

**Raymond Malewitz, *The Practice of Misuse: Rugged Consumerism and Contemporary American Culture*.
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DAVID HANCOCK*

In *The Practice of Misuse: Rugged Consumerism and Contemporary American Culture* Raymond Malewitz charts the emergence and subsequent containment of the figure of the ‘rugged consumer’ in twentieth century American material culture. Rugged consumers are those who ‘creatively misuse, reuse, and repurpose the objects within their social environments to suit their idiosyncratic needs and desires’ (6). Malewitz is interested in myth and his account of rugged consumerism is rooted in the particularity of American history through numerous references to the mythology of the frontier. This is important because it helps Malewitz to side-step the obvious question regarding the misuse of commodities in the developing world or indeed in the economically deprived areas of contemporary America; the misuse Malewitz describes is often based on a will to survive but rarely born of poverty. This interest in the fictional, rather than the actual, aids Malewitz in his attempt to chart the imagination of a mythic form of rugged consumption.

Theoretically, Malewitz draws on the ‘thing theory’ of Bill Brown and the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, as well Bruno Latour, Claude Levi-Strauss and Giorgio Agamben. For Malewitz there is a distinction between the thing and object; this is later augmented with the distinction of thing and device. An object or device produces an inauthentic experience of the world through its single purposeness of use. Late capitalism has produced an object world that has engendered a ‘conceptual imprisonment’ (178) of the designed purpose of the object in which ‘the consumer becomes an extension of the commodity’ (179). The re-fashioning of rugged consumption is a reaction to this object determination of experience. It seems therefore that American rugged consumption is produced through existential rather than economic circumstance. The rugged consumer sees the ‘thing’ in its authentic light and not through its merely designed purpose; by seeing the thing and not the object the rugged consumer is free to misuse what is present-at-hand in creative ways.

* David Hancock completed his PhD at the London Graduate School on the political philosophy of Leo Strauss. His current research is concerned with the cultural politics of neoconservatism and neoliberalism. He has publications forthcoming in *The Journal for Cultural Research* and *Symplokē*.

The book is broadly split into two parts, both of two chapters each, as well as an introductory and concluding chapter. The first part considers what Malewicz describes as rugged consumption in the left-libertarianism that came out of the counter-culture in the 1960s and 1970s, firstly through the plays of Sam Shepard and then through Thomas Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. The second part builds on the instability of these communities and the utopianism of the 1960s and 1970s by looking at the questions raised by the 'neoliberal strain of rugged consumption' (117). The rise of neoliberalism came with the re-emergence of the myth of the rugged individual celebrated by Ronald Reagan and this appeal, it seems, is based on the same existential lack as counter-cultural rugged consumption. What Malewicz's argument points to, through its concern with both left and right libertarianism, is the homology between aspects of the American counter-culture and the moral seduction of neoliberalism. The second part of the book asks if 'individual instances of rugged consumer behaviour merely recapitulate a culture of neoliberal individualism [...] or can they address some of the problems associated with late capitalism' (117). This is done through a reading of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and then, in answer to the celebratory neoliberalism of the 1980s television series *MacGyver*, the novels of Cormac MacCarthy.

Throughout these readings of recent American fiction Malewicz intersperses readings of real world rugged consumption. Simon Rodia's Watts Tower in Los Angeles, Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project in Detroit, Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalogue* and its updates in what Malewicz calls a 'New Arts and Crafts Movement' (24) and, quite fascinatingly, the biometric modes of production being pioneered by people like Yoseph Bar-Cohen at the California Institute of Technology. These vignettes are often intriguing in ways that the main focus of the book, American literature, is not and I can't help wishing they had been expanded and developed.

Malewicz's book offers some rich commentary on recent American literature but those with a wider interest in American culture will be left wanting more. To his credit Malewicz acknowledges this as a limitation. In sum, this is a thought-provoking account of the cultural practice of misuse as it occurs in recent American fiction and a valuable imagination of the re-mythologisation of the human experience of the material world.