

A new quarrel of universals

Étienne Balibar, *Saeculum. Culture, religion, idéologie*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2012. 118 pp., €22.00, 978 2 71860 874 7.

The new millennium has not been kind to the partisans of a radical Enlightenment. The sundering of temporal and spiritual authority, the suspicion of piety, the virtues of profanation, not to mention atheism itself – all of these have been laid claim to by the organic intellectuals of present-day imperialism. Conversely, critical theorists attuned to the postcolonial condition have subjected the ideals of secularism to the corrosive effects of genealogy and deconstruction. The upshot is an unsettling and unwilling convergence around the thesis that secularism is a Western value – cause for celebration among the partisans of (Judeo-)Christendom, and for unsparing suspicion among those who think it is high time that Europe, Christianity and the West be provincialized.

Balibar's opposition to those who have instrumentalized the secular to prolong projects of class, race and gender domination is a matter of record. In *Saeculum*, which expands on a talk originally delivered at the American University of Beirut in 2009, he revisits the highly symptomatic *casus belli* in the quarrel over French *laïcité*, the 2004 ban on the veil (and other 'conspicuous signs' of religious affiliation). The ensuing quarrel cut through the very heart of 'progressive' opinion, in a manner unmatched in any another European country. Balibar passionately argues that a law that exclusively compels women, who have been represented as the victims of religious oppression, either to unveil or to be ejected from state education cannot have 'the least liberating effect, the least educational value'. The young Muslim women targeted by the law are not framed as citizen-subjects, or if they are it is only inasmuch as their full citizenship is conditional on being *subjected to* an imposed standard of freedom and equality.

It is all the more noteworthy, in light of Balibar's rejection of the ideological state apparatus of *laïcité*, that these remarks are made in a section principally devoted to a critique of Joan Wallach's Scott's *The Politics of the Veil*. Though recognizing the incidence of a racist, colonial legacy in the actions of the French state, Balibar seems uncharacteristically defensive about what he perceives as the reduction of

the contradictions of *laïcité* to a postcolonial frame, an unease which is carried over in his critical considerations concerning Talal Asad's genealogies of the secular. The two foci of his criticism, however, are suggestive. The first is that in depicting a kind of convergence between *laïcité* and the exposure of (female) bodies to the market and its spectacle (in a manner that echoes Badiou's bracing intervention in the debate), Scott's critique doesn't sufficiently distinguish between two 'abstract universalisms': that of equality before the law and that of equivalence in the commodity. The functional harmony between law and market is not a given. Second, Scott's diagnosis of the 2004 measures, as the sign of republican *laïcité's* denial of sexual difference as a political problem, and its juxtaposition to a Muslim 'psychology of recognition', comes under attack, with Balibar faulting Scott's 'extraordinary blindness to the way in which a patriarchal and monotheistic social order invests sexuality and sexual difference with a symbolic function which is stunningly effective in the reproduction of its own structures of power'. This passage, qualified by a long note acknowledging the profound equivocity in uses and meanings of 'the veil', segues into a reflection on the double bind confronting women whose bodies are the objects of strategies of power by competing (if not symmetrical) 'phallographic' groups – though the young women's own subjectivity or resistance does not receive substantial comment. Comparison with the relevant passages in Scott suggests that the polemic is somewhat overstretched, and that perhaps Balibar's critique of secularism's national form could have engaged more with Scott's suggestion that the 'preservation of a mythical notion of "France" in its many aspects was a driving force in the *affaires des foulards*'.

The critique of Scott encapsulates the guiding principles of this essay – above all, to *complicate* the debate over secularism. The heading under which Balibar presented his *soutenance*, the 'infinite contradiction', hovers over these pages too. The splitting of abstract universalism between state and capital, or the double-bind structuring the politics of the veil, is accompanied by several other dialectical figures:

the unstable co-implication of secularism and cosmopolitanism, the mutual incompleteness of religion and culture, the sacralization that haunts secularism, the changing borders between public and private which define 'the anthropology of *homo duplex*'. In all these instances, a dialectic without guarantees risks constantly devolving into aporia, antinomy or differend – all recurrent entries in Balibar's lexicon. But the theoretical intervention regarding the veil also signals the centrality of the question of *anthropological difference* to Balibar's efforts, as well as the claim, critical to this essay, that a specifically *philosophical* perspective can point beyond the disciplinary commonplaces and political deadlocks that plague the debate over secularism.

In *Saeculum*, philosophy becomes the very name for traversing frozen oppositions in a universalizing direction: a 'vanishing mediator' along the lines of Fredric Jameson's essay on Weber. No doubt, under various rubrics – from transnational citizenship to equaliberty – universalism has been Balibar's abiding preoccupation over the past two decades. Secularism (Balibar pointedly opts for this over *laïcité*, for reasons both political and philosophical) is a privileged domain in which to prolong this inquiry. Above all because, as he rightly notes in one of the essay's few unequivocal theses, what is at stake is not – as certain partisans of *laïcité* might have it – a conflict between the universalisms of the secular state and the particularism of religion, but a *clash of universalisms*, which by definition are potentially incompatible.

But how is the philosopher, figured here as on the side of an expansive democratic politics, not to end up enlisted to one side in this clash, be it in praise of the state or in apologia for religion? Here Balibar makes use of a kind of regulative ideal, which we could term a recursive or reflexive universalism. It is expressed in the watchwords 'democratize democracy' and 'secularize secularism' which jointly structure Balibar's proposals, and which could also be summarized as 'universalize universalism'. To start from contradiction and strive towards an inevitably incomplete and partial universalization is the recurrent gesture.

If, as Balibar contends, secularism demands an acknowledgement of the very cosmopolitanism (and globalization) that both drives and impedes its territorialization in the nation-state, just as a non-secular cosmopolitanism would be inconsistent, then these are limits internal to democracy – limits, we could add, which have to do not with the persistence of particularism but with contradictory vectors of

universalism, which cannot be unproblematically synthesized. Underlying this dialectic of universalisms is also an implicit rejoinder to critics of secularism like Talal Asad or Gil Anidjar, for whom it is inextricable from a Western and imperial history. While not denying the links between universalism and domination, Balibar seems to believe in a de-provincialization of the Enlightenment (perhaps even its decolonization), not as an achieved position but rather as a perpetual work of self-criticism.

The core of *Saeculum* is taken up by a confrontation with the dominant dyad in the debate on the secular: religion and culture. Balibar first surveys different variants of the contention that 'religion' is a *faux* universal of sorts – an imposition of *mondial-atinization* on incommensurable traditions (Derrida), a category whereby Western Christian thought has sought to subsume its others (Asad), or the obfuscation by belief of a *more* general category of belonging, *communion* (Debray). Yet he does not himself abandon or relativize the category. The reason seems to be twofold. First, the identification of religion (or indeed of secularism, as in Anidjar) with the Christian West would be an insupportable fixation of the notion's contradictory universality, bringing the paladins of a Christian Europe into unexpected agreement with its postcolonial detractors. The Christian West is not a univocal code, and it can be unsettled by thinking through the contested character of the 'regime[s] of translation through which collective subjects represent themselves to one another'. Second, to provincialize or historicize the category of 'religion' without remainder would entail that there is *another code* which can serve as the platform for deconstructing the disavowed power of the Christian Western code. The anthropological critique, of the kind offered by Asad, would suggest that this code is culture or tradition.

It is thus to the necessary incompleteness of the reduction of religion to culture and its obverse, the pre-eminence of religion over culture, that Balibar then turns, indexing these positions to Clifford Geertz and Max Weber, respectively. Erudition and insight are here present in a necessarily compressed and allusive form, and the many notes give an inkling of the vast scope of the underlying debates. Balibar's defamiliarizing gesture might seem familiar enough: rather than opting for either camp, we need to stress the *difference* between these categories, religion and culture, and it is only this difference that can allow us to grasp concrete conjunctures in the clashes and skirmishes over universalism. But the mutual excess

of these categories, their interference – which could devolve into the dialectical parlour game of, say, deconstructing Weber with Geertz and vice versa – does not get the last word.

Religion and culture may be grasped in their asymmetrical commonality. They have a common object, ‘man’, or rather anthropological difference, understood in terms of those differences that can be neither avoided nor fixed once and for all – sexual difference and the difference between human and animal in particular. Difference is here a kind of real for which culture and religion can provide only unstable answers, though their form may be peremptory (*this* is man, *that* is woman). In light of his dispute with Scott over the politics of the veil, it is perplexing that Balibar does not give much consideration here to race as a crucial vector of anthropological difference, and one that in both overt and surreptitious ways has impacted heavily upon the conflict over secularism – especially when racialized populations that fail to



ascibe to it are de facto ‘denaturalized’ from citizens to pathological denizens.

We should also note that Balibar’s turn to the anthropological is not a turn, as one may encounter in Agamben or Virno, to notions of potentiality; it is much less confidently ontological, and indicates instead that the human is always over- and under-determined. In this attempt at determining the undetermined, religion and culture are not symmetrical. Balibar proposes an ‘allegorical’ hypothesis: while culture’s relation to the problem of anthropological difference is to regulate, religion is to revolutionize. Jointly, they contribute to the ‘historical institution of the human’. But where the forms of life that comprise culture seem to require necessarily non-generalizable, if plastic, elements, religion is an operator of a kind of abstraction, which can, depending on the case, rigidify or radicalize the elements on culture, just as it can, in a manner critical to reflections on

contemporary cosmopolitanism, ‘travel’ with greater ease. But Balibar does more than unsettle each pole of the religion–culture dyad.

As *Saeculum*’s subtitle announces, there is a third term, and that term is *ideology*. That Balibar should again return, in a modified key, to this Althusserian motif, is hardly surprising. The theory of ideology, after all, is so enmeshed in both the critique of religion and religious criticism (just think of the theological disputations over iconoclasm and idolatry) that its relevance to an argument about secularism should be self-evident – if it weren’t for a faddish allergy to the term itself. But though echoes of Althusserian distinctions remain, Balibar does not approach the matter here as a historical materialist, strictly speaking. The turn to ideology is warranted by the incompleteness of the reduction of religion to culture, and vice versa, as well as by the imperative to gesture from within these conceptual disputes to a ‘real’ of the quarrel over secularism – a real which

has already been partially named as ‘anthropological difference’.

This thesis further grounds the idea that there is no such thing as a purely religious conflict, or for that matter a culture clash unsullied by other determinants. Balibar proposes a curious formula to signal a real excess over the domains of culture and religion, which is also a structural deficit at the very heart of the notion of ideology. That formula is *Culture + Religion +/- x = Ideology*. But what is

x? Not trespassing his philosophical remit by making unmediated claims about the social infrastructure of belief, Balibar lists production (for Marxists), power (for Foucauldians), domination (for Weberians), practice (for Bourdieuians), the real (for Lacanians). But can one afford to be so eclectic in naming this ‘internal exteriority’ within the field of ideology?

I think Balibar’s foregrounding of the problem of cosmopolitics, as that of a conflict of universalism in and against and beyond the nation-state, suggests otherwise. After all, it is difficult to gainsay that the crises and mutations of planetary capitalism (and of imperialism, a concept and reality that unfortunately is not addressed here) constitute a critical factor for the issues articulated in *Saeculum*. Balibar himself observes that the locus of the problem of ‘secularism’ is an interminable ‘transition’ otherwise known as ‘globalization’ in which *extensive universality*, relating to the communication of human beings

within one institutional space, is no longer isolated from *intensive universality*, 'relative to equality, that is to non-discrimination and non-hierarchization of individuals and the communities in which they live'. Beneath the problem of the cosmopolitan and the secular we can thus discern the conflict between the equivalential logics of commodification and the egalitarian impulses of the kind of democratic politics espoused by Balibar, as well as the productions of difference that both entail.

Surely, if both religion and culture are thought to constitute adaptive symbolic responses to the instability that marks anthropological difference, this is a situation that is only intensified by the increasingly 'dispossessive' character of contemporary capitalism? Here we could supplement Balibar's inquiry with attention to how conjunctures of *crisis* have historically provided, and continue to provide, occasions for the very clashes of incompatible universalisms *Saeculum* highlights. Modernity and millenarianism, as the likes of Hobsbawm and Worsley noted half a century ago, are far more closely entwined than one may initially surmise. Ideology, as Balibar himself theorized in the 1960s and 1970s, is also the domain of social reproduction, and it would be worth thinking beyond the symbolic efficacy of religion and culture as competing and overlapping codes for the handling of anthropological difference to the material reasons for the 'returns' of religious and cultural affiliations as the socializing dimensions of the state are globally eroded.

This matter of reproduction, along with that of the specificity of capitalist abstraction – which Balibar indicates at various points in his text, including in his critique of Scott – should be not only of sociological but of philosophical significance. To Balibar's unanswered question as to whether we should make room for a kind of commodity universality that is not civic-bourgeois universality, the answer has to be yes. The hypothesis that we should determine the variable *x* in Balibar's formula as capital (not *qua* production, but *qua* social totality) is only sustainable of course if we treat this 'reduction' as one that complicates rather than simplifies the problems at hand. One way it can do so is by allowing us to reflect on the dialectic between the global and the national, in other words the way in which a certain secularism has served as a vector of defensive reterritorialization of the state, and in Europe of a partially disavowed racial-civilizational discourse which tries to parry the factual erosion of popular sovereignty, displacing it onto 'the immigrant'.

To do justice to the task of complexity would also mean really 'universalizing' the problem of secularism itself. The perilous confessional arrangement of the state, Lebanon, in which Balibar first presented *Saeculum* might give pause to the idea that the categories of Western political philosophy can contain the practical meanings of this term. As Raz-Krakotzkin has recently elaborated in an incisive intellectual history of Zionism, the latter's articulation into 'secular' and 'religious' camps also problematizes European commonplaces about the entanglement of religion, culture, *ethnos* and state – a predicament he provocatively captures in what he sees as the credo of 'liberal' Zionism: 'God does not exist, but he gave us the land.' The intense conflicts over the politics of secularism in India would again complicate the picture, expatriating the problem beyond the intertwined histories of monotheism and the state.

As affirmed at the outset, Balibar's is an openly *philosophical* intervention, and the task of philosophy is depicted not just as the conceptual or dialectical complication of the demarcations that make up our political common sense, but as an agent of universalization. Unlike the universalization offered by state secularism or by religious observance, this cannot be a subsumptive universal, spiritually encompassing particulars or neutralizing them through its sovereign 'indifference'. It also cannot ally itself to the universality of the capitalist value-form. Prolonging the approach rehearsed throughout this essay – to excavate the differential semantics of concepts in order to tease out their contradictions, excesses and deficits, in order then to gesture towards a more expansive, if precarious, universality – Balibar tries to reposition philosophy, in the midst of cosmopolitical clashes of universalisms, as a kind of vanishing mediator or a-religious supplement which would allow for what he calls, in an overtly Spinozist call, *generalized heresy*. The reference to Spinoza also expresses the desire for a kind of transformative or emancipatory secularism that would transcend the absolutization of sovereignty that marks Hobbesian secularism as well as the regulative tolerance implied by Lockean models (though Balibar retains a qualified sympathy towards the latter liberal variant, from the French vantage of a republican Leviathan). This self-critical secularism is not only opposed to the coercive dimensions of the state; it becomes indistinguishable from a (modestly) prescriptive view of philosophy itself.

Considering the panorama of contemporary European philosophy it is undeniable that the secularization of secularism is an interminable project.

There is a dialectical irony in religious categories being repeatedly employed by philosophers to confront the public life of religion today, and in the melancholy acceptance among many philosophers that we are fated never truly to transcend religious notions and traditions. It might be tempting, then, to complicate Balibar's intervention further by asking whether philosophical *atheism* – a position absent from the proceedings – should really be reduced to a 'heresy', and whether this doesn't depend on a presupposition about the continuity of religious content through conceptual forms which relies on a profoundly contestable image of secularization.

Considering the ambient piety that marks contemporary philosophy, it may also be worth bending the stick in the direction of those anti-clerical Enlightenment materialisms which were intensely suspicious of the sincerity and coherence of claims to universalism. Perhaps resorting to a somewhat less sophisticated understanding of ideology, many of what philosophy might generously depict as clashes between universalisms may appear, from a more political or sociological vantage point, as exclusive particularist struggles which enlist universalizing vocabularies. Or as projects whose universal extension is in the final analysis devoid of the intensive universality that Balibar connects to emancipation. In this respect, Balibar's illuminating formula of ideology should also be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the endemic character of religious and state ideology alike as manipulation, domination and hypocrisy.

Balibar's understandable suspicion towards a philosophy that would declare itself able to speak from the standpoint of the universal – with a sovereign indifference analogous to that of the state – should also not divert us from reflecting on the way in which philosophical radicalism, from Spinoza to Marx and beyond, has meant a separation from or termination of the universalizing pretensions of religion and culture. While the debate around secularism often acknowledges the pressures of capital on belief, there is less recognition – including in *Saeculum* – of the enormous role that the defeats of socialist and anti-colonial 'cosmopolitics' had in making possible a clash of universalisms in which the parties seem primarily to be parliamentary capitalist states on the one hand and religious movements on the other. Balibar's objections to the anthropological critique of secularism should in this respect be complemented by a recognition of the politically insupportable claim that secularism is per se an imperial imposition – something that would traduce the history of communist

and national liberation movements from Palestine to India.

Balibar's call for a critical refoundation of secularism is certainly worthy of philosophical and political consideration; whether its political counterpart can really be something that takes the name of 'transnational citizenship' is perhaps more disputable. Even more than secularism, citizenship is still conceptually bound to a certain transcendence of the state, the very body whose capacity to contain the problem of religion and culture – that is, the problems of *ideology* – Balibar is calling into question. Any emancipatory practice that breaks through the arrested dialectic of religion and culture, and the state's claim to serve as their impartial regulator, might need to leave these names, if not the problems that they crystallize, behind. Politics too will require heresies.

Alberto Toscano

Do the monster mash

David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*, Historical Materialism and Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2012. 296 pp., £20.00 pb., 978 1 60846 233 9.

It is no longer necessary to begin, as it might have been ten years ago, by pointing out that we live in Gothic times, and going on to detail the Gothic's many and various manifestations in contemporary culture. Even the bluntest of critical responses have moved beyond 'mankind's deepest fears' – though often not much beyond them – to recognition of more than an idea of unchanging human nature. Part of the problem lies in the sprawling category that Gothic has become, perhaps always was, in its blurry designation of architectural form, novelistic subject matter, visual effect, subcultural style, musical genre and metaphorical trope. Because of the jumbling together of different phenomena, Gothic is everywhere and nowhere. Indeed, this is partly the point of David McNally's book: that, as he says, 'the essential features of capitalism, as Marx regularly reminded us, are not immediately visible ... we are left to observe things and persons ... while the elusive power that grows and multiplies through their deployment remains unseen, uncomprehended.'

Monsters of the Market is part of the now fairly substantial Gothic Marxism that has grown in the two decades since Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illuminations*,

and in it McNally identifies contemporary manifestations of monstrosity in the familiar figures of Frankenstein's creature, the vampire and the zombie; arguing that these are all forms of the 'body panics' that constitute the 'cultural phenomena endemic to capitalism, part of the phenomenology of bourgeois life'. He thus recommends a 'dialectical optics', indebted to Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss, as the means by which to effect a new alliance of critical theory with the fantastic in order to be able to read images of occult capitalism and to understand the monster 'as a necessarily coded form of subversive knowledge whose decoding promises radical insights and transformative energies'.

There is, however, a flattening effect in this assertion of the uniformly subversive energy available in the figure of the monster akin to McNally's generalized criticism of what he calls the 'giddy embrace of monstrosity' by 'postmodern theory'. He suggests, I think rightly, that there has been a tendency (though 'postmodern' is a typically vague term as it is used here) to mere valorization of monsters as heroically non-conforming markers of marginality. As he notes, the 'social and historical specificity of distinct forms of experience effectively vanishes in the reduction of all social relations to general categories of us and them'. Weak theory the latter may be, and certainly is in some forms – especially guilty in this respect being the post-Derridean discourses of 'hauntology', where spectrality becomes (as it is not in *Specters of Marx* itself) a monochromatic formalism in which the 'same conceptual schema is slapped over all phenomena' – but a better question would be why criticism should have become gripped by the very same metaphors and conventions as the material it attempts to comprehend. For this is not simply a kind of false consciousness as McNally would contend, nor a restaging of a left-liberal accommodation of otherness, but something more complex. If we have to interrogate critical strategies as themselves subject to conditions of social and historical specificity, then the question is: why gothic and why now?

Just as he insists on strict delimitation of the only possible truly critical theory as a Marxist dialectical optics, McNally also dismisses the 'ceremonial fiends of the culture industry' as though these are not proper or interesting objects of analysis. For McNally, these are in some way not real monsters, which is really to ignore the fact the Gothic is, and always has been, part of the culture industry. *Frankenstein*, that text beloved of critical radicals and Hollywood alike, was not a samizdat manuscript produced at the

social margins, but a best-seller written by a woman of the leisured class (while on holiday with, among others, an aristocrat and his personal physician). The vampire that Marx knew was not *Dracula* (which was not published until 1897) but the figure from penny pot-boilers like *Varney the Vampire* and its theatrical adaptations. One of the weaknesses of McNally's book is, then, its selectivity and a tendency to romanticize what is imagined to be folkloric or authentically part of the culture of the people. The assertion that Shelley's novel draws upon images of monstrosity that were the stock-in-trade of the English working class has little sensible foundation – there is very little that is 'folkloric' in Frankenstein's monster, some more but still not much in the vampire, and something quite different in the zombie. Moreover,



these are three very different figures, and while McNally does to some extent treat them differently, he falls into many of the usual Gothic traps, principally the bundling up of all weird things as though they are in the same category, but also the uncertain movement between cause and effect – do monstrous forces produce monsters, or do monsters produce monstrosity? Is the monster the revolutionary force, or that which makes it?

The first section of the book, which culminates in a reading of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is a good assembly of a number of examples of anatomizing:

readings of Rembrandt and Hogarth, discussion of the history of enclosure, dissection and the 1831 Anatomy Act, as manifestations of the bourgeois appropriation of the proletarian body, both individual and spatial in the cartographic separation of land from the worker and labour from the worker. It also retells the resistance to that appropriation on the part of the working classes: gallows riots to recover the bodies of executed criminals, Lud-dites, the Gordon Riots. There is a sleight of hand at work, however, in the substitution or sliding together of ideas of dismemberment and abstraction. The appropriation of the body by power is, of course, not new; nor are the various forms of the demonstration of that power, either in life or in death. McNally's claim to hold together all his examples has to rest on a new form of expression of such power, one peculiar to the construction of the modern capitalist state. That claim is one of equivalence between dismemberment and abstraction in which the worker's labour is experienced as a separable part of the body, alienable in a manner that is a distinct product of the emergence of capitalism. Of the 'dismemberments' performed by power there is no question, and capital does repetitively select certain metonyms ('hands' for example). But is abstraction itself metonymic? Alienation from species-being could perhaps be seen as akin to a kind of dismembering of the 'full' body, as the early Marx articulates it, but this is not quite the same as abstract labour in Marx's later terms. It is also not mysterious: this is not one of the occult forces of capital; it is instead rather straightforward. No mysterious powers are at work here: they are the simple operations of power on the body politic.

In the case of *Frankenstein*, this is not a text, in fact, where much decipherment is needed; it is barely allegorical and it is not at all in the Gothic tradition of the late eighteenth century, concerned as that was with the Catholic past of dynastic, feudal Europe. *Frankenstein* is set in the present of the centre of the Protestant Reformation, science and the bourgeois family unit, and, as many have noted, the monster speaks for himself as he does not speak again for another 150 years. As such the speech of the monster is the articulation of the political ground of the novel – the positions are obvious, as are the conclusions. *Frankenstein* was immediately understood in political terms, as is evidenced by the swift appearance of the creature in political cartoons of the period as a figure emblematic of the unintended consequences of the creation of a powerful force (such as a working class). Shelley's text is not drawing on authentic popular

culture, but is a direct contribution to an older and longer deployment of notions of monstrosity as old as Aristotle, but of particular contemporary form in the Burke/Paine contestation of metaphors applied to the French Revolution. Given that the Gothic politics of *Frankenstein* were noticed at the time of its publication, a much more interesting question would be why so much recent criticism from the resurgence of interest in Gothic since the late 1980s chooses to ignore the political content of the novel almost completely. In this McNally is right that the tendency to read monstrosity as 'otherness' defuses the explicitly political charge of the text, but it requires a wilful reading against the grain to ignore that charge.

McNally's reading of Marx himself is in the tradition of more or less 'literary' readings, although he chooses to dismiss this, saying that legions of commentators have failed to appreciate that Marx was seeking 'a new language, literary as well as theoretical, a radical poetics through which to read capitalism'. He describes *Capital* as an 'ethnography of working-class experience, illuminated by extended historical discussions, literary references, copious empirical documentation, and explicitly dramatic constructions'. Identifying the stylistic shifts and changes in register as crucial to Marx's intention to defamiliarize, he suggests that one of the characteristic shifts is from 'complex theoretical mappings of the commodity to metaphorically charged descriptions of the crippling effects of capitalist production on workers' bodies'. In this he comes to the problem of reading Marx in literary terms – that is, in metaphorical terms. This is also manifest in the opening sentence of the chapter: 'Capitalism is both monstrous and magical.' Indeed it is, but monstrosity is not magic. Monstrosity is, however contested, dismally literal. It is the description of the body horrors of capitalist production that are, in the end, as visible as the etymology of the word 'monster' suggests. Magic is more difficult to show, and is precisely that which is at stake in representation. The representation of the body of the worker either made monstrous or subject to monstrous treatment is not, and cannot be, the same as representing capital itself. Monsters are easy to represent; magic is not.

Taking the famous example of the dancing table from the first chapter of *Capital*, McNally is caught by this problem. He begins by attempting to read the magic of the commodity and produces a decent summary of approaches to its immateriality, but then makes a switch via the figure of the vampire to what he calls a 'corporeal turn' to be found in part 3 of

Capital, and thus returns to dismemberment and body-horror – to monsters. There is a long and interesting excursion through the history of Enron and the derivatives market but the analysis still remains unresolved between monsters and magic. The image of the vampire to which he turns is symptomatic of the problem, as the vampire is in many ways a rather poor figure for the purpose, as it pushes in the direction of the individualized, heroic figure of the capitalist/monster, rather than the invisible force of capital/magic.

In *Capital* the section on the commodity is notable precisely for the *absence* of images of violence or monstrosity. Its images move between the deliberately prosaic (coats, linen, and so on) and crystals, diamonds, gold, the ‘dazzling’ form of money, the ‘dazzling’ commodities and the mysterious hieroglyph. The only violence suggested is in relation to the owner of the commodity; he can ‘use force’ if the commodity ‘resists’ possession. McNally’s critique of supposed ‘postmodern thinkers’ rests on the accusation that they perpetuate the occult economy by collaborating in the vanishing of the labouring body that capitalism performs (now *that’s* magic), ‘forfeiting a hermeneutics of suspicion in the face of the posterous self-representations of late capitalism’. His analysis of Enron and Lehman Brothers points out the predatory activities of Enron in the global South. Yet the problem is that this is now too geographically distant for the discourse of monstrosity to work. It would seem that the monster is an adequate critical figure for industrial capitalism but that the very fact of the recent welcome of the monster into the mainstream of popular culture indicates not just a liberal embrace of otherness but a real defusing of the critical charge of horror in the changed markets of advanced capitalism. As McNally notes, ‘most of us no longer find global capitalist processes bizarre.’ The shift from production to consumption in the North renders the magical dimension dominant, and this requires a more developed critical reading that carries the same power to make visible.

The specificity of the monster is also problematic in McNally’s third section, ‘African Vampires in the Age of Globalization’. There is a complicated tangle of different strands in this section, knotted around the figure of the zombie. The zombie is unlike Frankenstein’s monster or the vampire in being a non-European figure. It has its origins in the peculiar conditions of the West Indies, Haiti in particular and that island’s history as a republic ruled by revolutionary slaves and the geopolitical dimensions of relations

with the United States and the Dominican Republic in the twentieth century. McNally acknowledges the mixed bag of multivalent imaginings (race, gender, class, kinship, slavery, colonialism, war, marketized social relations, structural adjustment programmes, corrupt post-colonial elites and the AIDS pandemic) into ‘coherent local discourses’. He also acknowledges the local determinations that elude any ethnographer, but foregrounds what he sees as ‘recurring images of accumulation via corporeal dismemberment and possession’. His assertion is that we should not adopt the ‘cult of the local’ as ‘the global and local are always lived in dialectical unity’. Well, yes and no, and the weakness of this section is that in undervaluing the local, the discussion becomes confused in the heterogeneous mix of varied discourses from all over the African continent. McNally’s difficulty is that he cannot (unlike the zombie-master) make his figures work for him. Switching between vampire, zombie and witch, the claim that vampires and zombies are doubles, the ‘linked poles of a split society’, simply does not hold up because the zombie figuration in Africa or the West Indies is not ‘our haunted self-image, warning us that we might already be lifeless, disempowered agents of alien powers’, precisely because the US/European zombie figure is radically different from the West Indian zombie with which the shared name apparently associates it. McNally buys too easily the orthodox notion that the transition from the controlled zombie worker of Haitian origin to the post-Romero flesh-eating version in the late 1960s is a simple switch of attention from production to consumption. Although there is some looping back as a result of the circuits of global entertainment, the African and US/European zombie are not the same. As such, not only is it necessary to reinstitute the ‘cult of the local’, it is crucial if there is to be any explosive charge in the zombie figure in a context in which the post-Romero zombie is now seemingly ubiquitous. McNally sees the zombie as the sign of revolutionary potential, but what kind of political agent can the Western zombie be, unable to speak, no longer human and irrecoverable from those conditions? If there are monstrous or magical figures with the insurgent capacity for revelry and revolt in Africa (or anywhere else), then they cannot be the resurrected bodies of a European cultural imaginary. As Marx wrote: ‘Let the dead bury their dead and mourn them. On the other hand, it is enviable to be the first to enter the new life alive; that is to be our lot.’

Alexandra Warwick

Becoming-unhinged

Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2013. 368 pp., £56.00 hb., £18.50 pb., 978 0 8166 7958 4 hb., 978 0 8166 7959 1 pb.

'Solitary confinement can alter the ontological make-up of a stone'. So wrote Jack Henry Abbott in his prison memoir *In the Belly of the Beast* (1991). The question of how this kind of 'ontological derangement' can occur drives Guenther's forceful and articulate book. What kind of creatures are we, such that we can become 'unhinged' through being forcibly separated from others? Guenther uses the phrase 'becoming unhinged' here quite literally, as a 'precise phenomenological description of what happens when the articulated joints of our embodied, interrelational subjectivity are broken apart'. Essentially, there are two key arguments in the book, which are mutually determining: on the one hand, phenomenological accounts of interrelationality help us understand the effects of solitary confinement (and why it is so barbaric); and, on the other hand, the effects of solitary confinement support phenomenological accounts of inter-relationality as a condition of our being.

Guenther's focus is on US prisons. Although the nine chapters are organized to enable interdisciplinary interweaving, the book follows two key trajectories: the first sociohistorical, the second phenomenological. The socio-historical trajectory presents three 'waves' of solitary confinement in the USA, beginning with the 'first wave' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, following the penal customs of public humiliation, torture and execution that prevailed during English colonial rule. In this first wave, moral and religious reformers imagined and designed the penitentiary system as a humanitarian 'site of redemption'. Solitary confinement was introduced as a healing practice, where the (white) convict would be alone with their conscience and 'reflect on the wickedness of their own souls', emerging from the experience 'reborn' as an upstanding citizen. The first penitentiary to be established upon such humanitarian principles was the Walnut Street Jail, in Philadelphia in 1790, followed by Eastern State Penitentiary in 1829, which became the prototype of the Pennsylvania system, subjecting prisoners to night-and-day solitary confinement. The black experience during this era, however, was not of 'redemption' through solitary confinement, but rather of 'forced labour, bodily pain, public humiliation, and isolation to the point of social death'. Even after the

Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, slavery continued 'by the back door' through the criminalization of former slaves and the 'black codes' of the 1860s, the convict lease system (1865–1928), and prison farms. Indeed, Guenther points out, the continuation of brutal punishment and forced labour was made legally permissible by the very terms of abolition, as the Thirteenth Amendment states that such practices are allowed for those convicted of crimes. This has left open a 'loophole for the enslavement of convicted criminals' – in contemporary US federal prisons, and most state prisons, all able-bodied prisoners are required to work for the prison service or private corporations – as well as enabling the shift of racialized punishment from slavery to prisons, where today the number of black prisoners remains hugely disproportionate.

The 'second wave' of solitary confinement charted in the book took place in the 1960s and 1970s, and was led by behavioural scientists who applied the principles of behaviour modification developed in the wake of the Korean War to domestic prisoners. The aim here, Guenther argues, was not so much to redeem but to rehabilitate criminals, using 'brainwashing' techniques developed through CIA-funded research. This led to the rise of control units and behaviour modification programmes such as START (Special Treatment and Rehabilitation Training), where prisoners were placed in solitary confinement and submitted to a punishment/reward scheme that increased or decreased levels of comfort, freedom and human contact, according to 'good' or 'bad' behaviour. These programmes, Guenther claims, were tacitly and often overtly directed at African-American and other racialized groups, especially those engaged in political resistance movements such as the Black Panthers.

Today, the USA has less than 5 per cent of the world's population, but more than 25 per cent of its prisoners. More than 3 per cent of the adult population is in prison, on probation or on parole, and black men between the ages of 20 and 34 have a one in nine chance of being incarcerated. The exact figures of those in solitary confinement are difficult to pin down, but it is estimated that there are between 25,000 and 80,000. In the 'third wave' of solitary

confinement, Guenther claims, the aim is 'less to redeem or rehabilitate criminal subjects than to isolate and control prison populations in ways that best suit the needs of wardens, prison staff, legislators and other stakeholders in the political economy of crime and incarceration'. We are now living in the era of the 'supermax' or 'control prison', where prisoners are in solitary confinement from 22 to 23.5 hours a day, with the remaining time spent in an outdoor exercise yard surrounded by high walls that enable no outside view and a small glimpse of sky. Cells typically range from 6 ft × 8 ft, to 8 ft × 12 ft, and include bolted furniture (a bed, table, chair, toilet and sink), a slot in the door for food trays and cuffing or uncuffing hands, and a small window that lets in light but again no outside view. Fluorescent lights and surveillance cameras are never turned off.

Although the contexts, laws and logics behind solitary confinement in each of the three 'waves' have shifted – from redemption to rehabilitation to control – what remains similar throughout this history are prisoners' own testimonies of the effects of solitary confinement: anxiety, confusion, paranoia, depression, hallucinations, perceptual distortions, cognitive impairment, uncontrollable trembling and affective strain. Prisoners report seeing things that do not exist, and failing to see things that do. Their sense of their own bodies, Guenther claims, erodes to the point where they cannot be sure if they are being harmed or harming themselves. But 'how could I lose myself by being confined to myself?', she asks.

Guenther's enquiry begins with Husserl's phenomenology of intentional consciousness and intersubjectivity, establishing her basic thesis that our sense of concrete personhood, and of the objective reality of a shared world, depends fundamentally upon embodied relations to other embodied consciousnesses. The transcendental ego, for Husserl, is absolutely singular and unshareable; but the personal ego, with its distinct way of orienting itself towards objects and others, is constituted in relation to other embodied egos. In phenomenological terms, an object is never 'given' all at once, in all its dimensions, and our sense of the object's reality depends upon a network of others and a multiplicity of perspectives. Hence, 'without the concrete experience of other embodied egos oriented toward common objects in a shared world, my own experience of the boundaries of those perceptual objects starts to waver.' That is, in solitary confinement, the intersubjective basis for a prisoner's own concrete personhood, and their experience of the world as real and objective, is *structurally*

undermined by prolonged deprivation of meaningful, embodied experience of other people.

This thesis is given fuller elaboration in subsequent chapters, first in reference to Frantz Fanon, whose writings allow Guenther to address the lived experience of criminalized racial embodiment and thus to shift from classical to 'critical' phenomenology: a method which remains rooted in first-person accounts of experience but is also 'critical of classical phenomenology's claim that the first-person singular is absolutely prior to intersubjectivity and to the complex textures of social life'. For Fanon, the logic of colonization creates not merely a 'feeling of inferiorization', but has ontological implications. A black man in a colonial world, he writes, has 'no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man', as his being does not *matter*, beyond its profitability. Guenther emphasizes Fanon's description of this ontological interruption through a language of imprisonment and slavery, and argues that the 'ontological derangement' which occurs in solitary confinement cannot be abstracted from socio-political, racialized relations.

Guenther then turns to Merleau Ponty's account of 'living relationality' and behaviour, which serves as an interesting counterpoint to the behaviourist psychology of the 1960s and 1970s that underpinned the 'second wave' of solitary confinement. By speaking of 'living beings', Merleau Ponty helps show that the relational argument does not entail a claim about human 'specialness', as his account of behaviour pertains to animals *including* humans, and not humans *rather than* animals. An animal need not be capable of self-reflection in order to have a 'perspective' and comport or 'offer itself' to certain situations in distinctive, meaningful ways. Moreover, for our sense of concrete personhood and objective reality, we depend upon intercorporeal relations not only with other humans but also with other animals. A dog walks around the table and confirms the table exists; 'the twitching of a dog's ears tells me that a car is coming before I actually hear it'.

This inter-animal phenomenology serves as the basis for a 'posthumanist' critique of solitary confinement: an alternative to the humanist approach which operates through the language of prisoners' 'human rights'. Guenther acknowledges that there may seem to be a strategic value to the humanist approach, but argues that, in fact, humanist values and rights do not necessarily support prisoners' well-being. In the first instance, the hierarchical opposition of humans to animals presupposed by humanism underplays the vital interests that prisoners share with nonhuman

animals held in prolonged and intensive confinement in factory farms, zoos and laboratories; and, indeed, it was humanist values which led to the development of solitary confinement in the nineteenth century as a 'redemptive' practice. Further, in practical terms, the human rights approach has often backfired, when minimum standards for protecting prisoners' basic needs and rights have been enshrined and then become a new *normal* standard for confinement, thus ensuring 'mere survival rather than relational well-being'. On Merleau-Ponty's account of animal ontology, all animals depend upon non-exploitative intercorporeality to ensure well-being (though different species have specific ways of being relational). Thus, Guenther suggests, arguments that solitary confinement are 'dehumanizing' are better understood in posthumanist terms as 'de-animalizing', in light of the relational ontology of animal life in which humans participate.

The last chapters of the book round off the phenomenological account by considering the spatiality and temporality of solitary confinement, with reference to Merleau-Ponty's account of 'spatial depth', to Heidegger and to Levinas's account of 'ontological solitude'. Finally, chapter 9 critiques the rhetoric of 'accountability' in supermax prisons, drawing on Levinas's argument that philosophy must perform a critical 'reduction' of rhetoric, tracing it back to the ethical responsibility which it covers over. The book's conclusion is a plea for recognition that solitary confinement affects not just the confined individual, but all who live in a society where certain people are 'criminalized and isolated in prisons for the sake of someone else's security and prosperity'. As such, it must be resisted not only from inside but also from outside the prison walls.

Guenther's phenomenological account of inter-relational being and its 'unhinging' through solitary confinement is meticulously executed. I particularly appreciated her framing of the effects of solitary confinement in terms of 'ontological harm' and 'ontological derangement' rather than in psychological terms of 'mental illness', as this approach emphasizes that these effects are a social, structural problem rather than a problem of the individual which needs to be 'treated' or 'managed'. I also appreciated her posthumanist arguments, which manage to move beyond the general vagueness of much contemporary posthumanist discourse and give precise formulations and reasons why 'inter-animality' or 'living relationality' rather than humanism might be a stronger platform from which to struggle against exploitative

and cruel practices such as solitary confinement. Another key strength is the lucidity of Guenther's writing and the extremely vivid presentation of the analysis. The interweaving of prisoners' testimonies and memoirs with the writings of her chosen philosophers means that the phenomenological sections never feel too removed from the socio-historical realities the book is bringing to attention. The philosophical theories and concepts enable an interpretation of the prisoners' accounts, but Guenther does not *overinterpret*, allowing the prisoners to speak for themselves, such that the philosophers never speak for them or 'translate' them.

One aspect of the phenomenological analysis that needs further examination, however, is Guenther's enlistment of Levinas's concept of 'originary solitude' in her penultimate chapter. The gradual move from Husserlian phenomenology to Levinas is helpful in introducing non-intentional and unconscious – as well as intentional and conscious – aspects of subjectivity, and complicating any presumed 'self-presence' with the idea of an 'interval' between 'me and myself'. The originary solitude of the subject, in Levinas's account, is already complicated by relationality, as it implies a *relation to oneself*. However, whilst Guenther poses the 'chicken and egg' question of primordially with regard to Husserl, she does not address it with regard to Levinas. That is, whilst she interrogates the Husserlian claim that solitary constitution comes 'first', she does not interrogate Levinas's idea that there is an originary 'relation to oneself', anterior to a meaningful relation to time and the world, which arises in response to 'an other who is truly other or outside oneself'. The Levinasian framework certainly offers a way of understanding the 'ontological derangement' of solitary confinement; that is, it condemns the confined subject to the unbearable solitude of being 'alone with oneself', deprived of a meaningful sense of selfhood and world through relations with others. But this is slightly different to Guenther's argument elsewhere in terms of constitutive interrelationality: that is, that our self-relation is acquired *through* relations with others; hence to deprive a person of contact with others is to undermine their very relation to themselves, implying that others are never truly 'other' after all. From the Levinasian perspective, the sense of one's selfhood or 'identity of the same' is maintained through relation to others; but the *self-relation* in 'originary solitude' is nevertheless prior, and we might question the extent to which this primordially of the self-relation is compatible with constitutive interrelationality.

Equally, the connection between the concepts of 'social death' and 'ontological derangement' could have been made more explicit. The idea that solitary confinement is a form of social or 'living death' clearly runs throughout the prisoners' testimonies, and Guenther links this effectively to the concepts of civil and social death in studies of slavery and colonialism, for example by Colin Dayan and Orlando Patterson. But it could perhaps have been theorized in more detail in the phenomenological sections of the book: is social death the same thing as the denial of interrelationality, or interanimality?

Finally, more on the political project would have been interesting, in terms of Guenther's perspective

as an activist and voluntary prison educator. She is careful to outline the various forms of resistance that prisoners engage in, and evokes Fanon and Angela Davis to stress the importance of solidarity and a 'collective disinvestment in both punishment and privilege'. But debates around prison reform and prison abolition are not engaged with in any detail. That said, the book's aim is not to outline a political goal or strategy but to articulate 'what it is like' to be forced into solitary confinement, and why it needs to be ended. In this, Guenther succeeds admirably.

Victoria Browne

Avatars of media theory

Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013. 224 pp., £47.50 hb., £16.00 pb., 978 0 22692 521 9 hb., 978 0 22692 522 6 pb.

Part of media theory's inheritance from the likes of Jean Baudrillard and Friedrich Kittler was the idea that media do not really mediate; nor does communication simply just communicate. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari advised us to stop focusing on communication – we already have plenty of that – and instead create hiccups of communication, intervals and vacuoles, which prevent the illusion of communication as smooth exchange, while digital culture scholarship has mapped the existence of noise, spam, viruses and other dark sides of the overloaded Internet sphere, which are, in advertising and popular writing, too often defined in opposition to the sweet promise of communication in its innocent form: as a human trait. Communication is after all perfect product. Despite years of media and communication studies, it is still pitched as an inherent part of human being but also as easily packaged into consumer products and platforms for extraction of surplus value from media events. And yet, throughout history, we have never really communicated just with humans. The relation to a transcendent God was itself one sort of media relation, conditioned, for instance, by the synchronizing regularity of clockwork, as Eric Kluitenberg has argued. In other words, alongside actual media technologies, imaginary media have consistently defined our relation with entities both real and fictitious.

For the New York-based writing trio Alex Galloway, Eugene Thacker and McKenzie Wark, communication is underpinned by its Other: excommunication.

Their book is a philosophical take on models and concepts of communication at the limits of their functioning. Media and communication become not merely a question of the thing itself – media – but of language, expression and communication that by necessity detours via excommunication. The heresy starts and ends communication. As one can guess, we are far from rational Habermasian waters here. *Excommunication* deals, instead, in dark media of weird, haunted things; of fury and desire – 'Hence for every communication there is a correlative excommunication. Every communication evokes a possible excommunication that would instantly annul it. Every communication harbors the dim awareness of an excommunication that is prior to it, that conditions it and makes it all the more natural.'

The book starts with a media materialist horizon, referring back to Kittler. The question of how to understand so-called new media demands an investigation of their histories; a historical genealogy is also an ontological reorientation. This entails a hacking of concepts, which shifts their focus from a surface or textual level to their mediatic conditions. Various orders of materiality condition what we call 'media' both as technology and as concept. The trio are right to point out that, in this sense, media and mediation need also to be tackled as '*conceptual objects* in their own right'. This does not lessen the material quality of the questions *Excommunication* asks, but primarily this is a book of concepts.

The three-paced engine of *Excommunication* consists of Galloway's chapter 'Love of the Middle', Thacker's 'Dark Media' and Wark's 'Furious Media: A Queer History of Heresy'. All of them are, in their styles and themes, recognizably the work of their respective authors. But, while we may recognize the choice of topics and some of the arguments from earlier publications by each, the three voices are rather well synchronized in this little book.

Galloway's 'Love of the Middle' continues his interest in three figures of mediation – Hermes, Iris and the Furies – each of whom appears as a different sort of archetype of communication. In Galloway's hands, these three provide different ways to characterize, 'model' and guide the way in which we understand mediation. The underlying issue for Galloway is to move further along a path from media to mediation, and from a study of devices to an exploration of figures of mediation in Western (Greek) intellectual history. Hermes is the most obvious starting point as the god of transmission and trickstery. However, whether we are dealing with German classical hermeneutics, Gadamer, or, for instance, Serres's interest in Hermes, is not always clearly explicated. Hermes' trickstery already differentiated the figure into multiple forms in the history of modern hermeneutics. One particular problem, Galloway suggests, is that of how to move beyond the messenger model originating in Hermes. This is an important question, especially in a context where hermeneutics is claimed to be in crisis – a crisis that relates to its models of interpretation and meaning as these are questioned by scientific and other accounts of materiality. It would have been interesting to read a little more about this aspect.

Galloway also writes about Iris as another avatar of media theory, who, as she is associated with the image, complements the textual associations of Hermes. The goddess of the rainbow is one of light and vision: '[s]he presides over communication as luminous immediacy, and from her we gain the concept of iridescent communication.' For Galloway, the avatars of media thinking are not, however, fixed in a specific medium but become ways to understand relations of media modality as well as their relation to truth; so, from criticism we move to illumination, as well as gradually paving the way for the appearance of Galloway's final avatar: the Furies. Indeed, throughout the text the three avatars become means by which to discuss proximity and distance; themes of truth and deception; a web of interdependencies that characterize different models of mediation. At the same time, these typologies are not simply

historical, even if the Furies might be pitched as most relevant to the contemporary culture of distributed media technologies and swarms. It is in this context that Galloway's analysis attempts a historical characterization of what is happening to media theory today:

Thus for media theory, the following normative claim begins to emerge: hermeneutic interpretation and immanent iridescence are, at the turn of the millennium, gradually withering away; ascending in their place is the infuriation of distributed systems. In other words, and in more concrete terms, we can expect a tendential fall in the efficiency of both images and texts, in both poems and problems, and a marked increase in the efficiency of an entirely different mode of mediation, the system, the machine, the network.

A claim to such novelty of course suggests a specific idea of time. Media change and its conceptual underpinnings are still tied, in Galloway's analysis, to a possibility of absolute novelty in the modern sense, instead of other alternative models of media-theoretical temporality outlined in recent years: the deep times of Siegfried Zielinski, the recursive temporalities suggested by Kittler, or the percolated times that enfold diversity in Michel Serres's thought.

This is not to say, however, that Zielinski's deep times are missing from this book as a whole, for his is, in fact, one of those names that features in Eugene Thacker's account of 'dark media'. Thacker's way of engaging with the 'communicational imperative' starts in horror and engages with the inspiration the horror genre provides when read as media theory. At the same time, the focus on the impossibility of mediation is engaged through its intertwining with philosophy – for instance François Laruelle as well as some interesting if brief notes on object-oriented ontology put into the wider context of questions concerning the object and *das Ding*. Thacker's section is to me the most accessible in the book and pitches its argument in clear terms: to investigate how media 'reveal inaccessibility in and of itself'. Media should be seen as onto-epistemological systems in which the impossibility of mediation is presented.

Thacker's text distinguishes the different modalities of what he terms 'haunted media' and 'weird media', drawing on the connotations of 'weird' as a genre itself (one immediately thinks of China Miéville). From 'phenomenal presence' and 'haunting' in media history (so well mapped by Jeffrey Sconce), one has now moved into the territory of the weird. While Thacker acknowledges object-oriented

ontology here (as he doesn't, for example, feminist new materialism), he is after an alternative genealogy of thought, partly tied to media history, that gives us ways to think about thing-thing relationships that remain indifferent to human relations. This becomes clearest when Thacker argues that media technologies are historically often surrounded by 'unorthodox uses', including, for example, the nineteenth-century deployment of media technologies as tools to see and objectively analyse ghosts and the otherworldly. Yet Thacker's formulation provokes a question concerning the ways in which a differentiation of unorthodox from 'mainstream' uses has often been itself the result of a retroactive mediation and policing of what has come to be deemed media technologies' 'proper' use. Some media *start* as unorthodox. This invites another question: does there exist an unorthodox history and use of media theory? This would mean taking media theory as weird in both a thematic and an ontological sense, as an odd list of things that twist our understanding of media itself – a theme familiar in cultural techniques research and German media studies since the 1980s, even if it is left unmentioned here. The odd list of unthought media bends the ontological premisses that inspire media philosophy.

Excommunication does bend some of our thoughts – in particular, from media towards mediation. Following past discourses of remediation (Bolter and Grusin) and premediation (Grusin), the question of mediation has again been placed on the contemporary theoretical agenda. I am thinking in this context, for instance, of an email by Sean Cubitt on the Institute for Distributed Creativity mailing list on 21 July 2009:

Axiomatically, there is mediation. It comes before such accidental and contingent binaries as subjects and objects, space and time. It even precedes communication. Mediation is a name for the fundamental connection between (and within) everything. Sometimes it communicates, sometimes it just opens channels, sometimes it is pure poetry, and exchange of energies. The biggest question for any historical theory of media is: how come, in a universe where mediation is the law, there is such concentration, delay, detouring, and hoarding of it?

How to differentiate (or, should we say, excommunicate?) mediation from media is a question that returns in Cubitt's summary in two ways: as an ontological question and as a political-economic one (concerning concentration, hoarding and privatization). As we know from Cubitt's recent work, the questions that result from this expanded focus

on mediation can also lead to critical investigations into the environmental contexts of media on a global scale, although in *Excommunication*, while the 'cosmological' is addressed, this latter aspect is not present.

In the third part of the book, McKenzie Wark offers a further, complementary perspective that picks up on Galloway's opening. The three avatars of media(tion) are carried over into a mix with theory which spans from Situationism to Laruelle. Wark engages with the philosophical underpinnings of 'combination', and, especially in relation to the Furies, maps the attempts of capitalism to turn such images of (media) thought and action into circuits of its own. Wark's language sparks an energetic intervention which, with Laruelle, echoes Deleuze: we already have enough of communication. 'Capitalism is a communicable disease in the form of disease of communication.' Communication becomes a tool of universalization as exchange value. Histories of money and media conjoin most clearly in capitalism. As for the Furies – the swarm – as Wark aptly notes, this figure of the supposedly alien intelligence of insect (media) origins easily becomes domesticated: 'This pet swarm that capital hallucinates to replace the spectacle can supposedly reconcile capital and its other, be it nature, God, or whatever: that which is good, networks; that which networks is good.' Of course, when juxtaposed with the utterly boring worlds of standardized communication that social media culture offers – both in practice and as images of communication taking place between 'friends', connecting 'families', offering emotional and affective bonds between people separated – one almost wishes that there would be a bit more fury in media. But Wark's point has relevance: communicative capitalism is a machine of capture of different modes and models of mediation.

In a way, both Wark's text and the book as a whole transpose characteristics of media into media theory, so as to make media theory haunted as well; to make it weird (in the ontological but also historical sense); to consider 'heresy' as related to 'tactical media theory'. Heresies are, after all, in Wark's own words, 'quick and dirty means of exposing the control of portals and artefacts of xenocommunication, of underscoring the protocols of unequal mediation, and of routing around by mobilizing the other pathways through the labyrinth, ways which are to be found by tapping into the flocking algorithms of the swarm'. Media theory has to remember to resist becoming too cosy and domesticated. Heretics of

media theory, unite! Unfortunately, a full mapping of heretics of media materialism or media theory is not offered, although the book provides a sketch of possible further work.

Another way to think of this three-part book is to go back to a passage by Galloway. What if media theory itself acts a bit like media? What if infuriated, contagious and antagonistic media feed into a theory where (as Galloway puts it, referring to Franco Moretti) 'the infuriated media become a vast database, and the scholar becomes a counter of entities, a diagrammer of data, or a visualizer of information'? The function of theory changes from critique to something else. *Excommunication* marks a move towards the informational sphere and algorithmic culture, but is also part of an energetics of thought; of Aphrodite and sexuality; of dark places and of the impossibility of trusting that which media mediates. Media map their own limits, and so does media theory, trying to overcome them.

Jussi Parikka

M.O.R.

Andrew Bowie, *Adorno and the Ends of Philosophy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013. 288 pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 74567 158 1 hb., 978 0 74567 159 8 pb.

In his new book Andrew Bowie reflects on the gulf separating so-called 'analytic' philosophy, on the one hand, from so-called 'continental' philosophy, on the other. Instead of repeating well-rehearsed discussions of the split's contrived genesis, however, Bowie asks: how can Adorno be seen to arbitrate between these positions? After all, their effects have been with us for some time. Immediately the title of the book comes into focus. The ambiguity of the term 'ends' is taken to express two things about the condition of 'contemporary philosophy': first, it has divergent and contradictory *aims* (to explain the world *in toto* through metaphysical or empiricist analysis); second, it has reached a dead *end* because its standpoints 'are ceasing to be living options'. For Bowie, this has significant implications. On the one hand, he quotes Adorno, arguing that 'contemporary philosophy' must abandon its dogmatic claim to grasp the nature of objective reality as a whole. Oscillating between contradictory positions must be redeemed as a defensible strategy. On the other hand, we must ask what this experience of contradiction can help us *do*? Clearly,

the obscure ruminations of out-of-touch ethicists, steeped in 'thought experiments', have no bearing on our everyday lives. (On this point, in particular, Bowie's approach owes much to the pragmatism of his intellectual progenitor Richard Rorty.) Adorno, we are told, can be called upon in this context 'because of how he responds to the ways in which philosophy generates more and more contradictions, rather than producing new consensuses'.

The backdrop to Bowie's project is a series of recent developments in the analytic camp. Increasingly, authors like Robert Brandom, Akeel Bilgrami and John McDowell have critically reflected upon the scientism with which analytic philosophy is sometimes charged. They raise questions about, for instance, how their intellectual framework can account for the experience of modernity as the disenchantment of the natural world. How can philosophy adequately articulate our impoverished relation to nature when it is reduced to mere facts and figures? This sense of unease is taken by Bowie to echo concerns articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, with its famous dictum that myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to myth.

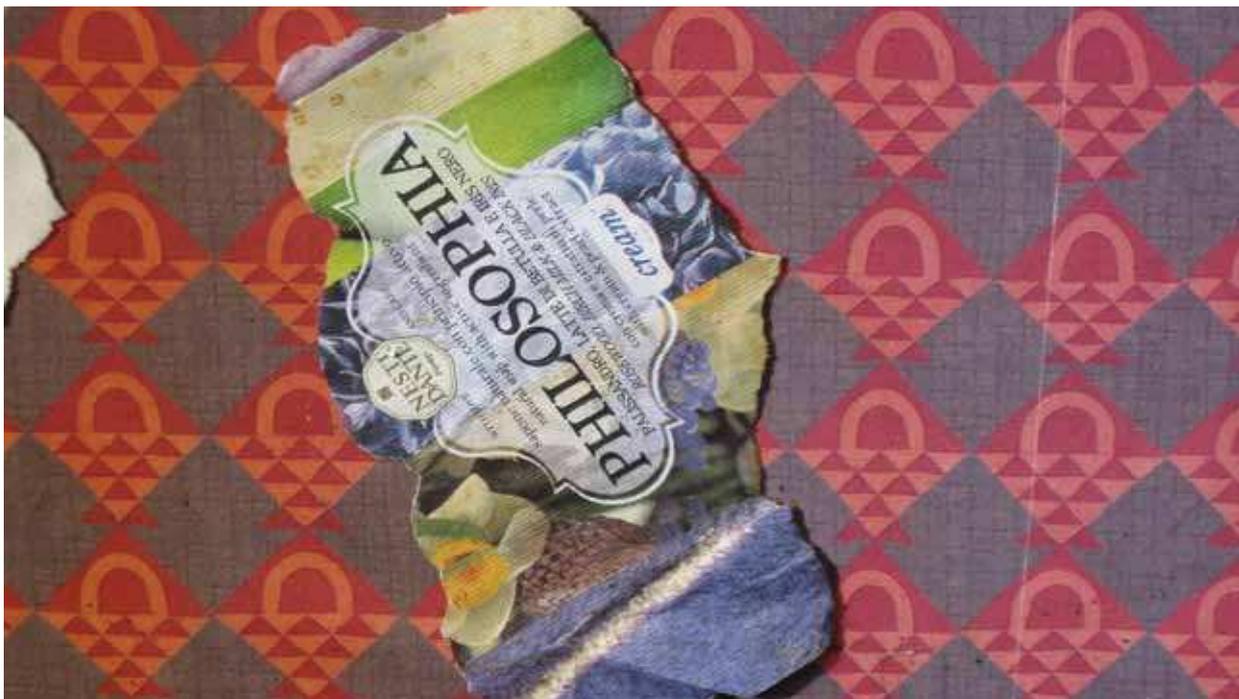
However, the claims of this work for a reevaluation of analytic philosophy's supposed dogmatism require considerable qualification. As Bowie reminds us, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not anti-science: Adorno does not 'doubt the validity of well-confirmed scientific theories'. Nor is he suggesting that philosophy should abandon its efforts to produce conceptual responses to scientific issues. On the contrary! Instead, what Adorno can help us do is mitigate: to redeem philosophy's internal contradictions for the benefit of a critically self-reflexive scientific practice. The fact that analytic philosophy has failed to produce any consensus on the make-up of objective reality gives cause for such self-reflection. After all, Bowie contends, the natural sciences generally succeed in this regard. Accordingly, Adorno is taken to be a worthwhile interlocutor for analytic philosophers because he argues that the contradictions in philosophy are coextensive with contradictions in culture and society. He is not concerned with the resolution of conflicts between opposing standpoints but, rather, with establishing how they can inform each other. 'This dialectical approach', writes Bowie, 'is the source both of some of Adorno's most important insights, and of what can for many be a frustrating sense that no defined position can emerge from it, because it seems constitutively to force one to sit on the fence'.

There is, however, another reason why mainstream philosophers have overwhelmingly ignored Adorno. For Bowie, this arises from the gratuitously obscure and esoteric style of his published works, which are full of wanton exaggerations and sweeping reductions. (The influence of Walter Benjamin is singled out as detrimental in this regard.) By contrast, Adorno is clear and lucid in his lectures (transcripts of which have been gradually published since the 1970s). It is here that one should therefore look if one wants to enter him into a productive dialogue with the representatives of prevalent Anglo-American philosophies.

The book's other intellectual port of call is the 'anti-metaphysical' interpretation of Hegel elaborated by Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin and others. (Bowie's enthusiasm for Pippin, in particular, is palpable.) 'If the "new Hegelian" approach is significant for the way that it reorients the agenda of philosophy away from the dead-ends of the analytical tradition' and towards an understanding of 'the sociality of reason', then, Bowie writes, 'Adorno's philosophy can be examined in terms of what it can contribute to a critical evaluation of that reorientation.' In other words, the question for Bowie is: what can Adorno contribute to the analytical Hegel revival? Without wishing to recount Bowie's lengthy cross-reading of Pippin's and Adorno's respective positions, it warrants emphasizing only their divergent accounts of 'the social progress of rationality'. In short: vis-à-vis Hegel, Pippin ultimately affirms a progressive view of history (reduced infant mortality, public health care,

advances in minority rights, etc.) whereas Adorno remains suspicious of it. For Bowie, however, this difference is not insurmountable. As he reminds us, one should take account of Adorno's and Pippin's respective historical contexts: 'the background for Adorno is the Nazi period and the Stalinist terror, whereas Pippin may be thinking more in terms of the successes of post-war democracy.' Accordingly, Bowie proposes a compromise: to moderate Adorno's fractured, catastrophic view of history with Pippin's wholesale affirmation of its purposefulness – a golden mean, so to speak.

From this vantage point, Bowie proceeds to read large swathes of Adorno's philosophy, spanning central themes including nature, freedom, metaphysics and aesthetics. His strategy is generally to outline a prevalent analytic understanding of a theme, demonstrate that its focus is too narrow, and counterpoise it with one of Adorno's views. Adorno's view is then revealed as impossibly exaggerated but containing a salvageable core. For example, mechanistic conceptions of nature are confronted with Adorno's concept of *Naturgeschichte*, with the proviso that this view is untenably bleak. The contradiction is, then, sublated to produce a more nuanced view of nature articulated with reference to Adorno's lectures. This pattern is repeated throughout each chapter. Bowie concludes the book with an account of Adorno's aesthetics, which he views as the model of his philosophy more generally. The lengthy discussion of jazz contained in this chapter does not need repeating. (In any case, this seems mostly personal.) What should be noted



is that, as a model of thought, Bowie takes Adorno's aesthetics to be his most valuable contribution to contemporary debates, a view that is likely to cause some controversy among his analytically inclined readers.

Bowie's book undoubtedly raises some timely questions about Adorno's usefulness for a critical reevaluation of analytic philosophy (and vice versa). The author's expansive knowledge of both German and Anglo-American philosophy is evident throughout, adding clout to his theses. One of the book's achievements, in this regard, is its incorporation of extensive passages from Adorno's unpublished lectures on epistemology, philosophy and aesthetics. However, the book provokes some objections. First, Bowie significantly underplays Adorno's relation to another *end* of philosophy, namely Marx's demand for its practical overcoming in the famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach. Although Bowie acknowledges that Adorno alludes to this passage in the opening lines of *Negative Dialectics*, which state that philosophy lives on because the moment for its actualization was missed, he does not pursue this line of inquiry. He might have argued, for instance, that Adorno's estimation leads him to adopt a standpoint resembling that of the young Marx. Since philosophy has not been actualized we are stuck with its continued critique. To be sure, Adorno's relation to Marx is not straightforward, but it is, nonetheless, of central importance. This is evident, not least, in its impact on the work of his students Alfred Schmidt, Hans-Jürgen Krahl and Helmut Reichelt, to name only a few. Certainly one could argue that all three go above and beyond Adorno in their readings of Marx, but, surely, writing him out of their erstwhile teacher's intellectual household misses a crucial political point. The fact that Bowie does not elaborate on this aspect of Adorno's thought, however, seems to me to be symptomatic. It is continuous with the broadly liberal tenor of his commentary, which echoes second- and third-generation Frankfurt thinkers, such as Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth and Albrecht Wellmer. Beyond Adorno's untenable exaggerations – his conflation of 'identity-thinking' with total 'reification', which alone is to blame for the catastrophes of history – lies a moderate pragmatism that can give a qualified view of the achievements of civilization, we are assured.

Second, Bowie wilfully misrepresents the central importance of Adorno's opaque, paratactic style. *The negative dialectic takes place at the level of presentation – the two cannot be separated*. To be sure, if we

follow Bowie in arguing that Adorno's account of 'reification' is hopelessly exaggerated, then there is no need to set up a modernist bulwark to protect his work from easy assimilation into the culture industry. But even if one agreed with such a view, Adorno's language cannot be reduced to a protective device. Accordingly it is unconvincing when Bowie professes to embrace Adorno's thinking-in-constellations, his micro-logical gaze, and so on. On his reading these traits remain fang-less. If his objections imply that Adorno is at his best when he produces clear, accessible criticisms of science, technology or politics which give rise to reasoned reflection and well-warranted reforms, then this begins to sound more like *The Theory of Communicative Action* and less like *Negative Dialectics*. The point is that, as a philosopher, Adorno does not sit on the fence as much as Bowie would have us believe. Indeed, Adorno was fond of quoting Schoenberg on this very point, arguing that the middle path is the only one that does not lead to Rome. This raises the question as to why Adorno, specifically, should be seen as the most appropriate negotiator between 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy. Surely Rorty or Habermas better fit the bill.

In sum: Bowie's book translates some of Adorno's admittedly difficult and not always up-to-date ideas into the vernacular of analytic philosophy. In doing so, the author attempts a kind of course correction. On the one hand, the salvageable core of Adorno's philosophy (extracted from the lectures, which avoid the supposed unnecessary opacity of his published works) is to form the basis of a critical reevaluation of analytic philosophy's reductive naturalism. On the other hand, the conceptual rigour and clarity of analytic philosophy is to be applied in articulating what is most valuable in Adorno, which – for Bowie – seems to be a moderate pragmatism. Together these pursuits aim to produce a philosophy that allows us to effectively address the ills of modernity – impending ecological disaster, economic crisis, and so on – without losing sight of its triumphs. As such, Bowie's book advances a philosophy of the middle ground, far removed from Adorno's own project. Of course, Bowie is not interested in giving an orthodox Adornian account of the present; but by underplaying Adorno's reliance on both Benjamin and Marx, on the one hand, and by overstating the tenuous link to Rorty and Pippin, on the other, he runs the danger of missing both his 'analytic' and his 'continental' audience at the expense of what is truly radical about Adorno's thought.

Sebastian Truskolaski

Paul Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire and Revolution*, SUNY Press, New York, 2012. 249 pp., £48.66 hb., £16.72 pb., 978 1 43843 991 4 hb., 978 1 43843 990 7 pb.

Addressing what has been called the ethical deficit in Marxism, Paul Blackledge's new book seeks to provide an ethical justification for revolutionary politics. The book presents an account of debates within moral and political philosophy, and offers a vision of how the human good that might be realized within a socialist society can be nurtured from within the womb of capitalism. It begins with a critique of dominant theories of morality and ethics. As exemplified by Kant, this consists of an attempt to ground a code of conduct in the unique faculty of human beings for rationality. With the waning influence of religion, it was human Reason, Kant claimed, which could provide a universal guide that applied to all human beings in all societies at all times. Blackledge argues, however, that Reason has produced different conceptions of what is right and wrong. Despite its intended purpose, Kant's categorical imperative cannot escape from the spectre of relativism (or 'emotivism', as Blackledge sometimes calls it) – the idea that what is right is what is right for me.

Yet, following Alistair McIntyre, Kant's principles were in fact, Blackledge asserts, a product of their time. For Kant, the essence of humanity is freedom, but this is in competition with our biologically programmed drives. Kant's philosophy assumes that human beings are isolated entities who come together with competing desires. Acting for the common good necessarily contradicts the individual's basic biological nature, and freedom consists of the ability to choose to act against this nature. For Blackledge and McIntyre, Kant's approach reflected in this way the emergent capitalist system of his time. Serfdom had been replaced by wage labour, and individuals were theoretically free to sell their labour or not. Competition and aspiration drove the system forward, encouraging the continual expansion of capital and the increasing wealth of society as a whole (however unevenly this was distributed). One of Hegel's most important contributions to philosophy was, then, to highlight the historically contingent nature of human thought, suggesting that the values of each epoch are determined by the requirements of its characteristic social arrangements; that what it means to be good is to live according to the principles of a particular community. Hegel thus shared with Aristotle, Blackledge

notes, a view of humanity as intrinsically social. Human beings want to live as part of a group, and human nature can only be developed in association with others. In this view biological nature and human agency are not juxtaposed, as they come to be in Kant. It is in our nature to desire and chose association and collaboration.

Blackledge proceeds to provide a detailed analysis of Marx's work to show that he can be viewed as having a similar conception of the nature of ethics. Like Hegel, Marx had a view that the historical progression of human society enables the development of human potential. Marx emphasized how this process is a consequence of the transformative capacity of human labour, so that by transforming the world human beings also change themselves. The bourgeois revolutions introduced the imperatives of freedom, equality and fraternity with which to challenge the old feudal order. However, these values necessarily remain limited and underdeveloped in a capitalist society. As such, the maximal development of human capacities is not possible because people are alienated from their potential – the working class through their exploitation and separation from the results of their labour, and the owning class through their participation in an alienating system. The full social nature of human beings can only be realized in a new form of society: communism. Although Marx was generally not prescriptive about the nature of this new society, it would, famously, be based on the 'needs' principle. Only when each was provided for according to need would each and every human being be able to flourish to their maximal potential. As Terry Eagleton has pointed out, this reveals the ultimate moral vision underpinning Marx's life and work. A good society is one that enables everyone to thrive, and not just one group at the expense of others. It is set against this maxim that Marx's analysis of capitalism is able to unite ethics and analysis, science and values, the 'is' and the 'ought'. Central to Marx's mature work is the claim that working-class action can nurture a different set of values, based on the virtues of solidarity and cooperation. Because it strives against the alienation inherent in capitalism, unlike other groups and classes, the working class is uniquely placed to realize the good of all. As the working class struggles

to free itself from exploitation, it creates conditions for a world in which all human beings are able to reach their full potential. This is the way that Marx escapes the stagnation implicit in the philosophy of Aristotle, but also illustrates how for Marx, as for Aristotle, ethics becomes politics. The question of how to live becomes the question of what sort of society we wish to inhabit, and how we can bring that society into being.

In following up this question, Blackledge goes on to provide illuminating sketches of the philosophies of Kautsky, Lukács and the Frankfurt School, as well as more recent writers including Rawls, Callinicos and Žižek. Reclaiming Marxism from a fatalistic turn towards scientism and positivism, both Lenin and Lukács, Blackledge argues, returned to Hegel's dialectic of subject and object; of how the material world is itself a product of human agency. Subsequently, however, a renewed interest in and emphasis on the free-acting individual in the late twentieth century led many Marxists to forge an accommodation with liberalism, in some cases to the extent that most traces of Marxism fell away altogether. This informative romp through the work of a range of Marxist thinkers converges again on McIntyre. In his early work, the latter pointed to the potential of working-class communities and working-class action to produce an ethics that united needs and desires – what we want with what we ought to do. From this perspective, *Marxism and Ethics* points to how a new set of values might germinate within capitalism before becoming truly realized in a future socialist society. I am not sure that it fully escapes the modern moral stalemate, however; nor whether it is really possible to do so.

Marx appears to have had at least an aspiration to a universalist morality. The good society in which all individuals can flourish equally, and in which the full social nature of human beings can be developed, is presented as a good for all, and not only for the working class whose action will bring it into being. Thus, despite Marx's recognition of the historically contingent nature of liberal-capitalist morality, the system is judged from the universalist standpoint of the ultimate end of human social development. It is not clear, therefore, that it escapes the criticisms that can be levelled at any attempt to construct a universal standard of the good. In particular, it hinges on a particular (and hugely contested) vision of human nature, as Blackledge is well aware. The key distinguishing feature of Marx's vision of the good is a profound concept of equality that goes

beyond the limited notion of bureaucratic or legal equality embodied in liberal democracy. Marx's communism is a society organized upon the needs principle, a society structured to achieve equality in the distribution of resources and opportunities. The objective justification for a society of this sort, the justification that transcends the working-class interests that will bring it into being, is the idea that only in a truly equal society can humanity as a whole flourish to its maximal potential and fulfil its collective 'telos'.

Within living memory political regimes such as Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa espoused the principle that mankind benefits from the flourishing of the few at the expense of the many. Blackledge's discussion of the limited nature of the liberal concept of freedom demonstrates that liberalism, too, as expressed in Berlin's distinction between positive and negative freedom, enshrines the unequal distribution of wealth and power by defending private property and circumscribing universal rights. An appeal to the universal benefits of a cooperative society seems to provide only a weak defence of the radical equality that is the goal of socialist action, one that can easily be challenged by darker visions of human nature, and alternative views of what constitutes a fruitful society. Using McIntyre and Aristotle to escape the criticisms of universalism does not, unfortunately, solve the problem either. For both these thinkers, what is right and good is to strive for a society that best nurtures some human capacities and values. But the society that is the goal of this striving is what defines these virtues. This begs the question of why (emergent) socialist values should be superior to capitalist ones, and how they can inspire and justify the struggle for a different society, if there is no universal court of appeal. Ultimately, therefore, this interpretation cannot escape the idea that history is the arbiter of morality, and the relativist and historicist consequence that right is with the victor.

At one point Blackledge argues that it is necessary for socialists to place a 'wager' on the working class; a wager that their struggles can transcend their specific situation and realize the general and universal good. Having absorbed the message that our morality is a constantly contested product of historical conditions, it is, however, difficult to see how this state of affairs can ever be fully achieved. Maybe socialist ethics are inevitably a wager; a wager that a better society is not only possible but worth fighting for.

Joanna Moncrieff

The meaning of pain

Paul Scheerbarth, *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel*, with illustrations by Alfred Kubin, translated and introduced by Christina Svendsen, Wakefield Press, Cambridge MA, 2012. 232 pp., £9.70 pb., 978 0 9841155 9 4.

For admirers of the work of Walter Benjamin, a translation of Paul Scheerbarth's *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel* is a major event. Benjamin continually lauded *Lesabéndio* throughout his life, most decisively in his famous vision of architectural politics, 'Experience and Poverty', of 1933. Benjamin's interest in Scheerbarth spans the whole of his career, from Gershom Scholem's gifting him the book at his wedding to an essay on Scheerbarth written near the end of his life. Most significantly, Benjamin intended to write an extensive essay on the book that was meant as a fulfilment of the claims set out in 'The Destructive Character' and was to be provocatively entitled 'The True Politician'. Since 2007 there has been a dramatic rise in the stature of Scheerbarth's writings, including the translation of four books and a range of essays and artistic projects related to his work. As Josiah McElheny, the artist whose work has revolved around Scheerbarth's example in recent years, recently put it, the 'most important aspect of Scheerbarth's thinking' is to see how his 'world of fantasy was in fact his attempt to discuss politics by other means'.

Scheerbarth's 1913 sci-fi novel – undoubtedly his most significant literary achievement – provides another in a series of wildly ambitious architecturally based explorations of utopia. The subject of the story is the construction of a gigantic tower by rubbery creatures called Pallasians, who live on the planet Pallas. The tower is meant to connect the Pallasians with the 'head-star' beyond an obscuring web-like cloud. A main dramatic current that runs throughout is the conflict between the artists (Labu, Manesi and Peka) who resist the building of the tower and the builders (Dex, Lesabéndio or Lesa, Nuse and Sofanti). As the story unfolds, the artists are slowly and literally absorbed – destroyed – by the builders: the artists merge with the architects in an act of physical and metaphorical submission to the architects' higher ambitions. The artists dream that after the construction of the tower 'other times will come' that will provide a 'solid new basis for art'. But the completion of the tower marks the end of art itself. Art pales before the architectural search to solve the 'last riddle of existence'.

Contemporary critics have championed Scheerbarth as a *post-human* visionary. Conceptually, we're meant

to measure with every phrase how different life is on Pallas than on Earth. Earthlings exist in a 'backward spiritual state' due to their resistance to the sun's infinite metamorphic capacities. The sun 'revitalizes everything around it' and it calls for a transparent architecture of glass to spread its transformative powers. 'All death', Biba (the wise philosopher) tells Lesa in his monologue on personhood, 'should be ascribed to this broad, omnipresent principle of transformation'. And transformation is what occurs when Lesa reaches beyond Pallas's atmosphere and connects with the head-system. He is 'completely altered' by the merger and 'everything ... looks utterly different' from the new perspective.

At the centre of Scheerbarth's utopian vision is an evolutionary scheme where lower forms are mentally and, more significantly, perceptually functioning on an inferior level. When a Pallasian visited Earth he was unable to make himself perceptible to Earthlings due to the bluntness of their perceptual capacities. Because they are 'stuck at such a low level of evolution' their mode of perception prevented them from seeing the more highly evolved Pallasians. The narrative follows Lesa's attempt to overcome his evolutionary position by connecting with the head-star. Lesa, the 'great leader' at the top of the Pallasian hierarchy, heals the Pallasians by marshalling them around the 'colossal labor' of the tower construction. The monstrosity of work required to raise the tower – a central theme of the narrative – prevents the workers from getting lost in their 'individual insights' and from destroying the utter unanimity of their task, which alone will evolve the species. It is the task that defines the work's meaning, not any 'artistic intentions'. As one of the builders reflects, 'we charged ourselves with a gigantic task before *genuinely* understanding why we're doing it.' This is the kind of construction Detlef Mertins describes as a 'kind of direct bodily production of labor, a potentially unmediated, collective physiological event in which dream-consciousness comes to realization'. In other words, there is nothing to understand, because it is the work itself – the back-breaking labour of working with steel and glass – that defines the work's significance, rather any meaning to be found in the work. Intentions, artistic or otherwise, are identified

with a lower level of evolution, one that revolves around books and writing. 'Sharing thoughts is accomplished ... through books and other types of written signs', both of which assume and reinforce an ideology of *distance*. Thoughts are not important for the 'major astral beings' because they presume at least two separate agents, whereas the 'formulation of new qualities' happens in the physical merger of formerly separate beings.

Lesá's gospel is one of unmitigated renunciation: 'one must subordinate oneself to something else over and over again.' His 'religion' is one of 'surrender', 'devoted submissiveness' through violent purgation towards 'something greater than ourselves'. Leaping from the tower, Lesá will merge with the healing force of the head-system. When he is finally absorbed into the head-star, what is revealed is how even the 'most disparate come together'; once we move beyond all physical limitations the separate asteroids 'unite' in a 'big comet-system'. The newly discovered unity also projects a new sense of difference. With a set of 'new eyeballs' Lesá discovers how asteroids could be unimaginably 'varied and diverse'. Like Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* – which Benjamin explicitly imagined as a Lesá-like creature – he is 'carried forward by a strong wind' and is only able to do 'what the wind wants'. And like the *Angelus Novus* Lesá performs a relentless destruction of distance: 'all he could feel was that he was noticing how everything distant wanted to come closer', thereby destroying every manifestation of 'aura', what Benjamin defined as a 'phenomenon of distance, however close it may be'. Lesá comes to know the sun's immense power of 'drawing closer' the formerly disparate, a power which neutralizes any lingering auratic forces tied to 'individual projects'. Individuality itself 'push[es] us back down and prevent[s] us from reaching the being that so continuously and relentlessly desires the approach of those who are drawn to it'. Lesá's primary ambition is to 'demystify' the auratic cloud structure 'by means of the tower' – something he continually stresses 'has nothing to do with art' – and which will eventually break through it to the head-system. Achieving violent union with the head-system, he 'no longer perceived or thought in the ways he had before the transformation'.

If the sun represents a 'spurting excess of life', then the forces that resist it are rest, sleep, torpor and habit. Before the construction of the tower the Pallasians are characterized as 'tired, sleepy and drooping'; 'want[ing] to die', they 'habitually sleep' through much of their lives (although far less than humans). The artists represent this deadening force

of routine and their aesthetic rests on a commitment to 'matter', to 'density and compactness', which weighs down the immaterial forces of light suffused through glass. Scheerbart affirms the '*perpetuum mobile* of technology ... and desire that foretells the posthuman adaptation', Branden Joseph writes; he provides a cosmic vision of the 'experiential poverty' of our contemporary condition. It is much harder to see what he provides – except buckets of pain – for those experiencing material poverty, rather than the experiential one.

Like most versions of the post-human, Scheerbart imagines that the process of going beyond will require immense suffering. We discover that the sun is far from 'kind-hearted'. It is an instrument of terror. 'Terrible things always leads us forward', the sun tells Lesá; 'Terrible things transform us'. Revitalization means the death of the physical body and its mode of perception, while 'pain and suffering should actually be seen as the biggest generators of happiness'. The last four chapters offer an unrelenting vision of 'pain and torment' as the path to evolution (this is what Benjamin means when he says Scheerbart 'succeeded in shedding the dross of sentimentality'). Chapter 22 ends with an underscored phrase uttered by the sun that articulates the basic theme: 'All of you, don't fear pain – and don't fear death either.' On the other side of the human 'there is no concern for the smallest objects'; the sun 'suffocate[s] anything trivial'. Rather, 'certain brutalities' are utterly necessary for progress. *Lesabéndio* introduces what Benjamin called the 'positive concept of barbarism'. The new barbarism indicates that 'only through difficulty do we arrive at the greatest ecstasies.' And again: 'The greatest suffering and the greatest bliss ... are almost inseparable.' This is something Lesá insists 'one must get used to'. Lesá explains to the Pallasians that the 'most important element of the great Sun philosophy is that ... subordinating and surrendering are the greatest things'. 'Dying is just another form of surrendering', and only for the 'one willing to suffer will [he] always go farther'. The basic failure of the Pallasians, a habit they share with Earthlings, is that 'their lives flowed onward *all too peacefully*'. The last chapter is filled with the screams of the torpid Pallasians as their 'old star is waking to a new life' under the influence of the light beaming down from the sun. Lesá's final meditation is a variant on the basic thought of the novel: 'Surrendering oneself to a Greatness is very painful', to which the sun adds its thundering commentary, 'As long as we fear neither pain nor death!'

Todd Cronan