

Book Review

A Post-Critical Theory of Cultural Production? A Review of the Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business

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To get in the right frame of mind, I begin drafting this review in a hotel bar. I order a Negroni and press shuffle on ‘The Frankfurt Kabuff Party 1 (extremely legendary)’ Spotify playlist¹. The opening glissando of Dancing Queen shimmers in my ears and I shake my head at the audaciousness of the authors’ conceit. A familiar space and texture is conjured in my mind’s eye. A bar. A blurry after-work crowd, untucked shirts, loosened collars, bobbing in unison. I realise I’m smiling. For a moment, I’m with them.

2020 was to be the modern Frankfurt Book Fair’s 72nd year of uninterrupted operation, until plans even for a scaled-down version of the event were struck down by the global pandemic. Coincidentally published the same year, *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business*, provides an unintended commentary on this turn of events, eerily issued from a time when the idea of contagion—which, as Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires show, is designed into the Fair’s spatial layout and social codes—produced enthusiasm and hope, not fear and unease. The authors name this industrial production of positive affect ‘buzz’. Accordingly, the production of bestselling books is part-business, part-‘buzzness’, the spreading of a sense of palpable excitement. Commenting on its interruption, the Fair’s director, Juergen Boos, defiantly issued the rallying cry that ‘books are alive’ and promised to ‘send a signal of hope’ with a new online platform for social and commercial exchange (Nawotka, 2020). While this digital alter-ego remains with us, again the book explains why Frankfurt reconvened at the earliest opportunity, albeit in reduced and sanitised form. The buzz of the Fair manifests a temporary microcosm of the whole industry: its economic life, occasioned by the cross-pollination of rights deals and social interaction; its orchestration of mood; its distillation of the loftier, enlightened ideals associated with the international Republic of Letters. Over the course of a slim volume the authors train their auto-ethnographic eye on its peculiar social space-time, reporting back with a playful, literary flair born of professional and scholarly encounters with the industry. The result is an appropriately page-turning introduction to the world of publishing that gives flesh and life to the writers, agents and executives that make up its central protagonists.

¹ Curated by the authors and available at: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0eXv8z8jZGyJBEWYAZFcNi?si=svSjpbpaTnWmiba1JZ6LzQ&nd=1>

This is a short book that demands reflection at length. More than a study of an annual convention, it is a compact manifesto for methodological experimentation—one of a constellation of related pieces (e.g. Driscoll and Squires, 2020b, 2021; Squisicoll, 2019)—challenging scholars of contemporary cultural production, broadly conceived, to rethink how they conduct and present empirical research in a form adequate to their domain. I want to convey here some of the multi-dimensional energy of this challenge and to evaluate it as such. As part of Cambridge University Press’ elements series on “publishing and book culture”, the authors naturally place themselves in relation to a narrower body of literature on that topic, much of which, they note, is historically descriptive or trade-oriented. By contrast, their central questions are pragmatist: what do book fairs do? What must we, as researchers, do to account for that? While not the authors’ framing, I read their manner of answering such questions in terms of what some literary scholars call “postcritique” (e.g. Anker and Felski, 2017)—not, that is, “uncritical” but steadfastly refusing critical distance, instead taking critique into account as simply another genre of knowledge production. As such, their study is in tacit conversation with a recent seam of research exploring the epistemic symmetry between cultural scholars and cultural workers. Rather than resting on *a priori* definitions, the former locate “culture” wherever the latter find meaning in the objects and practices that make up their world. In particular, Driscoll and Squires’ account dwells within what Caldwell (2008) calls ‘industrial reflexivity’ in Hollywood screen cultures—forms of knowledge produced, circulated and consumed within the trade itself—alongside associated deliberations over researcher access, rapport and insider status (Ortner, 2010). Drawing on Bourdieu, Appadurai, and Moeran they frame Book Fairs as competitions over cultural and economic worth. But their empiricism is ‘post-Bourdieuian’: a cultural-institutional analysis sensitised to the aesthetic concerns of its practitioners (cf. Born, 2010), as both methodological imperative (McRobbie, 2016; Seaver, 2017) and a means of “doing justice” to creative subjects and objects (Banks, 2017).

The Frankfurt Book Fair is surely the most inventive of such postcritical inquiries into the making of culture, a book-about-books that should generate rich insights and cross-disciplinary techniques for reflexive research in the industrial-academic borderlands. It illuminates the potential of deploying trade events as entry points, across cultural industries (art fairs, film festivals, fashion week) (cf. Moeran and Strandgard Pedersen, 2011)—while reminding us that each will bring its own peculiar aesthetic atmospheres and valuation conventions, to which any future study must be equally attentive. I assess it on these terms, in two parts. With their specific focus on publishing as culture industry, Driscoll and Squires recall that there are two “Frankfurts”; fittingly, therefore, they occupy a position between the production of industrial reflexivity (from ‘within’) and the production of critical thought (from ‘without’). Taking these in turn, I ultimately want to pose some problematics for future research to take up.

Frankfurt 1: From within

Next up: Kanye West’s bouncy 2005 hit *Gold Digger*. An imagined atmosphere of awkward carnivalesque becomes more tangible, populated with half-acquainted colleagues and potential business contacts, inciting a tentative collective release. The crowd coalesces into discernible faces of women and men, several greying on top, dipping and mouthing along to Kanye’s flow—the explicit version. Suddenly I realise. I can’t see it but I feel it: the extraordinary, unrelenting whiteness of the low-lit room.

A post-critical account of the first Frankfurt begins by meditating on its chosen object. At the *Buchmesse*, ‘bestsellers’ appear as speculative promises, creating ‘situations that both confirm and disrupt patterns of global book commerce and the scholarship that attends to it’, enacted within a ‘compressed, intense layering of social, technological, cultural and commercial transactions’ (p. 7). The spatio-temporal construction of manufacturing anticipatory *momentum* through compressed *layers* is key. Rather than getting inside the industry to find the central gatekeeper, or truth hidden at its core, at Frankfurt multiple “insides” are in constant assembly and disassembly: in meetings, deals, parties, social norms, rumours, restricted areas, mailing lists, social media hashtags, and of course the building itself. The authors describe a mood-based ‘concentric circle model of buzz’: the number, or frequency, of ‘insides’ visitors appear to occupy produces either a sense of self-confident centrality or the anxious peripherality of constant FOMO (‘fear of missing out’) (p. 22). Crucially, for insiders, buzz begins long before the Fair’s physical manifestation, in press releases and emailed preparations, and outlasts it, as organic goodwill towards a book bequeaths an impression of hot property that can be sold to outsiders. Book buzz shuttles back and forth between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ packages: between the massaging of gossip, mood and feel (depicted here on a scale from ‘ennui’ to ‘high-key excitement’) and calculative acts entwined with formal marketing logics and media reporting. The authors’ multi-modal approach allows them to trace how emotional investments in the future become attached not just to particular works but to authors, publishers, agents, genres, formats—and, moreover, to the industry as a whole. In this light they diagnose how the production of ‘optimism and forward-looking energy’ works to counteract diagnoses of business-model crisis and the supposed decline of reading (p. 2) and how the inclusion-exclusion dialectic takes on gendered and racialised dimensions.

In such ways, the trade fair is a generative site for accessing and producing hard-to-reach insights about cultural industries from a dual insider-outsider position. The methodological orientation developed here, dubbed ‘ullapoolism’ (after the coastal village in the Scottish Highlands that hosts an annual three-day book festival), responds to what the authors call ‘predicaments’: the need to make knowledge open and adequate to the sites and objects of research; blurred lines between formal and informal data gathering produced by immersion; the backgrounded relations of compromise and circumscription involved in arranging such projects. Honed for the particular aesthetic qualities, dispositions, concerns and modes of communication that texture and motivate book production cultures, these predicaments nonetheless resonate with situated scholarship of all kinds. Ullapoolism’s particularly bookish interventions are inspired by Situationist *dérives* and *détournements*, arts-informed research, and the ‘low theory’ of Stuart Hall and Jack Halberstam (cf. Driscoll and Squires, 2020a). While at times this approach can burden the prose with an apologetic air (regarding, for example, ‘our compromised position as researchers benefiting from and enjoying conducting research on this global book culture event’, p. 87), it also produces its most effective, and affective, moments. Alongside participant observation and autoethnography, they pioneer a range of ingenious, often hilarious, techniques: rapid vibe-gauging interviews using ‘fortune-telling mood fish’; interactive paper and card constructions that ask participants to remake the Fair; a handheld ‘Sleaze-O-Meter’ clicker for counting ‘each mansplain or leer’ (p. 68); a self-published Frankfurt-themed fiction novella, written under a portmanteau soubriquet (Squiscoll, 2019); the aforementioned Spotify playlist. The authors positively fizz with ideas for co-producing moments of delight, mischief and intrigue, to elicit conversation and connection. Their “situations” defamiliarize the routine aspects of the Fair, for them, for attendees and, thanks to the impish panache of the writing, for readers too. In their hands, the ethnographer’s craft is less that of the archaeologist—digging in to the field to unearth its secrets—and more a kind of fly-fishing: wading in part-way to the stream to throw out multiple hooks and lines of attachment.

Frankfurt 2: From without

The Clash’s *Should I Stay or Should I Go* fades to a close—then the vibe shifts. Moving uncomfortably in my seat, I recognise the opening bars of *I Believe I Can Fly*, and press pause on the playlist. Is it possible to disconnect the art from the artist? It’s probably not very Debordian... More to the point, a feature of the new digital rights regime means it’s certainly no longer possible to indulge this song as private nostalgia without simultaneously putting coins (or fractions thereof) into the pocket of R. Kelly, a repeat sex offender. As a consumer, I might reflect on the moral economy of complicity and distance—but actually the ethics are already decided, coded into the platform. This isn’t about tempering enjoyment, however melancholic, with the requisite quanta of personal disgust and public denunciation. It’s: should I stay or go? I decide to skip. The playlist continues but the buzz has been killed. I’ve left the party.

If the post-critical stance generates attachments within the Fair, this book is also instructive on the limits of postcritique for contemporary cultural industries. The authors’ ambition is a hybrid form of ‘working within and yet critically commenting upon the industry’, whence they seek ‘ways to make contemporary book cultures more progressive, fairer and potentially emancipatory’, while resisting criticism *qua* ‘destruction’ (p. 87). When the authors turn to the second Frankfurt, therefore, they wear their feelings on their sleeves. Or rather, over their shoulders: initialising the ‘Frankfurt School’ label, they sport a home-made ‘FFS’ tote bag around the *Buchmesse* halls, provoking conversations over critical theory from participants—conversations, however, that ultimately remain unresolved. In a book that demonstrates and problematises the painstaking construction of publishing’s inclusions and exclusions, oddly, the authors relegate critique to an unproblematic “outside”—but it is surely only possible to do so by caricaturing it as necessarily “destructive”. Indeed, part of the book’s ethnographic success surely comes down to the assumed (middle-class, university-educated) publishing worker’s familiarity with this caricature, likely via recycled versions of critical theory and the legacies of Situationist counter-culture. But rather than interrogate this disposition (as ‘low theory’ in action, perhaps), the authors tend to reproduce it. ‘Theory’ (capital T) appears as site of representation and symbolic play: another iconoclastic *détournement* occurs via Bourdieu’s (in)famous diagram of the field of literary production, across which hand-drawn bees flit from ‘Bohemia’ to ‘industrial art’ by way of Zola’s ‘naturalist novel’ (p. 27). Precise delineations and labels so obscured, the image is transformed from analytic tool to metaphor. Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer appear, as they often do, primarily as a foil: ‘curmudgeonly male theorists’ with a (gendered) ‘negative vision of mass culture’, whose view of the modern Fair ‘probably wouldn’t be positive’ (p. 78-79). The point is reasonable—after all, dismissals of popular literature as feminine-coded, alongside outdated critiques of a naively-conceived monolithic culture industry, remain all too common. Nonetheless, it is strange to couch this attack in opposition to theorists who approached their own place within scholarly and publishing circuits with a sense of seriousness and responsibility

and who worked (albeit in a curmudgeonly way) to bridge critical theory and administratively useful forms of inquiry.

Accordingly, while publishing's "culture" appears in fresh light, its "industry" remains "inside", seemingly inaccessible. We learn little about work, for instance, outside its social character. While much is made of the logistics of staging the fair, and the behind-the-scenes work that must go on, service workers (a female security guard, a Turkish taxi driver, a sweeping janitor) enjoy only occasional walk-on roles. There is a brief, tantalising reflection on an 'increasingly fragmented, atomised work culture' – staff 'laid off as companies contract and outsource' in response to the health of the broader industry, later to reappear 'hustling as contractors' (p. 87)—although what this looks (and indeed feels) like, to whom, or how it interacts with optimistic industry buzz, is obscure. Likewise, the exchange and assignment of intellectual property rights is a constant backdrop—but what do such exchanges involve? How do they create new alignments (between companies, agencies, industries)? Are some possibilities closed off and others locked in? Who makes decisions? What even is a rights-holder? Where are rights 'held' and how are they operationalised? In short, how is financial and organisational power enacted and encoded (hierarchically, concentrically, in lines of flight, or however)? Clearly a short book cannot do everything—but the ullapoolist method subsumes such organisational logics within its promotional frame. It is as if the global commercial trade in rights is simply a pretext for 'buzz-production' meetings.

This need not be the case. We're in familiar territory for bees, after all: from Marx comparing the architect's imaginative capacities with the construction of a honeycomb; to Moulrier-Boutang's (2004) autonomist emphasis on 'pollination' under cognitive capitalism. In particular, a mutually-enriching dialogue might be sought with economic geographers' conception of 'local buzz': the informal transmission of ideas and social glue, connecting urban and temporary innovation clusters to 'global pipelines' of information flows, in a wider creative and knowledge economy (e.g. Bathelt et al., 2004; Storper and Venables, 2004). In any case, the book demonstrates a need for closer engagement with global chains of production in economies of various kinds, beyond loose appeals to 'neoliberalism'—a useful term which appears here only as vague epithet. What makes publishing's 'market values' (p. 7), 'conglomerate power' (p. 48), or 'self-satisfaction' (p. 76) all 'neoliberal' (as opposed to merely capitalist) is not explained. A section of chapter three, contrasting the Fair's modern history as part of a (European) project of post-war institutional reconstruction with contemporary (global) asymmetries of access, is introduced indicatively late in the discussion (and, somewhat apologetically, as 'an odd conjoining of topics', p. 66). But it hints at a more integrative analysis, implicitly bridging international cultural and economic policy frames.

In that context, the authors grapple with former German Chancellor Willy Brandt's accusation, in the wake of 1968, that the intellectual life of the Fair risked 'pseudo-liberal self-satisfaction' (p. 73), wondering hypothetically if the phrase might apply to their own half-in/half-out research position, as agents of recuperation perhaps. They sidestep the question—but one possible riposte appears in the 'amateurism' of their methodological models and interventions: depicted as an act of self-sabotage, they foreclose prospective valuations by either the publishing industry or the impact agenda of the 'neoliberally inclined university' (Driscoll and Squires, 2020b: 148). As a strategy to resist the logic of the Fair, it chimes not only with Halberstam's queer ethics of failure—prompting the question: what of publishing's flops as well as its bestsellers?—but also Adorno's speculation about a cultural production that would dwell in the outmoded modernities of obsolete media (actualised in the mimeographed early copies of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* cf. Burges, 2013). Driscoll and Squires are right, of course, to resist theoretical reverence. But they might have allowed their Hall-esque 'detour through theory' (p. 36) to become slightly more of an open-ended *dérive*, rather than travelling down well-worn pathways, littered with critiques-of-critique, coordinates mapped well in advance. By contrast, their strategic fluency in the language of a publishing culture 'marked by at least superficial "niceness" and conviviality, a searching for commonality and similarities, for like-mindedness and affiliation' (p. 48), reaps dividends: an ingenious analysis, finely tuned to publishing's idiosyncrasies and, vitally, huge fun to read. How far it challenges the industry's own self-perception, however, remains unclear. A little curmudgeonliness might not always be a bad thing.

It's now late at the "extremely legendary" Kabuff party (sponsored by Spotify). Or early morning, rather. The Bertelsmann execs left some time ago. One guy has taken up refuge in a karaoke booth, tucked off to one side – senior business development something-something at a publishing services vendor. In his fifties maybe, alone, clutching a Weizenbier to his chest with one hand, a clunky plastic mic in the other. He sways and murmurs, falteringly, to himself.

"Routine bites hard... ambitions low. Resentment high, emotions won't grow. We're changing our ways ... different roads. Love... Love will tear us apart, again..."

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