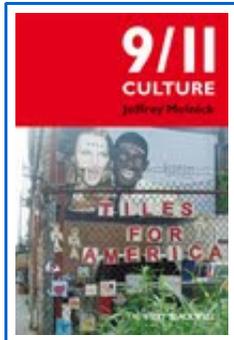


MATERIAL CULTURE BOOK REVIEWS

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9/11 Culture.

By Jeffrey Melnick.

Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, April 2009.
Cloth: ISBN 978-1405173728, \$79.95; paper:
ISBN 978-1405173711, \$19.95. 200 pages.

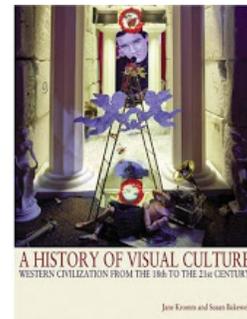


to be released on November 23, 2010

Review by Waleed Mahdi, University of Minnesota

As its title suggests, *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction* advances a framework that captures the ongoing formation of the U.S. cultural landscape, which has been primarily triggered and shaped by the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001. With an awareness of the interwoven complexity of the social, the political, and the personal in the U.S. cultural fabric, Jeffrey Melnick offers an interdisciplinary reading of various genres in the U.S. post-9/11 popular and literary repertoire in light of the discourses of grief, memorialization, nationalism, race, gender, and religion. This is expressed in the span of two hundred pages, and layered in seven chapters, structured thematically to reinforce the post-9/11 narratives that continue to construct the U.S. cultural products, namely, rumors and the search for 9/11 truth, appeals to the rhetoric of national healing and unity, practices of censorship, and attempts to commodify “9/11.”

In this work, the author articulates a critical argument that significantly contributes to the current attempts to theorize, if not guide, the post-9/11 cultural production. He emphasizes that stressing the singularity, or what he calls “the exceptionalism,” of 9/11 is conducive to generating a “reflective” rather than a “reactive” mode of thinking that translates into works of arts, both popular and literary, which are mainly contingent on the resonance of the 9/11 attacks. This, he argues, severely limits the construction of “9/11 culture” as it threatens



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to eventually hinder the continuity of producing cultural works appealing to 9/11 and to perpetuate the parameters of several dominating narratives that render the many “9/11 cultures” into a homogenous one. Reflecting on 9/11, therefore, serves as an important approach to generate works of arts that continue to re-examine 9/11 in view of the socio-political and even racial composition of the United States.

Alongside the strengths of 9/11 Culture, which include its use of jargon-free language, profundity of argument, and in-depth of analysis, there are two concerns that may require more attention. First, the subtitle “America Under Construction” raises the question of accuracy in using “America” as a proper descriptive term of the United States of America. This is particularly important as scholars in the field of American Studies continue to reflect this concern in their works. Second, Melnick’s analysis, though broad in perspective, seems to blur the lines between popular culture and arts. Considerations of the distinction between the two components of the U.S. culture may help the reader to further comprehend the complexity and limitations of approaches that each presents.

Those concerns, however, can be considered as part of the significance of 9/11 Culture, which lies in its power to inspire future research, inquiry, and instruction. In this book, Melnick sets a broad scope for analysis, but chooses to reflect only on certain genres across the cultural spectrum, though he does claim that his analysis of music, film, photography, and fiction does not imply their primacy. Future research is needed to dwell on other cultural genres such as television drama, painting, and even photoshopping. The work opens doors not only for scholars, but also for creative artists and others involved in the cultural production arena. Following the central argument necessitates continuity of a re-consideration of 9/11 culture and its interrelationship with the social and political dimensions. And finally, the work is written by a professor experienced in teaching the U.S. since 9/11. The book can serve as an excellent primary text assigned to students taken courses related to the same field. The “Note to Teachers” letter attached at the end of the book, and the bibliography as well as the appendixes listing many 9/11 films and music, are good resources that would help guide both prospective teachers and students.

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