

The *Modern Review* is a small, and young, publication devoted to the discussion of mass culture. It first appeared last summer and, after four quarterly issues, now looks forward to achieving American distribution and going bimonthly in the autumn. It has a print-run of 15,000, but sells considerably less than that. It is a modest initiative, described by one of its contributing editors as being in the literary tradition of the 'little magazine', yet it has been promoted with unusual vigour through the national press and the lifestyle magazines.

It is too early to tell whether Julie Burchill is justified in claiming it to be 'the paper of the nineties', but the launch was certainly revealing of our times. The *Modern Review* was born of Burchill, erstwhile Queen of the *New Musical Express*. Its directors include pundits like Burchill and Peter York, and also advertising executives like Geoffrey Howard Spink and John Hegarty. Its publicity was guaranteed, less by its stated commitment to mass culture than by the carefully-arranged collection of severed heads displayed alongside that commitment.

One well-placed introductory article, in the magazine *Vanity Fair*, pitched Burchill and her team against the 'wrinklies', the 'seedy dummies and mummies shedding dandruff everywhere', and the 'old farts' who had turned the British media into 'one huge gentleman's smoking room'. (Identified culprits included Auberon Waugh, A.N. Wilson, Jeffrey Bernard and Richard Ingrams, whose anti-lifestyle magazine, the *Oldie*, was launched a few months after *Modern Review*, in February 1992.)

An article in last month's *Harpers & Queen*, meanwhile, was written by William Cash, himself a *Modern Review* contributor, and it lined Burchill's paper up against a different collection of old crocks. Clive James was quoted, regretting the low tone of a recent attack on him and asking, almost plaintively, what the young strutters at the *Modern Review* wanted: 'For us older lot to just crawl away and die?' A.S. Byatt, stung by being treated as a ludicrous matron (who, as *Modern Review* contributor Eric Griffiths spat out on BBC2's *The Late Show* just before she was announced winner of the Booker Prize, 'had been educated beyond her intelligence'), observed that: 'There are a lot of very unpleasant young male critics in Britain with a very sharp edge.'

And Martin Amis, who himself may have enjoyed a little nastiness as a young man, also came out to meet contempt with contempt when talking to Cash. After pronouncing, again quite justifiably, that the *Modern Review* consisted of nothing

but 'opinions', he dismissed it as the product of an underachieving and publicity-seeking 'bunch of Turks'.

Now that the *Modern Review* is on the map, Julie Burchill declares sweetly that the magazine wasn't really started with the aim of attacking anyone. It was just that 'we didn't like the others' and didn't see why people should only be able to choose between the 'mindless glossies' and the 'boring heavies'.

'I'm not very intellectual', she remarks helpfully, adding that she likes to think of herself as 'intelligent but not snooty', and perhaps therefore a model of the kind of reader the *Modern Review* might attract. Burchill leaves not doubt that she is 'the boss' as well as the bank-roller of the project, but the magazine is edited by her 'pet minx' Toby Young, who is unrepentant about the aggression with which the magazine kicked its way into view. He is unreservedly contemptuous of those who came on to the media scene in the fifties and early sixties, and set about applying their own patrician values to popular culture. 'They used organisations like the BBC, thinking that 'if they could control the means of producing popular culture', then they could control the thing itself. He adds, 'No harm is ever going to come from putting the frighteners on people like Clive James and D M Thomas.'

Young says we shouldn't mistake the *Modern Review* for the kind of cultural relativism that he associates with Michael Jackson, the BBC's Head of Music and Arts, and his 'ghastly post-modernism'. Julie Burchill and her team will write about popular culture with genuine enthusiasm, while also holding the banner of a return to standards. The aim, Young explains, is to be 'canonic'; to sift through the huge array of mass culture that is pouring out, and to 'raise the standard' by 'pinpointing what is good'.

After quoting Burchill's description of the *Modern Review* as '*Smash Hits* edited by F R Leavis', its editor goes on to dispense with the old leftist critique of the culture industry, which assumed that the capitalist media only wanted to make money by producing 'ghastly, Disneyesque trash, which is unimaginative and stupid, and quite without aesthetic value.'

In the free market, the solution can't be to attack 'the big corporate bogeymen'. The real masters are the consumers, and that is where Young claims to pitch his sights: raise their standards, create 'educated and discriminating consumers' and the industry will have to follow.

Is this newfound commitment to 'standards' also tied to a mission to engage the interests of ordinary people? At least one of the *Modern Review's* supporters hopes so. John Carey, Professor of English at Oxford University, declares himself all in favour of Burchill's magazine, seeing an immediate connection between its lionisation of mass culture and the thesis of his new book, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*. Currently undergoing rocky passage through the reviews, this book makes an argument that might have come from the Marxist left not so long ago. Convinced that English intellectuals have built a great barrier of contempt between their idea of culture and the masses, Carey wishes the *Modern Review* well in its endeavour and remarks that it is 'trying to make some bridge across the culture gap' produced by generations of mass-hating intellectual elitists, from the snobs of Bloomsbury to the wilfully obscure deconstructionists of current literary theory.

He has a high regard for Julie Burchill, respecting her writing and her ability to communicate widely, and would like to see the *Modern Review* reaching out towards a larger audience. Indeed, he suggests it should be accessible to the 'ordinary sixth former'.

This prospect seems remote. The *Modern Review's* slogan promises not worthy acts of public education but 'Low Culture for High Brows'. This commits it to the provision of coterie thrills: anti-intellectual excursions for déclassé intellectuals, rude days out for academic writers who may feel too tightly buttoned up in the *Times Literary Supplement*, a place for tabloid journalists to prove that they have a perfectly adequate education too.

Even the format is an in-joke. The paper toys with the look of the cultural heavyweights, presenting itself as a 'hip version of the *London Review of Books*'. It also revels in coded parody. A review of sex manuals is presented as a lampoon of the *Independent on Sunday's* 'masterclass' column. And while the *Modern Review* is proud of the youthful ease with which it looks up as well as down across the pop-posh divide, the articles that are said to take a low-brow view of high-brow (say the Yale-educated producer of Cheers writing about Jacques Derrida) turn out to be just as arcane as the heavier ones that consider, say, the case for Stravinsky as World Music.

Contributors to this never less than individualistic publication are hardly confined by any sense of loyalty. They, too, wonder just what it is they are involved in. One remarks that the paper is 'compelled by prejudices', adding that there is little real curiosity about popular culture. Another appreciates some

items, but wonders whether the whole thing isn't really a 'fake' and a career-boosting 'posture'. Some, who hoped that it would offer 'serious analysis of mundane things', are disappointed.

Opinion is also divided as to the political nature of the project, or, indeed, whether it should have one at all. For Julie Burchill, the question seems laughable. (And about as acute, I'm left to guess, as taking Morris dancers into the Groucho Club.) She remarks that the paper is really a CIA front, and then swings round to suggest that it is a refuge for Marxists: after all, she herself claims still to be one – in just about everything except economic matters. If everything seems to be a removable label in these circles, there is also a pronounced hostility to 'predictability' and that convenient American import 'political correctness'.

Toby Young was writing abrasive articles for the *Sunday Telegraph* before the *Modern Review* was launched – most of them affronting the ideas of the so-called liberal establishment. He had derided Karl Miller, editor of the *London Review of Books*, for stooping arthritically to write about the footballer Paul Gascoigne, asserting that 'mass culture is good, but it is precisely because it's so good that it ought to be preserved from the attention of intellectuals.' He attacked the Edinburgh Festival Fringe as 'little more than a platform for egotists and self-publicists', whose 'anti-bourgeois' antics were sponsored by Stella Artois and Perrier. He ticked off Salman Rushdie – a favourite target for the boys at the *Modern Review* – for not being prepared to come out and say that 'our way of life is superior'. He praised the yuppies: 'the materialism of the eighties' was a 'sophisticated political gesture, a way of saying that the good opinion of the liberal intelligentsia no longer mattered.'

Young says that he certainly doesn't think of himself as coming from the left. And he is not the only person who goes on to insist that the *Modern Review* is not defined by a shared ideology. Steve Beard, a contributor whose more leftish background lies in magazines like *Arena* and *The Face*, feels the magazine is a symptom of conditions in the newspaper world. He explains that 'Thatcherite restructuring' seems to have divided most national newspapers in two. The workers in the lower regions have been casualized and restructured, but the upper echelons remain privileged and intact.

So there are ambitious youngsters, raised in a climate of competitive expectation and looking for their break, but coming up against over-paid elderly hacks, who

would have been made redundant long ago were it not for institutional inertia and 'the accumulated prestige of their by-lines'.

There is, Beard suspects, a kind of resentment at work' and it doesn't follow party political lines. (He suggests that a lot of *Modern Review* contributors are running a private fantasy of using Burchill's magazine as a ladder into the national press.) Beard says that we still have to come to terms with the extent of the reversals that took place in the eighties. He reckons we are in a 'much more complex cultural moment' than the old left-right distinction can usefully explain, and describes the *Review* as a 'temporary object' in which this becomes apparent.

Wallace Kingston, who used to sell advertising for *Marxism Today* and now does the same job for the *Modern Review*, takes a similar line. He suggests it is a 'radical magazine' not in terms of any political programme, but for its cheek, its passion, its restitution of opinionated personal argument, its impatience with academic discourse, and its concern with 'the whole panoply of 20th century media.'

The last two issues confirm that the characteristic attitude of the *Modern Review* is quite widely shared. The advertisements also make interesting reading, providing a roster of those who don't want to be left behind. An old hipster like Bill Buford is not to be one-upped so easily: he's taken a whole page for a *Granta* magazine advert, featuring a vast and positively Panzaic paunch.

The publishers of those equally middle-aged enquiries known as 'cultural studies' also seem to be running to keep up. There are advertisements for *Screen*, the journal through which Colin McCabe and other veterans of the distant 'moment of theory' first came to public notice, and for diverse books concerned with the 'concept of ideology' or offering a 'bold critique of women's roles in male society.' There are advertisements for course in cultural studies, including an MA in 'Tourism and Social Responsibility'.

Can we expect a rapprochement between the *Modern Review* and the tradition of cultural studies that was busily investigating popular culture and arguing the toss over the Beatles versus Beethoven 20 years before anyone heard of the 'Keats versus Dylan' debate, or Peter York came up with the 'pop-posh' epithet for the cultural coupling?

Contributing editor Cosmo Landesman, whose review of an 800-page cultural studies tome was headed 'Taking out the Trash', suggests that, despite the many

failings of cultural studies, it wasn't all a waste of time, and that we do think of the media differently as a result of them. His wife, Julie Burchill, is less forgiving. Mention cultural studies to her and she says: 'The very phrase makes my toes curl,' adding that the serious-minded (and, of course, wrinkled) practitioners of this approach are like 'librarians trying to get down at the disco'. As for reading Martin Amis on football – well, that is plain embarrassing, 'like seeing your granny drunk'.

Toby Young remarks that the aim of the *Modern Review* is to 'apply the techniques of higher learning to analysis of popular culture', apparently unaware how close this was to the aim expressed by Richard Hoggart in the founding days of the since much-expanded cultural studies. As far as Young is concerned, it is 'misguided' to use popular culture for 'study group purposes': 'first and foremost, it's entertainment.'

He regrets the excessive theoretical jargon, and the way cultural studies subordinated popular culture to its own left-wing political agenda – 'the seminar room replaced the myth of the barricaded street.'

The point is amplified by Graham McCann, the Oxford politics don whose new course on 'Media, Culture and Ideology' was hailed in the *Modern Review's* first editorial as proof that mass culture had become respectable. McCann seems himself as coming from the left, but he welcomes the magazine for the shake-up it is likely to give the world of cultural studies. A good thing to get them worried he remarks, pointing out that he is talking about the third and fourth generation of cultural studies, and not the earlier pioneers.

Cultural studies, he says, had become governed by a self-conscious clique of people, all of whom had been through the same post-structuralist mill, and are disdainful of people who try to enter from other directions. He likes the *Modern Review* for its affront to the 'garrison mentality' of a cultural studies establishment that makes a fetish of 'the idea of being left-wing . . . You signed up and got membership of the left at the same time.'

How do the cultural studies academics reply to this charge? Some in far-flung poly/university departments mutter that this latest metropolitan aberration has yet to reach them. Others are in no doubt that the correct strategy would be to ignore the upstart altogether.

Professor and journalist, Simon Frith, is less disdainful. He reckons that a popular and accessible journal that took popular culture seriously would be an excellent idea, but he's not impressed so far. He regrets the way the magazine seems to merge the popular with the populist, giving way to a predictable anti-intellectualism. He is inclined to see Burchill's articles as testimony to the value of higher education: they prove that argument cannot be entirely a matter of 'ad hoc style response'. He remembers thinking this in the mid-eighties, when Burchill started contributing to *New Society*. Earlier, that now-defunct weekly had been carrying articles by the likes of Reyner Banham, Angela Carter and John Berger, who would look at the objects of popular and mass culture with interest and enthusiasm, while also trying to produce an informed analysis. But by the eighties, all that seemed to matter was 'being there', so we got missives from the street front and the brute fact of youth.

*

Jon Savage, the historian of punk, remarks that the *Modern Review's* interests are all 'anti-life' and it 'reflects complete failure of nerve on the part of the London media.' It is 'a little bit of vanity publishing that has got out of hand' and is most significant for what it reveals about the condition of the national press. He cites the high number of articles that have been syndicated into national newspapers, the publicity generated around the magazine. The *Modern Review* offers newspaper editors a convenient 'style degradation of the punk and post-punk phenomenon', allowing newspaper editors to gain a bit of 'hip allure' while actually evading their real responsibilities to the public.

Savage says that the whole world may be upside-down, but what do we get in the morning paper? 'Relentless personal comment in place of reportage or reviews which concentrate on the matter at hand, unpleasant cynicism tricked up by the simulacrum of intellectual activity . . . in short, a panoply of offensive New Right effects masked by a false liberalism.'

As for the 'slag-off' style of journalism, people like D.M. Thomas may indeed seem to be deserving targets, but the whole mode is unhealthy, and only interesting to people in the media world, with their unhealthy obsession with celebrity.

So we come back to the *Oldie*, where the slagging match continues. Sitting in his office in Fitzrovia, Richard Ingrams declares, with a certain frayed hauteur, that he finds it hard to rise to Julie Burchill's provocations because he finds her

writing 'almost impenetrable.' Toby Young compares Ingrams to 'a lout in a pub', and declares the *Oldie* to be 'staggeringly bad'. They don't really believe in their 'fogeish stance'. Their convictions are only 'strategic', he says, with the passion of his own convictions.

In reality, the *Oldie* and the *Modern Review* have more in common than they might like. It is not just that they are both coteries and adept at self promotion. They also seem to share a journalistic style that likes, in Auberon Waugh's phrase, 'tickling things up,' and which hedges its most opinionated messages with the little shrug that suggests you shouldn't take it seriously anyway.

They may be camped out on opposite sides of the vast demolition yard that the post-war settlement has become, but neither of them want anything to do with its challenges or problems. They seem curiously similar in their provincialism and in their rejection of the responsibilities once associated with critical journalism.

There may be some good pieces in recent issues of the *Modern Review* – if scarcely enough to justify the hope that it will develop as it grows up and out of the vicious polemical framework from which it was launched. But the main lesson so far, at least for the practitioners of cultural studies, is not that intelligent things can be said enthusiastically or in accessible language. It is that if you confine your attention to the periphery, to the cultures that exist on what used to be called the power-bloc, then a vacuum is left in the centre. The *Modern Review* comes in with the timely reminder that when the citadel is abandoned, the freebooters move in.

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported

You are free:

- Ⓒ to Share - to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

- Ⓘ Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
- Ⓓ Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- Ⓔ No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do this is with a link to this web page.
- Any of the above conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.
- Nothing in this license impairs or restricts the author's moral rights.