Fergus discovers, to his initial shock and distress, that he has fallen in love not with the grief-stricken widow of the black soldier for whose death he is partly responsible, but with the latter’s cross-dressing, gay ex-lover, his decision to continue the relationship with Dill nevertheless, and thus his recognition that the bond between them is effectively indifferent to fixed-gender identities and conventional rules of desire, evoke in the audience a definite quantum of sympathy. The audience, or at least a significant part of it, “goes along” to a degree that must appear surprising to someone who assumes the absence of sympathy for the “formal concepts of social living” represented by a would-be “official” bourgeois code of sexual and racial conduct that Fergus and Dill transgress. What appears to be a popular affirmation of “difference” as something intrinsically right or pleasurable is, more truthfully I think, a popular disaffirmation of what stands, in an ideal opposition to such “difference,” as a positive cultural norm.

Are these not, in the end, the same thing, one may ask. To be sure, the tendency of Cultural Studies is to treat them as such. But to assert this is to lose sight of the fact that what The Crying Game formally negates and thereby posits in its absence—bourgeois society as a positive social good, or “utopia”—nevertheless continues to determine the film’s “artistic form and content,” while that which the film outwardly affirms simply filters out as a sort of compensatory after-effect. The absence of any affirmative social horizon—either “actually existing” or utopian—outweighs any presence that the cultural politics of “difference” might provide. The social question is not posed in The Crying Game, but rather is treated as a kind of embarrassment, as if any possible answer were necessarily both obvious and false. It is in this precise sense that the film’s racial and sexual utopianism, when linked to its social and political cynicism, may suggest an economy of mutual restraint or “armed neutrality.” But the positivity of the one does not just compensate for the negativity of the other, as a more conventionally “political” or ideological reading of the film might—not incorrectly so far as it goes—point out. Rather, it is a case in which both poles denote an absence in relation to which a politics of “difference” looks, in an ironic twist, “positive” while a politics of “identity” looks hopelessly primitive and obsolete.

That is to say, The Crying Game, like popular culture as a whole in James’s thinking, does not “give the people what it wants.” It is scrupulous, rather, in not giving the people what it does not want. In it the popular audience finds a representation, not of what it may become, but of what it no longer is.

Movies, like all art, are, as James wrote to Constance Webb, “not merely a reflection, but an extension of the actual—an extension along the lines which people feel are lacking and possible in the actual” (C.L.R. James Reader, p. 129). But, as James might have added, this extension itself, under even the most liberalized conditions of capitalist democracy, will tend to limit its movement to within the actual in its radical negativity. The power to exceed such a limit must, in the end, come to culture “from without”—from a class struggle pushed to its own objective limits under the existing order. On this question, disappointingly, the James of American Civilization remains oddly silent. One often senses in James, alongside his richly mediated and dialectical approach to culture and art—his astonishing skill at charting the course of the negative—a surprisingly rigid and mechanical attitude—perhaps “ultra-left” in this sense—toward politics as such. Does not social revolution itself, after all, advance unevenly through a maze of negations? Does not it too have its dialectic of form and content? And how, exactly, do grandiose abstractions such as “the totalitarian” ultimately render this process any more rationally apprehensible?

These are questions that deserve lengthier consideration than can be provided here, of course. But they do not place in any doubt James’s real importance for the critique of popular culture. They are, after all, questions that the positivized social theory of Cultural Studies would never have permitted us to ask in the first place.

NOTES

3 In this regard I am dubious of the frequent claims that Cultural Studies has no hard and fast “line” on culture—or that, as Fredric Jameson has put it, Cultural Studies is not a “theory” but merely a “symptom” (see“On Cultural Studies,” Social Text no.34, 1993, p. 17). “Symptom” it surely is, of course—but what gives its theoretical line on culture the feel of “common sense”—indeed, of a kind of culture in its own right—is, as I see it, the fact that opposing “lines” go largely unarticulated or undisseminated, at present, at least on the left.
5 C.L.R. James, American Civilization, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Cambridge:
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9 Think here of James’s remark concerning Moby Dick that it was “in essence a scenario for a film.” American Civilization, p. 129.
10 I defer any sustained discussion here of James’s strange, not to say outrageous opinion of Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, as declared in one of his “Letters to Literary Critics” in The C.L.R. James Reader: “I do not know any finer movie than Griffith’s Birth of a Nation” (p. 222). But the issue here—as with James’s disturbingly frequent willingness to overlook the racial and racist underpinnings of “American civilization”—would have to be a part of any truly comprehensive re-assessment of James. It seems reasonably clear that what James so admired in Griffith’s pro-Klan epic were its new aesthetic properties, in the sense outlined above. But even so, there are problems created here for James’s attempt to trace the decline of film’s “golden age” to the Depression. Isn’t Birth of a Nation the equal (at least) of any gangster thriller in sheer social and ethical depravity?