

Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010. 264pp.

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The historical significances of the recent past are often difficult to articulate: whilst a period's legacies are refigured and contested in the media and public imagination, its lasting impacts remain unclear. In *American Culture of the 1990s*, Colin Harrison rejects any unitary or unifying conception of the decade, instead exploring the "remarkable heterogeneity" (3) of 1990s cultural production through its interconnections with (and explorations of) the period's intellectual, historical and socio-economic contexts. This focus is achieved through chapters that combine in-depth case studies with surveys of the decade's varied developments in the fields of literature, music, radio, cinema, television, art, architecture and digital culture.

The book opens with an extended introduction in which Harrison outlines four historical paradigms through which the 1990s are traditionally viewed: the centrism and compromises of the Clinton Years, the period of neoliberal economic boom and expansion, the digital Information Age, and the post-communist 'end of history' exemplified by the work of Francis Fukuyama. The uneasy status of women and racial minorities in the 1990s is examined alongside the period's engagement with the divisive political and social legacies of the 1960s, which Harrison characterises as a

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complex fusion of affirmation and disavowal exemplified by Clinton's famous admission that he smoked cannabis but 'did not inhale.' This opening section is impressive, deploying a wide range of historical and intellectual perspectives that concisely frame "heterogeneous" 1990s culture, without seeking to neatly define it. Harrison even briefly interrogates the concepts at the core of the book (and its title): the simultaneous contingency/usefulness of analysing 'the decade'; the contestability of the term 'culture' as exposed by the ideological 'culture wars' of the period; and globalised neoliberalism's complicating effect on conceptions of 'America', 'nation' and 'community.'

The following chapters expand upon these concerns and their relationship to various modes of cultural production. Chapter One considers fiction and poetry in the 1990s and examines the decade's charged debates about the cultural value of reading and the literary industry's increasing commodification. Harrison moves on to examine tensions between race and gender in the works of Toni Morrison; the confident and culturally hybrid voices emerging in American poetry; the divergent responses to postmodernism's legacies in the contemporary fiction; and Phillip Roth's figuring of America's ambiguous relationship with its national past. Music and radio of the 1990s are considered next, through the effects of industrial conglomeration and an examination of post-1960s music's communal or political potential in the "aftermath of a revolution in which nothing was liberated except the market" (89). The decade's diverse cultural responses are evinced through readings of Nirvana's "chilling sound of rock music aware of its own defeat" (74), hip-hop's angry representation of the realities of black inner-city life, the *Riot Grrrl* movement and the rise of digital technology.

A focus on the intersections between new technology, modes of media consumption and socio-political concerns recurs in the chapter on television and film. Harrison argues that the intensely mediated/televised spectacles of the Gulf War, the OJ Simpson trial and the endlessly repeated footage of African American Rodney King's assault by four white L.A.P.D. officers, all produced by the proliferation of video technology in the 1990s, highlight a fraught cultural concern with "the nature of reality and the status of film and television images" (98). Analysing these events as complex representations of race and neoliberalism through their reception and circulation in culture is productive; and situating this kind of reading in a chapter alongside examinations of various texts produced by Hollywood, independent cinema and TV, indicates the book's scope.

There are occasional missteps, such as a questionable reading of science fiction and historical films as ideologically "two sides of the same coin" (120) during a discussion of 1990s 'Hollywood Baroque.' However, Harrison's approach remains persuasive, effectively balancing close readings with assertive analysis of wider historical and cultural concerns. A chapter on art and architecture takes in the 'culture wars' and controversies around NEA grants, the growth of video and abject art, and the impact of globalisation on artistic and architectural practice. A final chapter on digital culture traces the transformative effects of the Internet on commerce and concepts of 'free speech', community and nationhood. Finally, the Human Genome and Visible Human projects are considered alongside the effects of unprecedented technological advances on subjectivity and the burgeoning discourses of 'posthumanism.'

At first glance, Harrison's description of 1990s American art as a "fragmented terrain, characterised only by its diversity and ongoing anxieties about a loss of

critical direction and critical force” (133) could seem representative of the “heterogeneous” decade. However, *American Culture in the 1990s* presents a more complex and critically useful vision: examining the complexities and disjunctions of the period’s cultural production whilst simultaneously tracing connections and common preoccupations. In the conclusion, the decade’s proliferation of ‘post’, ‘neo’ and ‘trans’ prefixes are seen as symptomatic of “a general awareness that existing paradigms were breaking down and new ones were yet to appear” (201). It may be too soon to confidently articulate the cultural legacies of the 1990s, but this impressive study offers a convincing framework for the debate.