

REVIEWS

Joseph Brooker. *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 236 pp. £19.99.

Joseph Brooker's welcome study of the literature of the 1980s is the ninth volume in the Edinburgh History of Twentieth Century Literature in Great Britain series. The series conveniently slices literary history in decade long cycles to provide, or perhaps impose, a coherent historiography. Periodisation is always problematic—as is evidenced in on-going and possibly futile debates as to when exactly the sixties ended and the seventies began. In this sense, decade studies may come across as too convenient and over-coherent in their narrative construction of literary history. When this is coupled with popular discourses that argue that such and such a decade was crucial to the development of contemporary concerns then critical surveys run the risk of merely re-articulating unexamined and taken for granted assumptions. As the series' general editor, Randall Stevenson, points out in the preface: 'Individual volumes may argue that theirs is *the* decade of the century' (ix. Own emphasis). Against this, there is the counter possibility that an historicising survey will simply end up listing one damn thing after another.

That said, it may well be the case that the 1980s can justifiably be viewed as a comprehensible and delimited period—one that continues to exert an influence on today's politics and culture. It seems entirely appropriate and justified that Brooker opens his commendably inclusive study with reference to Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker Prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty*. Hollinghurst's novel revolves around the household of an ambitious Conservative politician. Echoing a comment by a character from the book, Brooker points out that post-millennial readers may wonder if that decade has ever really ended: 'They may also feel that the very act of writing this novel, and its critical and public success, are signs of an inability fully to leave the 1980s behind, or leave them alone' (1).

Brooker's aim is to both attend to the specificity of literary texts across a variety of genres, while also acknowledging and tracing the 'historical and social contexts that shaped writing in this period' (1). In this, the author is successful in presenting a lucid, accessible, and wide-ranging appraisal that deserves to become an essential text for anyone interested in the 1980s.

It is understandable that any art produced during that decade is inevitably read alongside the momentous political events that occurred

during the period. Much of it invariably commented directly on the transformative and corrosive effects of what has come to be labelled ‘Thatcherism’. As Brooker makes clear in his introduction, this movement was part of a post-war process that saw the rise in the UK and the USA of the New Right, the trashing of the post-war consensus, and changing concepts of culture. Thatcherism—that association of apparently incompatible elements that Stuart Hall categorised as ‘authoritarian populism’—is analysed in terms of historical development and its associations with Empire, enterprise, and the market.

Writers responded to this context of seemingly creative destruction by the prolific production of different modes of writing. Brooker addresses these various forms, starting with the novel, and moving on to poetry, drama and screenwriting. He organises his account under dominant themes, as seen in the chapter titles (Generations, Disaffections, Modes, Belongings, and Commitments. In his conclusion he also returns to the contemporary concerns that introduced his study by commenting on neo-1980s texts).

In chapter one, *Generations*, Brooker discusses issues of literary succession as he works to identify a watershed and distinguish between post-war and contemporary generations, a distinction borrowed from Philip Tew. *Disaffections*, chapter two, follows this by examining class identity in working-class and regional writing. The emphasis on poetry from writers such as Tony Harrison and Sean O’Brien results in an interesting set of readings on class politics and unemployment. The poetics of postmodernism, that imprecise yet necessary defining category and cultural logic of the decade, are the topic of chapter three, *Modes*. Here Brooker pleasingly blends an analysis and overview of the postmodernist forms of now canonical novels of Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, and Alasdair Gray, as well as outlining the legacies of modernism, particularly in poetry.

The legacies of British Imperialism are explored in chapter four, *Belongings*. Shifts in ideas of nationality and nationhood were anticipated by Tom Nairn’s seminal *The Break-Up of Britain* in 1977 that pointed to the ‘uncertain status of the United Kingdom itself’ (145). But if ‘nation and ethnicity...remained remarkably insistent’ as subjects for writers (141), the slipperiness of the very idea of Britishness is marked by authors such as Hanif Kureishi and Kazuo Ishiguro, whose multivocal works explored an increasingly multicultural society. Chapter five, *Commitments*, focuses on gender and the ‘conjunction of feminism and literature in the 1980s’ (173), recognising the extraordinary diversity of contemporary feminist writing and the growing strength of gay rights and representations in the face of AIDS and the ensuing media hysteria.

The decision to organise the decade survey thematically rather than chronologically means that Brooker is able to move beyond any obvious set of political issues and make novel and hitherto overlooked connections between writers, forms and genres, and the social and cultural transformations that were taking place. And so alongside novels, poetry and drama from the 1980s, we get an account of cuts in the funding of arts and the after-effects, the growth in prize culture for literary fiction, and changes within the publishing industry.

Literature and politics are further contextualised within a much broader field of contemporary culture. Readings are helpfully augmented by the inclusion of analyses of important film and television texts such as Stephen Frears' *My Beautiful Launderette*, Alan Bleasdale's *The Boys From the Blackstuff*, and the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs*. Their inclusion works to underline the point that literature now exists as part of rather than apart from a wider network of media representations.

Brooker also manages to re-evaluate works seemingly frozen in their context. Howard Brenton's monumental *The Romans in Britain*, which notoriously allegorised colonialism with a graphic male rape on stage, has long been overshadowed by the attempted prosecution for obscenity instigated by Mary Whitehouse. As Brooker points out 'freed from the controversy that initially surrounded it [the play] stands as an extraordinary panorama, epic but jagged, of the centuries of violence and conquest on which the present-day nation stands' (141).

In his conclusion, referring back to his introduction, Brooker astutely traces the persistent legacies of the decade in post-millennial literature, in novels from writers as diverse as Hollinghurst, Nicola Barker, Jonathan Coe, Tim Lott, David Mitchell, and David Peace. Extending the comparative cultural approach that proved so fruitful in the previous chapters, Brooker works in references to popular theatre such as *Billy Eliot* and *Market Boy*, as well as the tedious and all-encompassing purview of current retro-culture as evidenced in tacky television shows such as *I Love the 1980s*. This returns us to the uncanny sensation that the 1980s never really went away—something emphasised by the current Conservative-led government, and even more so by the recent unpleasant news stories concerning Jimmy Savile and sexual abuse at the BBC that seem almost to have come out of one of Peace's novels.

If there is a complaint it is that this final section is too short; it seems to raise many interesting questions before concluding abruptly. This, however, is a minor objection—the book after all is part of a decade series, and the conclusion reads almost like the beginning of

another project. This book is required reading for any student of the period. We can hope that Brooker will return to neo–1980s literature and culture, providing us with a sequel every bit as expansive, thorough, and analytical.

Tony Venezia

Michael Levenson. *Modernism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. 1, 320 pp. \$40.00.

In recent years, the canon of literary Modernism has significantly widened in scope, and this has occurred alongside a broadening of critical perspective. Considering that Modernism continues to expand as a field, the task of bringing together the various threads within it into a perspicuous account of the movement is formidable. Nevertheless, in his new monograph, Michael Levenson builds on over two decades of research in the field of modernist studies to produce an authoritative account of the period, and one which is a welcome addition to the array of recent criticism on Modernism.

Whereas Levenson's *A Genealogy of Modernism* was largely concerned with literary doctrine and aesthetic concepts, in his latest monograph he does not interpret Modernism as solely concerning individuals, forms or styles, but conceives it as a 'heterogeneous episode in the history of culture' (8). For Levenson, what constitutes Modernism is related to the artists, works, audiences, publishers and patrons in equal measure. Crucially, though, whilst he takes a synthetic approach to Modernism, he does not restrict it within a false history of cohesion.

Chapter one, 'The Avant–Garde in Modernism', emphasizes the importance of subversive art from the mid–nineteenth century onwards and establishes that the rapid growth of artistic forms and movements was a form of social rebellion. Levenson also highlights how provocation came in the shape of both the 'brazen idea' and the 'scandalous word' (21), deftly illustrating these with reference to a range of brief examples, from Zola's description of the naked Nana to J.M. Synge's use of the word 'shift' in *The Playboy of the Western World*. Most importantly, Levenson sees the break in the cohesion of culture as one important way of distinguishing Modernism in this period.

The most salient section of chapter two is 'Modernism as Racism', an issue that is entirely neglected by both Peter Nicholls and Pericles Lewis in their accounts of Modernism. By contrast, Levenson maintains that it is impossible to disregard the racist elements of Modernism. In fact, Levenson stresses that racism was tied up with the very quality of modernity and modernization. Consequently, he suggests that