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CASHMORE, Ellis, **The Black Culture Industry**, London: Routledge, 1997, £45.00 (£13.99 pbk), iv + 203 pp. ISBN 0 - 415 - 12083 - 7

Ellis Cashmore's new book is as controversial as its predecessors in addressing the issue of racism and the black experience. The question of (in)sensitivity must accompany any treatment of the politics of racism that seeks controversy as its mode of *entree*. The book's thesis is that 'Black culture' has been commodified and sold to Whites and that this process has involved a legitimization of racist representations and stereotypes which Black performers have, for economic reasons, been only too happy to collude in producing. *The Black Culture Industry* tells a history of Black popular entertainers and entrepreneurs who have sought a mainstream market in White society through the production of a series of limiting images and representations of Black 'nature': from the cakewalk minstrels to Michael Jackson and Gangsta Rap. Cashmore's secondline argument, derived from Pieterse (1992), is that, over the course of a century of Black popular cultural forms, the function of the *Black Culture Industry* has changed from one of legitimization to substitution: Blacks have been given a cultural freedom in the popular realm at the expense of real social and economic change. The mechanism promoting consumption without economic redress is White guilt.

The book is organised into twelve chapters, covering Minstrelsy, Blues and Jazz, Stax, Motown, Hendrix, Michael Jackson, (afka) Prince and Gangsta Rap; as well as the White and Black entrepreneurs who promoted and distributed them. The style is journalistic, which particularly suits the treatment of some chapters. The book is a larger format than usual for Routledge and comes with embossed graphics on the cover. Its presumed audience is general rather than academic and theory is kept to a minimum.

Like Adorno's *The Culture Industry* (1991) which Cashmore's title appears to echo, the books' focus is upon America; but Cashmore's America is racially 'separate and unequal'. Both authors view the mass production of popular culture commodities as an extension of capitalism's logic to culture. Curiously, the discussion of Adorno's thesis is thin (pp. 3, 42); this seems strange, given its contested application to popular musical forms, such as *doowop*. There is throughout the *Black Culture Industry* an overwhelming sense of the lines between the music business and capitalism but no clue as to how the general case for a commodification thesis applies to the particular case of Black popular culture and

the issue of racism. Racism is reduced to a possession and practice of a White power establishment; a sort of monolithic structure supported by an equally monolithic unconscious structure. What moves between these levels are stereotypes and images of Blacks that enclose and contain Black culture once it attempts commodification. The only kind of success is success in White terms. This means Jewish entrepreneurs, innovating within a racialised economic order, were *merely* part of the White power structure.

Cashmore's thesis is reductionist: Black popular culture *should be* expressive of black oppression but its commodification means that any authenticity is lost between the cultural act of construction and the commercial act of distribution to a wider (White) audience. This cues Cashmore's sub-thesis: that the *Black Culture Industry* has required and equally reflects the contribution and influence of whites. Thus the Blues is first a rural idiom, a form forged by both Black and White players, but given its stamp of authenticity by virtue of its apparently un-mediated expressive relationship to Black experience. The rise and success of Atlantic and Motown soul is a similar story. When Black entrepreneurs succeed on the same terrain as Whites they do so by behaving as White, first by commodifying Black culture for White markets, and then by the super exploitation of the artists who produce it.

Often Cashmore seems to suggest that such constructions of blackness succeed to the extent that they conform to a hidden unconscious reservoir of racism. It may be the case that such a racial hierarchy is held together by a symbolic universe of psycho-sexual fantasies but Cashmore's account is a-historical in the extreme: racism, in the form of Black stereotypes, is held constant, geographically, and across time (and across the Atlantic in the case of Jimmy Hendrix, whose dedication on *Band of Gypsies* (p.122), incidentally, is misrepresented as *conservative* by Cashmore) which removes any sense of 'Black' autonomy and contestation of such ideologies.

There is no doubt that Cashmore is fascinated by the careers he documents and he extends considerable sympathy to the motives of exploitative entrepreneurs, like Berry Gordy (p.112). However, it should be remembered that much of the material drawn on here arises from the writings and explorations of African American historians and musicologists. This means there is good coverage of historical material of nascent black consumption of popular culture. The treatment of more recent

periods, such as the travails of the *Artist Formally Known As Prince*, while given a journalistic treatment by Cashmore, do provide fascinating detail. Inevitably, such accounts act as mere support for a thesis which, taken as a whole, is reductive and simplistic. There is no doubt that Cashmore's book is driven by a genuine enthusiasm and interest in the economics of the *Black Culture Industry* but this focus either ignores or distorts the substantive *content* of Black popular cultural forms. For the general reader this book is likely to be both provocative and readable. But, taken in isolation, it presents the reader with a seriously misleading account of the role and significance of Black popular cultural forms in constructing and reconstructing the terrain of popular music and performance in capitalist modernity.

*Reference*

Adorno, T. 1991 *The Culture Industry* Routledge: London

Pieterse, J. 1992 *White On Black* Yale University Press: London

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