REVIEWS

The hesitation waltz

Ian H. Birchall, *Sartre against Stalinism*, Berghahn, New York and London, 2004. xiii + 242 pp., £47.00 hb., £14.95 pb., 1 57181 621 6 hb., 1 57181 542 2 pb.

As the adolescent's entrée into the world of ideas, existentialism has probably diminished a little since the Cure's 1978 'Killing an Arab', but 2005 is the centenary of Sartre's birth, and the celebrations can be expected to raise his profile. In his introduction to the edition of *Critique of Dialectical Reason* issued by Verso last year, Fredric Jameson argued that globalization has conferred a relevance on Sartre's concept of universal history that even his postmodern detractors cannot ignore. Birchall is likewise hopeful that 'a new generation of "anti-capitalists"' will rediscover Sartre. Hence this book.

Birchall is one of the most dogged researchers in the field of twentieth-century French letters. He is also a long-standing member of the Socialist Workers' Party. He dedicates *Sartre against Stalinism* to the memory of Tony Cliff: activist, biographer of Trotsky and the SWP's founding theoretician. After studying the government statistics in 1948, Cliff defined the society which emerged in the USSR after the defeat of the Left Opposition in 1929 as 'state capitalist', a term previously restricted to Frankfurt School or anarchist (non-party-building, non-Leninist) circles. Trotsky's own definition of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state demanded that it must always be 'defended'. Defence easily becomes 'apology': definitions of socialism which include labour camps, anti-Semitism and atom bombs make it hard to gain either sympathy or recruits. By breaking with Trotskyist orthodoxy on Russia, Cliff gave activist party Marxism a new lease of life.

Given his politics, the aspect of Sartre which causes Birchall grief is his vacillating relationship to the French Communist Party (PCF): the 'against Stalinism' of his title is deliberately tendentious. Sartre never really accepted Trotsky's account of a betrayed revolution, much less Cliff's state-capitalist analysis. On top of that, the PCF was one of the world's most reactionary communist parties: in February 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, only Mao Zedong and Maurice Thorez, the leader of the PCF, hailed Stalin as a father of socialism; for *seventeen years* (until 1973) the PCF insisted that Khrushchev's 1956 apology for the crimes of Stalin was a forgery. In a year-by-year account, Birchall documents what he calls Sartre's 'hesitation waltz' with the PCF. Sartre's 'hard Stalinist' period, when he visited the Soviet Union and claimed it allowed freedom of speech (a barefaced lie), was restricted to the years 1952–56. It was a response to the Cold War and the peace movement. The rest of the time, Sartre was a fellow-traveller of the PCF, but frequently involved with initiatives which dismayed the leadership: organizing opposition to the Algerian War, defending Jean Genet and homosexuality, promoting feminism.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Sartre moved on from the existentialism which had made his name and engaged with Marxism. In 1960 he declared his 'fundamental agreement' with historical materialism. But Marxism in the postwar period was hamstrung by Stalinism. When Georg Lukács excoriated existentialism's obsession with despair and loneliness in 1952, he claimed that Russia's atom bomb was proof of the onward march of enlightenment and reason. This was not going to convince anyone too young to have fought in the war, let alone a CND member. When the New Left rediscovered Marx and revolution in 1968, it did so by emphasizing precisely those aspects of life which the Stalinists deemed 'petty bourgeois' and repugnant: sex, music, self-development, social experiment.

Birchall tells the tale of Sartre's political involvements with such fastidiousness – every assertion tied to a source by a footnote – that the atmosphere is peculiarly unFrench: English historical research meets Parisian posturing in a bizarre confrontation of opposites. French publications often eschew the apparatus of footnotes and index, but the notion of public debate and manifesto remains alive, defying grey academic knowledge-after-the-event (which is perhaps why French philosophers write primary texts and anglophone academics write commentaries on them). However, Birchall is himself urgently political, busting the limits of academic propriety with declarations of political allegiance. He introduces considerations banned from the charmed circle of those citing Derrida and Deleuze like Biblical texts.

In 1934, before he had written a word on existentialism, Sartre read an article on Martin Heidegger

by Colette Audry in *L'École émancipé*, a socialist weekly for teachers. She titled her essay 'A Philosophy of German Fascism' (straight away highlighting an issue which the academic reception of Heidegger in the 1980s befogged). She was concerned to explain this strange new political development called Nazism. As a Trotskyist, Audry was aware of the omissions of Stalinized Marxism: 'they leave to their opponents the monopoly of intellectual audacity in everything which goes beyond the scope of the purely economic and political'. As Birchall points out, such complaints provided Sartre with his postwar project. To achieve it, he resorted to the ethical and moral apparatus of existentialism, but also to a dialogue with the French anti-Stalinist Left. Some of the political stands he took were worthy, but it's hard to see his philosophical endeavours as achieving much more than personal fame and theoretical confusion. Fredric Jameson expresses surprise that Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is not more widely read. This may be because it is a turgid grotesque, a comedy of errors, in which a Cartesian unable to rid himself of the Christian metaphysical divide between spirit and matter repeatedly misunderstands what Marx said about humans as social, productive animals: a paranoid labyrinth which projects frustrations with the PCF to the level of anthropological truth. It aped Hegel's expansive *Phenomenology of Spirit* by adopting Braudel's breathless guidebook prose, a manner which later re-emerged in the dubious rhizomatic sprawl of Deleuze.

By restricting himself to Sartre's politics and refusing to set sail on the dark waters of philosophy, Birchall weakens his case. What he defends in Sartre's philosophy, against the structuralists and postmodernists, is his insistence on 'the unitary subject' and 'freedom of choice'. Dear as these are to Christians and apologists for the market like Tony Blair, many readers of Marx believe *Capital* explodes these liberal concepts. As the pre-eminent philosophical celebrity of postwar Paris, Sartre did not establish anything resistant to later trends; he set the mould – incomprehension of Marx and vilification of Engels as the guiding lights for a spectacular career. Structuralist and postmodernist attacks on Sartre were not devastating critique, but bids for the throne. Sartre's love–hate relationship with the PCF – 'party power as inevitably corrupting' – became a convenient *tic* for a purely academic Marxism, reproducing itself outside the conditions that gave it birth. Sartre was about as useful to the development of a genuinely Marxist philosophy and politics as Harold Pinter.

Birchall has a horror of 'mere' ideas, exhibiting the Anglo-Saxon positivism which Trotsky attacked mercilessly in his later years. He keeps returning to the fact that the PCF won millions of votes and had masses of working-class members. It was a 'real' political force. To ignore it would be ultra-left. But was Sartre's vacillating attitude so helpful? In May 1968, all the criticisms made by the Trotskyists (however tiny their *groupuscules*) were proven, when the PCF betrayed

the biggest general strike in history and prevented a social revolution, handing back power to De Gaulle and the employers. Cliff learned from 1968: working in reformist parties like the Labour Party or the PCF is useless; revolutionaries need their own organization. If Birchall took his own political positivism seriously, he would be in the Labour Party, not the SWP.

In 1956, Pierre Naville issued a pamphlet titled *L'Intellectuel communiste*. Passed over by Birchall, it questioned Sartre's self-description as an 'intellectual' communist. It explained why revolutionary socialists find something vain and compromised about the stance of the 'intellectual':

> Do you imagine for a moment that Marx considered himself an *intellectual* communist? No, he considered himself a communist, which is something completely different. The *intelligentsia* swaps the right of every person to use their intelligence for affiliation to that celestial legion of the 'intelligent class'. By thinking it thereby elevates and magnifies its role, thought actually mutilates itself, reducing its social role to that of a paid functionary.

With Sartre as his lodestar, Birchall confuses speculative thought with celebrity politics. Perhaps it gave an impetus to the movement against the war in Vietnam when Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre decided to oppose it, but translating one species of spectacular power into another hardly advances our understanding of either war or capitalism. This is 'philosophy politics' for those who do not read philosophy, alien to the egalitarian and self-emancipatory principles of Marxism proper. Stars harm collective discussion and deserve our opprobrium.

The 'masochism' of Beauvoir and Sartre before the PCF was helped by the fact that they never joined. Alternately impressed by its size and power, but disappointed by its lack of principle, they regressed to the moral antinomies of the 'problem plays' of bourgeois drama: 'Action involves wickedness … should I do it?' However, as the Trotskyists tried to explain to Beauvoir and Sartre throughout their lives, the reformist bureaucracy originates from the links between the labour movement and bourgeois society (this was how Ernest Mandel put it in 1953). The 'power' of the PCF *was* its power to betray workers' attempts at control and make deals with management. Pondering the ethics of taking 'action' is a fool's game: *their* actions hurt us every day.

The historical record presented by Birchall shows Sartre again and again failing to understand the opposed dynamics of class power in capitalist society. How he keeps managing to find anything admirable in Sartre's obtuseness is really rather amazing. He even says that the confusions of *Les Mains sales* (1948), which casts a Trotsky-style martyr as a corrupt Stalinist who lied to his members (the opposite of Trotsky's practice), gives the play 'its richness and strength'. Birchall's Marxism appears to be so moralistic and formal, so lacking a dialectic of experiment, so absolutely certain of the task ahead, he needs to revert to liberal quandary to generate the unknown on which art relies. The possibility of acting artistically *after* reaching an understanding of class society and its manipulations (Brecht and Debord, Burroughs and Shepp, Jorn and Free Improvisation, Stewart Home and Punk) is nowhere on the map.

Birchall doubtless adores Sartre's novels and plays, but nowhere explains why politically he should be deemed anything more than a pompous centrist: self-dramatizing, moralistic and confused. Nowhere does he point out that because both liberalism and Stalinism believed in the electoral spectacle rather than the revolutionary moment, they made a perfect, if abusive, couple. Sartre was a symptom of his times. Real Marxism was elsewhere.

However, Birchall's conclusion makes a crucial point. Sartre's wobbly orbit is only comprehensible if we acknowledge the pull of the 'authentic' French revolutionary Left 'hidden from history during the long night of Stalinist domination' (as Birchall puts it): Colette Audry, Daniel Guérin, Victor Serge, Pierre Naville and the pioneers of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Sartre had a continuous dialogue with these activists, joining them occasionally in united fronts (especially during the Algerian War). However, what they said never seemed to stick. Sartre was the wealthy, well-connected chump who so often hangs around revolutionary circles and understands nothing. Rather than detailing every sad twist and turn of Sartre's alternations between Stalinist realism and liberal moral panic, one wishes Birchall had spent more of his 240 pages expounding their views and telling their stories (especially that of Colette Audry, who emerges as the real brain). When, in the 1970s, succumbing to postmodernism's critique of 'totalization' (a term used so often in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* the effect is comic), Sartre declared he was no longer a Marxist and converted to Judaism, Birchall's special pleading goes into overdrive.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is usually interpreted as existentialism's gift to Black Power. Birchall, however, informs us that he also drew on Pierre Naville's *Psychologie, marxisme, materialisme* in making the point that 'individual sexuality and

dreams depend on the general conditions of civilization, especially class struggle'. This could give us the Marxist theory of the imagination that Colette Audry (and Walter Benjamin) wanted. Pierre Naville – surrealist, friend and biographer of Trotsky – has never found an English publisher. This suppression of this genuine Marxism – speculative, creative, class-based, unrepressed, anti-authoritarian – ensures that all French criticism of Marxism which surfaces in English arrives from anarchism and the Right. This lacuna explains the chronic idealism and self-defeating narcissism of so much anglophone continental philosophy. Whatever its illusions about the political effectiveness of bourgeois celebrity, if Birchall's scholarly work helps spread word of Audry and Naville, it will have served the Left well.

Ben Watson

Sophistication

Keith Crome, *Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2004. 224 pp., £45.00hb., 1 4039 1238 6.

In this well-researched and thoughtfully articulated book, Keith Crome presents a case for the serious consideration of the relationship between Jean-François Lyotard – variously philosopher of desire, theorist of the postmodern condition, disenchanted Marxist or acute reader of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* – and Greek thought. Or rather, he presents half a case, as this book is only the first of a projected two volumes, dealing with, in turn, sophistry and Aristotle.

Lyotard and Greek Thought is initially motivated by a concern that the general tendency in Lyotard commentary has been to overlook the significant role that Greek philosophy plays in his writings. Crome notes that this is something of an anomaly given the more widespread appreciation of the role of the Greeks in the writings of Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida (and, we should perhaps add, Badiou). A significant result of this oversight has been that commentators have generally failed to consider the crucial role that sophistry had in helping Lyotard articulate his research problematic. In this volume, Crome charts the genesis of Lyotard's interest in the sophists – an interest that can be dated back to the 1960s (with a projected text on sophist logic) and which appears intermittently throughout his subsequent publications – a series of lectures he delivered on Nietzsche and the sophists in 1974 and 1976 makes this interest evident. More importantly, Crome argues for a profoundly 'historial' Lyotard, whose philosophical project can be read as an attempt to put into play a political and ethical way of thinking and existing which should be seen as ultimately sophist in origin.

In keeping with the general thrust of the book, Crome devotes several chapters to considering sophistry in relation to Plato, to Hegel – one of the first, perhaps, to attempt the gesture of rehabilitation – and to Heidegger. These discussions show how sophistry is caught up in philosophy's determination of its own identity and how for that reason an engagement with it is essential if we wish radically to question the 'philosophical disposition towards truth and being'. Crome shows how the philosophical determinations of sophistry (can there be any other?) undertaken by these thinkers pass over what will eventually be the essential point for Lyotard: its challenge to the sovereignty of the decision to philosophize on the basis of what is.

Crome does well to note the peculiar ambivalence of philosophy to this, its intimate other. Indeed, it is a curious feature of Western philosophy that from its Platonic inception it has had to negotiate with the margin of indetermination that the 'sophist effect' induces in it. Plato, a little hamfistedly, in *The Sophist*, finds himself being forced to make 'non-being' be. Aristotle, with his curious demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction, was forced to turn the sophist gesture of refutation into the very rationale for his demonstration. Hegel, at the beginning of *The Science of Logic*, makes the sophist confusion of being and non-being into a crucial moment of his dialectic. Such gestures imply the possibility of a certain sophistication at the heart of reason, a point which is clearly not lost on Crome. However, the key point that Crome wishes to make in these chapters is that the philosophical delimitation of sophistry precludes an analysis of its challenge to thought.

The argument about Lyotard really starts only once this preparatory work is out of the way. The second half of the book rather painstakingly lays out the grounds for what Crome sees as Lytoard's restoration of sophistry. Where an early text such as *Discours, figure* raises the spectre of sophistry in terms of the need to displace the philosophy–sophistry dichotomy, the lectures on Nietzsche and the sophists marked a shift towards recovering the practices of the sophists and their 'habitus'. Crucially for Crome these lectures outline Lyotard's appraisal of the sophist practice of 'retorsion' (although the concept itself is derived from Aristotle). *Libidinal Economy* puts into play

what Lyotard was later to see as a sophistic challenge to philosophy, a point he makes in *Just Gaming* in 1979. The latter text also provides Crome with the opportunity to explore the curious but insightful rapprochement Lyotard makes between Kant and the sophist Corax, and to follow through Lyotard's own hesitations between an ostensibly Kantian position and a sophist one.

Like the ideas of reason, the sophist's plea at a tribunal in defence of a strong man who has assaulted a weaker one forces the judge to overstep the bounds of what is given in experience. It does this by adducing that the probability that the judge will think it likely that the strong man did assault the weak one – because common opinion has it that the strong always do this – precisely becomes the reason why the strong man did not commit the assault. Both the Kantian idea and the Greek *doxa* serve as a rule for judgement. The parallels with Kant are, Crome argues, continued in *The Differend*, where the appeal to the sophists is more direct and more explicit. Crome notes the resemblance

between Kant's notion of the antinomies of reason and Lyotard's conception of the differend. As he reminds us, Kant himself was inclined to see in the antinomies a 'sophistication of reason itself', something that arises from within reason and not something superadded to them from the outside by the ill-willed or stupid. Of course, for Kant, this regrettable sophistication was something to be avoided at all costs and in a sense motivated the entire project of critique in the first place.

To show that reason might be somehow instrinsically sophist-icated, Crome reverts to a discussion of the Ancient Greeks and in particular to the sophist demolition of Parmenides' poem 'On Nature', on the basis of the tenor of Lyotard's references in *The Differend*. The case for the intrinsic sophistication of reason is strong when one examines the way in which Gorgias's *Treatise on Nature or Non-being* shows how the self-evident presence of nature – revealed by a goddess to Parmenides in stark terms as being the One that is – is really a complex verbal construction. Gorgias achieves this by turning the phrase articulating the revealed truth – that what is is – into a logical argument. Crome follows among others Cassin to claim that the philosophical demarcation of itself from sophistry collapses with this demolition of the first evidence of ontology, the very 'evidentiality' of the evident. Both become modalities of 'logology' and imply the primacy of an ethical and political – Lyotard would perhaps say 'judicial' – practice of thinking and language. If we then accept that both sophistry and philosophy are possibilities of language, the differend, which bespeaks an irreducible conflict within reason, becomes constitutive. To support this view, Crome draws a parallel between the differend and the Greek notion of *steresis*, the privation of the ability of speech to speak about something.

In many respects, Crome's account of the role of the sophists in Lyotard's work is a useful corrective to the predominant image of Lyotard in Anglo-American academia as the prophet of the postmodern condition. In fact it balances the correction of this misapprehension, which insists on the crucial importance of Lyotard's earlier works, *Discours, figure* and *Economie libidinale*. And it adds something of a nuance to the view of Lyotard as having produced a philosophy of language. Emphasizing the philosophical importance which sophistry had for Lyotard is an intelligent way of drawing our attention to the depth, subtlety and – let's say it – sophistication of Lyotard's enterprise. Very sensibly, Crome does not try to pretend that his reading of Lyotard is definitive; nor does he try to minimize the importance of Lyotard's alleged Kantianism, libidinal economics and so on. However, the emphasis on the relationship of Lyotard to Greek thought does entail a certain rejigging of the stakes of Lyotard's work. By drawing our attention to the use that Lyotard makes of Gorgias, Crome situates the stakes of *The Differend* directly in relation to ontology and to the general (im)possibility of first philosophy. And this of course means, to anyone who has followed the developments of continental philosophy over the last half-century or so, taking up the cudgels for and against Heidegger, as it is Heidegger who has been largely responsible for stimulating the resurgence of interest in ontological questions and in promoting 'historial' arguments. However, it is by no means evident that the line which runs from Parmenides to Kant and from Kant to today is a straight one. Western rationality certainly has a history – or perhaps histories – but

there are clear problems entailed in assuming that it should receive its directions from philosophy in the manner Heidegger would like it to (qua 'the innermost basic features of our Western-European history'). One then slips quite quickly into a prognostic of the 'fate' of philosophy and the attendant pathos of 'the end', muted but implicit in this book.

The issue is not, perhaps, whether or not sophistry might help us develop a somewhat different appreciation of our modernity. Clearly for Lyotard it does; and Crome takes care to show how Lyotard's interest in the sophists shows up in *The Postmodern Condition*. It also features in other accounts of modernity and the fate of rationality – for example, the recent writing of Isabelle Stengers, which similarly revives the importance of opinion (but against the modernist gesture par excellence of critique) and emphasizes the construction of nature and the given. The issue is rather one of how we should think this through and whether the idea is of a 'restoration' or 'rehabilitation'. Stengers for one manages to avoid the linguo-centric bias of the 'discourse with everything' approach, and in this respect it is perhaps noteworthy that in many places in his book Crome draws so heavily on Aristotle – particularly in the last chapter where the classic determination of man (*sic*) as *zoon logon ekhon* supports Lyotard's claim for the constitutive role of the differend. Of course, he is not wrong to do this as Lyotard does as much himself, but it does force us to continue to frame the problematic around discourse or logos, leaving us wondering whether this is really the way radically to question the canonical history of reason.

Andrew Goffey

In process

Anne Fairchild Pomeroy, *Marx and Whitehead: Process, Dialectics and the Critique of Capitalism*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004. xii + 227 pp., £28.25 hb., 0 7914 5983 7.

Pomeroy wisely opens this book by addressing the supposed incompatibility of Marx and Whitehead, recognizing that some might see this as 'a most curious undertaking'. The linking of one of the most abstract of metaphysicians to one of the most stringent critics of the mystificatory status of metaphysics might indeed be seen, by some, as an unlikely union. Yet, given the recent upsurge of interest in Whitehead, an appraisal of the interrelation of Whitehead and Marx could also be seen as a timely and welcome contribution to contemporary debates. Whitehead's insistence on the utterly processual character of existence and the complex but necessary interrelation of the material and the conceptual within such process could help avoid concerns over the status of, for example, determinism, free will, agency and subjectivity within Marx's texts. It could also, perhaps, lead to a more 'dynamic' rendering of Marx's materialism. Equally, a reading of Whitehead through Marx could help rehabilitate him from being envisaged as occupying the outer reaches of philosophical abstraction by pointing up, through Marx, the critical relevance to contemporary theory of a range of his arguments, such as the rejection of the split between subject and object (or knower and known); the primacy of processes over a static conception of being; a radical reconsideration of subjectivity and its relation to materiality.

Pomeroy starts out by establishing Marx as a process philosopher along Whiteheadian lines and in doing so insists that there is no distinction to be made between the 'early, humanistic' and the later 'political economist' Marx. For, she argues, the missing link between these two is Marx's ongoing adherence to the theoretical position of the processual character of all existence. Pomeroy agrees that such a position is not always apparent within Marx's texts and that it takes a reading of Whitehead's more developed philosophical position into these to establish the continuity of Marx's argument. The crucial link between the two, it is claimed, is that both develop what Pomeroy terms a philosophy of 'internal relations': 'a philosophy of internal relations is one in which there is a real transmission of historical data and a constitution of each "entity" by its particular incorporation of that data, yielding process … as the organic movement of inheritance and productive relationality to, of, and by that inheritance.'

The common concern of Whitehead and Marx is, therefore, to establish a theory that is able to go beyond simple subject–object or self–other delimitations to provide a sustained account of a concrete reality populated by material entities that are constituted through their active reception of their environment. The interrelation of all things adds an ethical and political

element to such an approach. For, if it is commonality that *produces* individuality, then questions and concerns about the conditions within which individuality is produced are brought to the fore. Overall, whilst this theory will apply to all entities, it is not of itself a transcendental or mystificatory one, as there is no additional premiss or explanation for these entities, save for that of 'process' by which the continual transmission of data proceeds. Pomeroy thus maintains not only that ontological concerns lie at the heart of all Marx's texts but that this, in a sense, politicizes both ontology and process philosophy. For 'the ontological features in Marx's work … [and] the analyses of capitalist economics.… are inextricably linked.… The beating heart of the economic analysis and critique in *Capital* will be ontological.' Further, 'process philosophy … is, or should be, economically, politically, and what amounts to the same thing, socially radical.' This rendering of Marx and Whitehead as cooperative partners in an ethically or politically charged account of the processual character of existence makes up some of the most informative and successful sections of the book; in particular, with regard to Marx's account of production and the associated dismantling of the social/natural distinction within process philosophy.

So it is that Marx's notion of production is described in terms of a Whiteheadian notion of process. Production is therefore not an occurrence within which either the individual, nature or society are fixed or substantial, self-identical entities. Instead, they are moments within a wider flux. 'Production is the generative ebb and flow from objectivity to subjectivity and back, the bridge between the past and future'. Hence, 'production is a *process*. It is processive production.' Whilst certain political economists might envisage both production and consumption (or distribution) as distinct, Marx insists they are not. Indeed, to state that they are is to misrecognize (or mystify) the interlinked status of their existence and thereby to impose capitalist conceptions as natural. This much is clear from many interpretations of Marx. But for Pomeroy the point is that Marx's argument relies upon and is best explained in terms of process, whereby supposedly distinct entities are shown to be, in reality (hence the importance of ontology), utterly interrelated and yet nonetheless attain some level of individuation. 'What Marx suggests … is that we recognize just how tangled this web is.'

It is this tangled web, the complexity of interrelations, that Whitehead's philosophy more fully explains. Pomeroy states that because both Marx and Whitehead are philosophers of internal relations (though holding that this is more explicit in the case of Whitehead), then the status of existence at any point or time is not to be considered as inert, as a passive objective material. Instead, existence comprises the already accomplished becomings of prior entities. In this sense it is no longer realistic to talk of the separations of humans and nature, or of the social from the physical, as all existence is social. 'For Marx, production is appropriation of the social–natural world.' Or, as Whitehead puts it in *Adventures of Idea* (1967), 'these societies presuppose the circumambient space of social physical activity.' Hence, the world is not given in the sense of being fixed, but it is still given as a *condition*. Furthermore, although material, the adoption of the concept of process is supposed to entail that this is not simply a determining condition, in the traditional sense, although it does have efficacy. In such passages Pomeroy successfully deploys Whitehead's work to sustain Marx's texts against charges of determinism or overly strict materialism, and to describe how both manage to overcome the society/nature dichotomy.

However, the consideration of how Marx and Whitehead might contribute to a renewed and more dynamic concept of materiality is not as developed as it might be. There is, for example, no discussion of multiplicity or difference, no investigation of the possibility of some kind of vitality being granted to matter itself. Rather, there is a sense throughout the book that Pomeroy's vision of Marx is a classical one, albeit in the best sense of the term. Throughout the discussions of time and labour, for example, in Chapter 6, the focus is mainly on 'value as socially necessary labor time'. And whilst some elements of Whitehead's conception of time are added to the mix, there is no reference to those such as Negri who have developed alternative analyses of the relationship between time and value which question whether time can any longer be given a value. Further, the sections on alienation, whilst faithful to Marx's text, tend to envisage it in terms of a form of creative consciousness as the essence of humanity. This is one of the areas where I feel that Pomeroy has slightly misappropriated Whitehead's work. Whilst recognizing that drawing out a full-blown theory of consciousness from *Process and Reality* is no small task, Pomeroy tends to conflate Whitehead's notions of conceptuality (and conceptual feelings) with human consciousness. Rather than seeing consciousness as an occasional resultant of process ('No thinker thinks twice … no subject experiences twice', Whitehead wrote in *Process and Reality*), Pomeroy views it as that which defines and therefore subtends all human existence: 'human consciousness, as anticipatory consciousness and as dialectical consciousness, is … the

union of thinking and being, the union of the ideal and the real – true humanism.' Pomeroy's reading of Marx and Whitehead is ultimately limited to using the latter to develop a form of phenomenological or existential Marxism wherein communism becomes 'uniting our essence with our existence'.

As such, there is no place for considerations of the role of multiplicity or difference within this work, no sustained consideration of changing forms of capital, resistance, community or class. Instead, there is a thorough and ongoing reliance on dialectics as elemental to both Marx and Whitehead. Perhaps this is not surprising, but the manner in which this aspect is developed might, again, be seen as a misappropriation of Whitehead's work (and maybe even of Marx's). To view, as Pomeroy does, a Whiteheadian actual entity as 'a unity in difference' and eternal objects as 'dialectical', concluding that process philosophy must hence always be dialectical, is a very specific reading. It disregards the possibility that Whitehead's discussion of the dual character of the universe (as cited by Pomeroy) is more of an argument against monism than evidence of his dialecticism. Some of the emphasis on dialectics arises from Pomeroy's clear and detailed treatment of Hegel's philosophical importance to Marx. 'Praxis' is viewed as the articulation of internal relations through self-constitution and, as such, 'process metaphysics serves as the logical continuation of the Hegelian project'. However, to insist that Whitehead's philosophy is obviously and resolutely dialectical, and that the only reason Whitehead did not explicitly adopt the term is because of his 'self-professed ignorance of Hegel's philosophy', is a rather bold claim upon which to establish the central theme of the book. Indeed, Whitehead's emphasis on becoming, concrescence and relativity could be seen as offering a radical rethinking of production as an entirely physical yet social process of construction in which neither consciousness nor dialectics has a central role.

To say that this work is a missed opportunity would be an overstatement. Pomeroy clearly has a sophisticated and in-depth knowledge of the work of both Marx and Whitehead and has developed a scholarly yet politically aware account of their interrelation. The result is a striking account and defence of Marx's philosophy, even if it does emphasize certain 'traditional' elements and interpretations. Given the specific reading of Whitehead offered therein, it is not clear how beneficial this book would be as an introduction to his work. Yet there is much to be gained in following its variable attempts to demonstrate the critical importance of moving 'from the microontology of Whitehead to the social ontology of Marx' – that is, of explaining the radical relevance of Whitehead's metaphysics to contemporary thought.

Michael Halewood

Perception or affect?

Mark B.N. Hanson, *New Philosophy for New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2004. xxviii + 333 pp., £17.53 hb., 0 262 08321 3.

In *New Philosophy for New Media*, Mark Hanson elaborates a complex 'triple narrative of image, body and affect' that attempts to provide a philosophical account of embodied experience in light of the development of digital technologies. In the process, he develops an ambitious thesis through a wide-ranging yet thematically consistent series of critical engagements with theories of information and new media. As interventions into key debates in this field these critical episodes offer many salutary insights that may serve as an antidote to some of the more impetuous responses to this most recent of technological revolutions. For example, he offers an interesting critique of the sense and desirability of the technicist dissolution of the category of the human in 'post-human' theories of information. Indeed, in opposition to this influential tendency, the book as a whole presents a sustained argument *for* the centrality of a certain problematic yet persistent conception of the human in the forms taken by such technology. This is all the more interesting given that the trajectory pursued remains broadly sympathetic to the forms of radicalism that much theorization of the digital conventionally takes.

The book is provided with a foreword written by Tim Lenoir that sketches its relation to recent discussions of media, locates it within historical debates in information theory and summarizes the argument in a way that will undoubtedly prove useful, given its complexity and the multi-disciplinary readership it is evidently aimed at. Following Hanson's own introduction, *New Philosophy for New Media* is divided into three main sections: 'From Image to Body', 'The Affect-Body' and 'Time, Space and Body'. In broad terms, these explore a strategic correlation between 'the aesthetics of new media' and 'a strong theory of embodiment', oriented by a set of historical-theoretical claims regarding the 'co-evolution of aesthetics and technology'. The theory of embodiment here is derived from Bergson's account of human perception, updated, so to speak, by exemplary practices in the culture of new media. This historically hybrid notion of embodiment is set against Deleuze's influential 'transformative appropriation' of affect and image from Bergson and develops into a critique of Deleuze's disembodiment of affectivity in his writings on cinema.

The critical and narrative core of the argument revolves around the thesis that new media art pursues a 'Bergsonist vocation'. At its 'best' new media art serves to extend Bergson's account of 'brain–body' activity – with its privileging of intelligence over instinct – and to further his 'understanding of technology as a means of expanding the body's margin of indetermination'. Thus:

> Contemporary media artists appear to be doing nothing else than adapting this Bergsonist vocation to the concrete demands of the information age: by placing the embodied viewer-participant into a circuit with information, the installations and environments they create function as laboratories for the conversion of information into corporeally apprehensible images.

This interweaving narrative of body, image and affect attempts to divorce the perceptual body from the image, whilst positioning the body as the active terminus of the contingent form of the digital work. The analysis further distinguishes the specificity of the technical and the embodied through a critical articulation of information seen as determined by context and interpretation. This leads into a discussion of the form-giving function of the human considered as a machinic organism that 'dwells in meaning' and is further developed through a critique of the cinematic immobility of the Deleuzean notion of framing. In relation to this, Hanson elaborates a conception of the affective body as active 'enframer' of information, which is taken to enable an account of the radical dissolution of opticality (a major feature of previous and persisting theories of aesthetic experience). These arguments culminate in an assessment of the inhumanity of digital technology and its theoretical development in post-human theories of the digital, through which Hanson attempts to show that the digital image's indifference to perception does not lead to the 'apocalyptic erasure of human subjectivity' (as Lenoir puts it).

Throughout the argument, much consideration is given to the 'inhumanity' of digital technology. This stems from an ontological description of digitized information's algorithmic organization. In terms of its impact on human perception, the important thing is that this enables the treatment of each part of an 'information set' independently from the rest. This means that the spaces and times possible in the digital image are inimical to the discourse of the image in previous accounts of media, with their insistence on a more or less strict analogical relation between image, apparatus and human perception. Such factors are

taken to imply that the experience of digital images operates on an affective level – that of bodily processes beneath the level of organization of perception – and that these are homologous with the technical processes of information systems.

The main argument culminates at the end of section two of the book, with an analysis of virtual reality environments that is intended definitively to differentiate affectivity from perception. Here, the experience of 'nonextended mental apprehension' that Hanson models on artistic uses of virtual reality technology are taken to finally establish the radical immanence of the active spatio-temporalizing 'brain–body' operations of the subject that experiences them. The discussion of virtual reality environments ends the argument for an interiorizing dissolution of the categories of aesthetic experience. This is followed by an attempt to broaden such 'direct experience' into an account of digital technology experienced outside of the immersive environment. The artwork Hanson discusses here is extremely interesting (an installation of cast sculptures of human skulls, the forms of which are manipulated digitally to appear anamorphic yet which do not resolve into 'normal' image shapes from any point of view). However, at this point the extension of his account of the immanent experience of digital space seems to wear thin. It is, perhaps, significant that this occurs at the very moment in which it has to explain an experience of the digital in a recognisably empirical social space, a space in which the materiality of affective relations to information has to compete with other, more mundane, senses of materiality.

Regrettably, in many cases, Hanson's elaboration of the vocation of new media art sets the artwork in instrumental relation to the theoretical argument. Often the exemplary object – which is supposed to provide the suggestive model informing the discussion of the problematic materialization of digital form – is forced to serve as a 'perfect demonstration' of the thesis (as in the discussion of 'facialization' in Chapter 4). This may or may not be just clumsiness on the part of the writer, but it does make one wonder about the tight focus on technical definitions of the digital that shape the discussion of its materiality. What might this be leaving out of view? This is supposed to be an aesthetics that breaks down the concept of perception into distinct forms of affect, explicitly in order to provide a critically reflexive philosophical understanding of the kind of embodied experiences inaugurated by novel technological forms. Yet its treatment of examples terminate in comments such as, 'What viewer could fail to empathize with these machine-produced heads endlessly wondering if they really exist?' Is it naive to expect the sophistication of theoretical construction to inflect the analysis of its examples? Or is there a deeper problem here that is perhaps symptomatic of the relation to culture adopted by the discourse of immanence?

To be fair, Hanson does present some very interesting discussions of particular art practices. Perhaps the best is the lengthy exposition of Jeffrey Shaw's pioneering work, which describes his overlapping of new and traditional media formats in environments that confront 'image and interface conventions with one another'. Here, the 'Bergsonist vocation' rings true with regard to the materialization of criteria such as those of 'making technology a supplement of the body' and 'a means of expanding both the body's function as a centre of indetermination and its capacity to filter images'. But why doesn't this account of embodied relation to digital media find similar explanatory purchase on non-immersive experiences of the digital? Are the limits of Hanson's attempt to extend his theory of technical–affective embodiment to the world outside of the immersive digital environment proscribed by a constitutive blindness to other considerations of materiality?

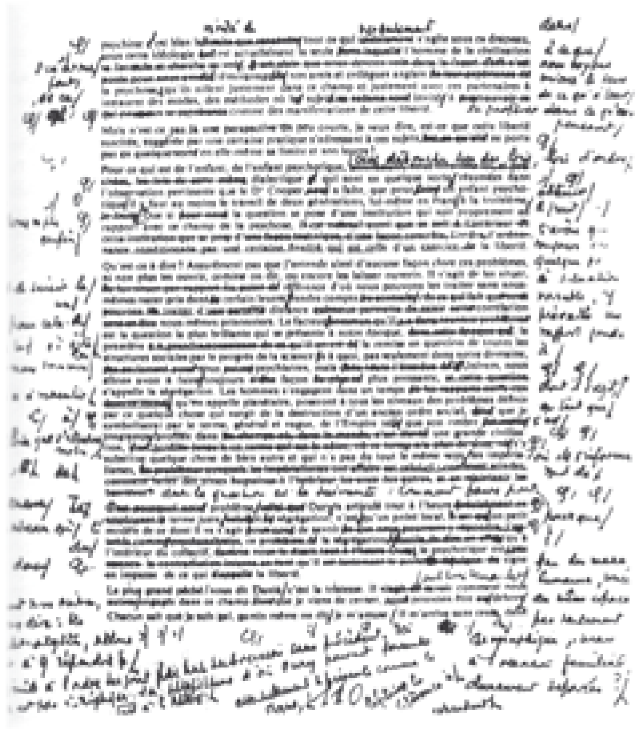
The last section of the book is taken up with a discussion of Douglas Gordon and Bill Viola, particularly their slowing down existing video, or shooting video very fast and then slowing it down. These are read through the work of the phenomenologically oriented neuroscientist Francisco Varela and his work on the duration of different levels of temporality. Hanson develops an interesting argument for the digital 'liberation of affectivity' in Viola's material thematization of imperceptible temporalities. My reservation with this analysis is perhaps also pertinent to the book as a whole. What seems distinctive about many of Bill Viola's artworks and the radicalization of affective experience they produce involves what one might call the cathedralization of the space and time of their experience. Affect here is frankly theological, a kind of classicism of religious sentimentality. My admiration for the impressive technical and formal manner in which he achieves such affectual resonance does not stop this worrying me. Search as I might, Hanson's model of affect doesn't seem to offer much purchase on such problems. Perhaps in respect of the judgements demanded by such artworks – though they evidently do transform the category of the image – older forms of the critical discourse of perception might come in handy after all.

Andrew Fisher

Brain food

Bruce Fink, *Lacan to the Letter: Reading Lacan Closely*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2004. xi + 192 pp., £ 52.50 hb., £17.50 pb., 0 8166 4320 2 hb., 0 8166 4321 0 pb.

Lacanian theory seems caught in a methodological dilemma about how to treat Lacan's writings. His prose in the *Écrits* is usually impenetrable just where you want clarity; if his seminars are clearer, the problem is that there are about twenty-five of them, and he is generally held to change his mind throughout them without ever signalling it. So is Lacan's work really a 'body of thought', as he claimed, or do his ideas radically preclude any kind of systematization? As a theoretically active Lacanian, do you attempt to extract the most coherent theory you can from this sprawling body of work, weighing up the various trajectories he takes and seeking out some criterion for deciding on the best ones? But if you fail to find a definitive Lacanian theory, at what point do you decide that there is in fact something instructive in the resistance of Lacan's writings to totalization? It is part of his message that the notion of totality is an imaginary one, and that 'there is no metalanguage', so in this way the only true consistency for Lacan would be inconsistency. For the moment, the middle ground remains inhabitable: you can attempt to start to tabulate the various paths he takes, not deciding on the best one, as nobody is yet in a position to do more than appreciate what is the most majestic body of psychoanalytic work in existence.



Bruce Fink's third book on Lacan claims to be a 'close reading' of Lacan's *Écrits*. It faces the above dilemma in the form of the question whether such a reading must also be a 'closed' reading. The book contains a number of illuminating textual analyses, but it also exhibits an unease in so far as Fink's decision to opt for the non-totalizing approach to Lacan sometimes rubs against the desire to get as close as possible to the text. It is as if whenever Fink feels himself getting 'close' to Lacan's true 'meaning', he needs to compensate by withdrawing, in such a way that one suspects that he thinks that to come too close to a true meaning inevitably risks destroying its allure forever. Fink opts to portray Lacan's texts as examples of the Lacanian notion of hysteria: Lacan 'himself does not view his own texts as constituting any kind of finished theory or system', His ultimate aim is to keep our desire for completion unsatisfied. Taking this line inevitably brings out a certain paradox in the very idea of 'Lacanian theory'.

It needs to be said at the outset that the subtitle is not to be taken too rigorously. The book appears to have been assembled from occasional papers on quite diverse topics, such as the Sokal and Bricmont affair, Lacan's critique of ego-psychology and Lacan's *Seminar XX*. If readers really do want a close reading of a text in the *Écrits*, they should read Philippe Van Haute's recent *Against Adaptation: Lacan's Subversion of the Subject* (Other Press, 2002), a stunning 300-page analysis of Lacan's 30-page essay 'Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious'.

Unease with Fink's book properly starts in the second chapter, which claims to be about Lacan's critique of ego-psychology, but ends up unexpectedly sabotaging Lacan's case by presenting it as inconsistent. There are similar acts of apparently unconscious sabotage throughout the work, where Fink seems to be undermining Lacan's theory in the very act of putting energy into clarifying him. At times, the justifications are so laid-back that it looks as if Fink is quietly mooting a future in evolutionary robotics. In one instance, he confesses that he is 'hard pressed to find an argument in [Lacan's work] to sustain any one particular claim' and that we should accept that 'Lacan leaves the task of supplying arguments to the reader'. As most theorists provide

arguments as well as claims, this admission would seem to place a heavier than usual burden on the kind of venture Fink is undertaking here. But Fink often appears reluctant to rise to this demand, with the result that Lacanianism is more often than not left rather exposed.

It is worth dwelling on the critique of ego-psychology, as it shows the effects of leaving the above-mentioned dilemma hanging. After some sound generalities about how it is counterproductive to treat a patient ego to ego, because the patient ends up hostage to the contingent and often unanalysed preconceptions of the analyst, Fink proceeds to discuss Lacan's alternative approach by appealing to his 'four different readings' of Ernst Kris's case of the man who craved fresh brains. This case concerns an academic who has the delusional belief that he is a plagiarist. After having finally overcome his resistance to publishing his work, he is browsing through the library one day when he discovers to his horror that a book written by one of his colleagues already contains the ideas he has just put into print. He concludes that he must have plagiarized the book, as he had read it some years before.

In his first interpretation Lacan seems to concur with Kris that the patient has an enduring shame about his father's inadequacy and an acute awareness that the latter was dwarfed by his own father. His belief that all his own ideas are plagiarized is thus a way of diminishing himself in order to prop up his father (to make him grander than his grandfather). The patient's response to Kris's interpretation is to disclose that whenever he has finished his appointment with his analyst, he goes off in search of a restaurant that sells his preferred dish – fresh brains. Lacan states that the patient's admission here is the kind of 'response elicited by an accurate interpretation'; it involves "a level of speech that is both paradoxical and full in its signification". The patient seems to announce his overcoming of his predilection for old brains.

In the second interpretation, Lacan claims that Kris's investigation into whether the patient really did plagiarize his colleague (he concludes that this was another delusion) lets the patient off the hook and actually leads him into a premature 'acting out', whereby seeking out fresh brains is nothing other than a symbolic hint that the symptom is about to be displaced again and that the analyst himself needs to take a different (less reality-based) approach. In the third interpretation it is Kris's egoistic attempt to inculcate his own bourgeois ideas about intellectual property into the patient's head that amounts to a dose of fresh brains (an injection of the analyst's ego-libido, as it were).

The fourth interpretation is the most overdetermined. The patient is now protecting himself against the effects of his grandfather's demands upon the father to be original and think for himself. The patient desires to justify the father's weakness retrospectively as a legitimate defence against the crushing pressure of the grandfather's demands. The patient adopts a kind of 'mental anorexia': 'Thinking nothing is the way for him to maintain a protected space for desire (just as eating nothing is for most other anorexics).' Lacan now suggests that the man really goes on a hunt for a meal of fresh brains because his analyst's interpretations were leading nowhere and bringing up no new fresh ideas. Fink then adds another reading on top of the four just outlined. 'Pretty as it is', he says, Lacan's diagnosis 'does not seem to me to be the best possible diagnosis for Kris's patient.' Fink points out that the patient does not seem short on ideas after all; 'he just did not recognize his own ideas as worthwhile until he heard them repeated or enunciated by someone else.' This leads Fink to diagnose Kris's cerebrophage as suffering rather from obsessional neurosis, because he can only make thinking attractive by believing that he is stealing his ideas from somebody, so that the whole process is somewhat taboo and only thence desirable. Fink doesn't say whether it is because the dish of fresh brains should now be understood as somewhat *outré* that the man seeks it out.

While Fink has performed a useful service in bringing together Lacan's different interpretations of the fresh brains man, he bizarrely seems to take this cacophony of interpretations as evidence of the therapeutic efficacy of the Lacanian 'symbolic dimension', as against the dual relationship involved in ego-psychology. But what has actually been produced is (at least) five different interpretations of the aetiology of delusional plagiarism and as many symbolic interpretations of eating fresh brains, with no indication how to choose the right interpretation in either case. As much as anything, it shows that this patient would have been treated entirely differently depending on which year he visited Lacan, which is surely to fall back into the traps of ego-psychology.

Looking around for some reasons why Fink believes Lacanianism is superior to ego-psychology, we find at the beginning of the same chapter the suggestion that the results of ego-psychology are 'sterile and unproductive' in that 'it led to very little in the way of a renewal of research and theorization, whereas Lacan's led to huge increase in both (like a good interpretation in the analytic setting, it generated a lot of new material)'. In fact, this criterion keeps coming up in the book. Fink

claims that 'an interpretation's soundness [is] found only in the new material it produces'. 'Sound' here clearly has a different function from 'correct', not least because new material might equally well be generated by haphazard and off-the-mark interpretations. One could object that this criterion of productiveness seems suspect because it potentially provides the perfect alibi for the avoidance of real problems. But still more troubling is the suggestion that productiveness is also serving as the main criterion for evaluating the power of Lacan's own theories. For Fink, tensions in Lacan's texts are not to be 'resolved, but explored and worked on', and indeed it seems that the more the texts incite divergent interpretation, the more valuable they are.

This view surely will not help justify the ideas of Lacanian theory. It can be argued, furthermore, that any affirmation that Lacanian theory is itself no meta-language must lead to unsustainable and paradoxical results. The basic Lacanian idea that gives rise to this view is that the position of enunciation in language can never coincide with the position expressed in the statement. This is taken to mean that any statement at all, from everyday speech to the statements of theory, is subject to the constraint that it cannot express a truth and simultaneously express the criterion that guides its being taken as true. Psychoanalysis lives off this discordance. But because all theoretical utterances are also subject to this aspect of enunciating speech, psychoanalytic theory itself must also be the object of psychoanalysis. Hence Fink suggests that it is consistent for Lacan in his seminars and texts to put himself 'in the position of an analysand', fashioning utterances which demand extreme interpretative effort, because such utterances are the object of psychoanalysis, and statements about the theory of psychoanalysis must be treated in the same way. Lacan's utterances should be treated as symptoms to be deciphered, not as theories. *But*, does he then provide any help with possible criteria for interpreting his symptoms? And what is 'psychoanalysis' if it cannot give some account of its own theoretical position? How do we know we are interested in it for the right reasons? Ultimately, doesn't this line on what Lacan is doing in his work lead inexorably to the conclusion that it is Lacan's texts that become the privileged object of analysis, and that the central task of psychoanalysis is the analysis of Jacques Lacan, the fascinating master whose utterances have no need of justification?

One cannot say that the way out of the aforementioned paradox is to say that it describes how every theory has a blind spot and hence an 'unconscious', as this in turn will introduce a concept whose validity is in question. Freud, of course, in like manner suggested that philosophers were after all paranoiacs, and Fink too doesn't spare us the thought that the assumption that 'theory has to produce a discrete, discernible object (a turd of sorts) for us to examine (admire or scorn)' is an 'obsessive standard'. Lacan, by rejecting finished theory or system, apparently takes a more hysterical stance. A strained smile is the only proper response to such suggestions.

It may be, though, that these results represent the terminus of all Lacanian theory, not just that which more or less explicitly absolves it of justifying itself. For if Lacan changed his mind so much throughout his writings, surely the one thing that he never stopped attempting to formulate is the central mystery of symbolic castration. One of the main problems in reading Lacanian theory concerns the multiplicity of formulations of what this involves. How exactly is the lack in the Other's desire supposed to be overcome? Is it that the subject almost vitalistically attempts to evade being completely identified in terms of a specific demand of the Other (an identification which would negate desire's original and abyssal freedom)? This seems to be Fink's reading. Or is it desire's abyssal freedom that is the problem in so far as it is the unknown desire of the Other, which must be fled by acceding to stable, signifying identity, despite the cost? What is being avoided and what accepted in each version seems to be the inverse of the other. But perhaps the deeper problem is that the radical negativity that Lacan tries to isolate in the notion of symbolic castration seems to bore a hole through any attempt to mediate it stably in theory. If we accept that, though, we end up drifting towards the view that the act of the paternal function in symbolic castration is nothing other than a 'It is thus because I say it is thus' – the lack of justification for symbolic castration being now made into a virtue. But once that is affirmed as the ground of the law, it quickly follows that anyone who claims to enunciate definitively a true theory of symbolic castration would at the same time be excepting himself from symbolic castration. In other words, if Lacanianism is true, then it is not true. Therefore Lacanianism must adopt the structure of a conspiracy if it is to survive. It can only sustain itself through a myth of a primal father who does indeed exclude himself from the law (Lacan himself), and through ever more ingenious strategies for keeping our desire for explanation unsatisfied. Lacanianism would thus have an interest in keeping a smoke-and-mirrors approach going.

Yet if Lacanianism is indeed structured like a conspiracy, who is all this Lacanian *theory* for? Why the apparent search for fresh brains?

Christian Kerslake