Twitter Thread by Aaron Bady



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So much cultural criticism boils down to chewing on the strange result of popular genre chum--guilty pleasure stuff--being taken more seriously than it was really designed for or capable of sustaining.

Im thinking about the furors around American Dirt, Bridgerton, and WW84, which, in different ways, are all objects meant to be consumed for pleasure without thinking too much about why and how. And then you think about them and you're like "wow, this sucks."

Scads of thrillers as bad or worse than American Dirt are published constantly, and no one but their readers notices, but THIS one got lots of "serious" attention, so it was held to real literary standards and eviscerated.

Bridgerton is an adaptation of romance novels--not serious alt-history--but when claims for the progressive work it was doing were made, lots of folks were like "wow, this seems pretty silly and kinda careless?"

And the conversation around WW84 is fascinating because of the strange way "comic book movie" is simultaneously "stupid goofy fun, not supposed to make sense" and "this is an allegory for America under Trump" (doubly vexed by the "saving cinema!" role WW84 was slotted into)

To be clear, I think it's GOOD to take such culture objects very, very seriously! But they work in genre terms, and have to be read in terms of how those genres teach audiences to take pleasure in them.

There's a critical short circuit if you review Bridgerton but don't place it in the romance novel genre (or Shondaland), when you review WW84 but not by reference to MCU/DCEU, or when you talk about American Dirt as if there aren't scads of narcothrillers doing analogous racisms

In short, to coin an extremely original idea: if you're going to decode the structure of a text's political unconscious, always historicize

I'm also not sure "highbrow literature and cinema" really exists: you *can* watch ambitious cinema on mubi and read incredibly sophisticated and challenging novels (esp in translation), but mainstream cultural conversations on "the novel" and "film" totally ignore all of that

Put differently: what happens when "guilty pleasures" became so mainstream and commercially dominant that they cease to be, in any sense, "forbidden"?