

Revenge or revival?

Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, trans. Gregory Elliott, Verso, London and New York, 2002. xvii + 392 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 85984 712 9.

The translation of *Marx for Our Times* presents to an Anglophone readership one of the more ambitious and, in many respects, more intriguing products of the recently fêted recovery and renewal of Marxist thought in France (see Conference Report in *RP* 115). As its title and 'Preface to the English Edition' accentuate, *Marx for Our Times* is proposed as a disruptive intervention into the intellectual and political conjuncture of the present; an intervention claimed all the more forcefully now as the end to the dismal period that induced and attended the book's composition. Bensaïd describes the very act of rereading and re-engaging with the 'dead dog' that Marx had become from the late 1970s to the early 1990s as itself an 'act of resistance' against the 'Counter-Reformation' or 'Restoration' that he brands this period of anti-Marxism in France, a period symbolized by the *nouveaux philosophes*. *Marx for Our Times* is revenge. In fact, writing revenges on the *nouveaux philosophes* has become the main genre of contemporary French Marxism.

The year 1995 marked both the French publication of *Marx for Our Times* (entitled *Marx l'intempestif* – *Marx the Untimely*) and, according to Bensaïd, the alignment of various conditions enabling a wider reformation of Marxism. Dominant among these was the percolating effect of the dissolution of the Soviet Union; more specifically, the dissolution of its overdetermination of the meaning of Marxism within the ideological struggle of the Cold War. This decisively broke the association that had been fundamental to the strategy of the *nouveaux philosophes*, thereby removing the generalized suspicion that had stifled reconsiderations of Marx. Intellectually, there has been a resurgence of work on Marx. Among the celebrity highlights, Bensaïd cites the 1993 publication of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and, in the same year, Deleuze's tantalizing remarks to *Le Nouvel Observateur* that 'My next book – and it will be my last – will be called *Grandeur de Marx*.' More punctually, he cites the first 'International Marx Conference', organized by

the journal *Actuel Marx* in 1995. And, more generally, he itemizes a wealth of contemporary international research on or relating to Marxism, which, in a refreshing lack of chauvinism, and a pointed depreciation of Althusserianism, he affirms against any nostalgia for a 'Golden Age' of 1960s French Marxism.

But Bensaïd is also highly critical of the tendency to develop a purely academicized renewal of Marxism, a temptation he characterizes as a desire for Marx without communism. For Bensaïd, communism is distinguished radically from its Stalinist connotations and identified with the general practice of resistance to capital, a practice that acquires an urgent contemporaneity because of, rather than despite, capitalism's current hegemony. Again, 1995 is circled in Bensaïd's calendar. The winter of that year saw strikes and marches in defence of public services and social security in France and the intimations of a broad repost to a hegemonic neoliberalism – intimations of the emergence of 'the Left of the Left' that has resonated in the actions of a global anticapitalist movement from Seattle to Genoa to Pôrto Alegre.

But 2002 was not 1995. It was marked by the fiasco of the French presidential elections and the irruption of the 'War Against Terrorism'. These are phenomena that confirm a crisis for neoliberalism, but that also demand deep reconsideration for an emergent anti-capitalist movement. Bensaïd does not reflect on this transformation. And in certain respects there is little need for him to do so. The immediacy claimed for the book's historical self-consciousness is largely belied by the research constituting the body of the book, most of which concerns methodological and logical disputes that, despite being oriented towards a critique of the contingencies of the present, nonetheless remain merely gestural in this orientation. It is tempting to downplay this disjuncture as overzealous promotion. But this is insensitive to the desire of *Marx for Our Times*, as well as to the desire for a Marx for our times. For it is the condensation of these desires that reveals some of the book's highest stakes.

The book appears elegantly simple in structure. Unified by the general characterization of Marx's theoretical practice as 'critique', the three main parts of the book thematize according to deployments of critique attributed to Marx: the 'Critique of Historical Reason', the 'Critique of Sociological Reason' and the 'Critique of Scientific Positivism'. Appended to the last is also a 'Contribution to the Critique of Political Ecology'. However, this conceals a collection of essays that scarcely constitutes a straightforward narrative. Eclectic, idiosyncratic and occasionally laboured, they read very much like the documents of an extended period of research undertaken with complex demands. Bensaïd's mode of presentation here is derived from Benjamin: 'assembling and juxtaposing extracts make it possible to outline the constellation of an epoch, to awaken echoes under the impact of the present'. And Adorno's criticisms can be cited again, in so far as Bensaïd's presentation of material tends as much towards positive exposition as critical juxtaposition. Furthermore, perhaps the most striking juxtaposition of the book is not quite intended as such: namely, that between Walter Benjamin and analytical Marxism. It informs much of its analysis.

With respect to the critique of historical reason, Bensaïd criticizes the normative and determinist theory of history developed by G.A. Cohen as a renewal of the conservatism of the Second International, and, via Benjamin's critique of the latter, proposes a radically disjunctive and politicized model of history, structured by 'eventful singularities'. But in a confusion that is perhaps engendered by Bensaïd's eclecticism, the clarification of Benjamin's relation to the logic of singularities is left largely suspended. And when we return to the consideration of singularity in the critique of scientific positivism, it is inflected by a recourse to chaos theory that raises more questions than it answers. The second part of the book, on Marx's critique of sociological reason, is a defence of class struggle against its reduction to methodological individualism, in so far as the latter dissolves the central political category of Marxism in the name of explaining it. However, conceived in terms of a general renewal of Marxism, this choice of opponent seems anachronistic. There is no discussion of the post-Marxism developed by Laclau and Mouffe, which has

been in many respects more influential in the present scepticism towards Marxist political philosophy. Their articulation of the challenge presented to the Marxian conception of class struggle by new social movements and the multiplication of political subjectivities would be an urgent task for a renewal of Marx today. It is also noticeable that, despite the debt to Benjamin, and passing nods to Bloch and Adorno, there is no sustained discussion of Habermasian Critical Theory, which would seem to offer the obvious target for a Marxian critique of sociological reason today.

Indeed, in many respects the discussion of analytical Marxism is anachronistic. At a time in Britain when it has lost most of its momentum, influence and credibility as a Marxist enterprise, we are offered an extensive confirmation of this as a critical renewal of Marxism today. For all Bensaïd's insistence on the present, there is a definite time-lag here, a sense in which he has arrived too late. Paris in 1995, maybe, but in London and New York in 2002 it is so passé. And yet, much like a video time-delay, the effect is strangely revealing. The time passed has transformed the critique of analytical Marxism, from the suspicion of an insidious dismantling, into



the preparatory ground-clearing for a radical renewal of Marxism.

A further surprising, but also confusing feature of the book is its relation to Hegel, who undergoes a peculiar odyssey as he bobs up and down at different points in the book. He is the principal target of Bensaïd's attempt to conceive the critique of historical reason non-teleologically and disruptively, and to apprehend history strategically and politically. However, in the critique of scientific reason Hegel is redeemed emphatically as the fundamental progenitor of the logic of *Capital*. But few of the historic disputes over Marx's relation to Hegel are articulated here, and the critique of teleology proposed in the first part of the book is later transformed into an understanding of Hegelian dialectic as a fundamentally open and pluralistic form of totality; indeed, a dynamically indeterminate, probabilistic, and therefore strategically understood and negotiated logic of chaos. In characteristically rhetorical mode, Bensaïd writes: 'Regarding capital as a dynamic social relation in chronic disequilibrium, Marx glimpsed "the footprints of chaos on the sands of time", but was not yet able to decipher them.' (The quotation is from Ian Stewart's *Does God Play Dice?*)

Bensaïd's indifference to Althusserianism is more the pity here. The elaboration of the consequences of this reading of Hegel in relation to Althusser would have great resonance for a renewal of Marxism today, when Althusser's echo can still be heard in the work of a number of influential intellectuals on the Left. And in many ways the strategy of renewing Marx through the diagnosis of his blind anticipation of a subsequent scientific paradigm is very similar to Althusser's, only here it is chaos theory rather than structuralism.

There are many desires for a Marx for our times that *Marx for Our Times* does not serve. It is not an analysis of the contemporary political possibility of communism. It is a pedagogical introduction to Marx in only a very peculiar form. Many of the crises of Marxist thought on the Left are broached only indirectly, if at all. *Marx for Our Times* is in many respects best understood according to its most modest self-understanding, as the document of a particular period of critical research into the renewal of Marxism in a particular context. In this, it remains true to its original French title, untimely. However, this does



not diminish what gradually emerges as the unifying horizon of the book, but which is ironically absent from its structuring themes: namely, a Marxian critique of political reason. This is the secret passage that links the assumption of Benjamin's political transformation of historiography to the antagonistic structure of class struggle and, finally, to the elaboration of its ontology as the strategic negotiation of open systems of determination. The development of this critique of political reason is the implicit but pervasive labour of *Marx for Our Times*. Buried in the immanent critique of its own critiques, it emerges only indistinctly. But its critical self-reflection demands more than conceptual clarification. It demands, as Bensaïd himself insists, 'an organic relationship with the revived practice of social movements – in particular, the resistance to imperialist globalization'. These social movements are to be excused if they don't immediately recognize this call as their revival.

Stewart Martin

Sex change

Wendy Cealey Harrison and John Hood-Williams, *Beyond Sex and Gender*, Sage, London, 2002. 258 pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 7619 5599 2 hb., 0 7619 5600 X pb.

Wendy Cealey Harrison would like to say thanks and goodbye to the sex/gender distinction. (John Hood-Williams, Cealey Harrison's intellectual partner in previous publications and at the conception of this book, died before very much of it was complete. The ascription of joint authorship is a generous expression of the intellectual debt.) Her book's main thesis is that the continued deployment of the sex/gender distinction as an analytical tool is doomed to perpetuate the very thing that it was designed to avoid or overcome. In particular, in the use of the distinction, feminists find themselves occupying the same conceptual terrain as their opponents, unwittingly ceding to the latter's presumptions, whilst attacking them.

Several chapters attempt to demonstrate this through detailed and often critically incisive analyses of specific texts or oeuvres which have played an important role in the analysis of gender or of the relationship between sex and gender, across a variety of disciplines, but primarily in Cealey Harrison's own: sociology. The intellectual history in question here is one in which, as a category referring to patterns of socio-culturally determined behaviour, conformity with or resistance to ideological and normative demands, gender has been deployed to bear the weight previously accorded to sex, understood as a biological or even zoological category, in the explanation and justification or criticism of social, familial and psychological structures. (The implication being that where 'sex' had tended to justify the patriarchal status quo, 'gender' would criticize it.) An early chapter focuses on Ann Oakley's *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972). Oakley's book is a much-copied example of the sort of feminist analysis that, tired of stupid claims about women's nature and the biological imperatives to which we were subject, scrutinized the biological claims about sexual difference, contrasted them with evidence of cultural variation, and found a vastly reduced field of 'what really *can* be established and confirmed ... with the result that the [explanatory] field commanded by biology shrinks in favour of gender'. An analysis of a text from 1972 may seem belated, but Cealey Harrison's point is that Oakley's basic presumption about the sex/gender distinction is still prevalent, and its alleged deleterious effects thus still operate.

Her criticism is twofold. First, what amounts to the separation of the natural (biological sex) from the social (gender) results either in the insuperable difficulty of explaining their relation, or, if some relation is posited, the separation is *ipso facto* denied. Second (leading on from this), despite its delimitation of biological explanation, the distinction *confirms* the irreducible facticity of biological sex, which then cannot but function foundationally (cannot but be thought as that which 'comes first'), acting as the 'lodestone' on gender, ultimately displacing the latter's explanatory power. Sex, in other words, will always remain the final court of appeal when contrasted with gender in this way – the very claim against which Oakley's book argued.

In the same chapter Cealey Harrison then examines Christine Delphy's attempt to overcome this problem with her claim that 'sex' marks a social division that is the *product* of the hierarchy of gender (that is, patriarchy), working in its service. The criticism here focuses on the fact that Delphy's analysis forces us, albeit unwillingly, into the question of the origins of patriarchy, and to a presumption of the quasi-causal role of patriarchy in the sex/gender (or now, better, sex–gender) configuration. Within this, although Delphy may define men and women as agents occupying certain social positions (such that 'men' in the commonsensical sense of the term can be women in Delphy's sense), Delphy cannot help but also presume the existence of men and women, in the 'sexed' sense of male and female, in the justification of the theoretical role of patriarchy in her analysis. Sex thus creeps back in, as the presumption behind the concept of patriarchy, and once again functions as the ground of gender, inverting Delphy's apparently progressive intention.

Further chapters discuss, among other things, Bob Connell's *Gender and Power*, Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna's ethnomethodology of sex and gender, and Erving Goffman's work on gender as display. The point of these chapters is often hard to see without considerable retrospective reconstruction and speculation on the part of the reader. There are also serious problems in the details of some of the analyses. The criticisms of Kessler and McKenna, for

example, are fatally compromised by the claim that phenomenological reduction entails 'epistemological agnosticism'. And claims elsewhere that 'epistemological conceptions' (whatever they are) 'conceive of knowledge in terms of a distinction and correlation between two self-enclosed realms' of knowledge and the objects to which knowledge refers reveal a characteristic confusion about philosophical terms. Yet in so far as they are successful, these chapters tend towards the same critical conclusion: wherever the conceptual opposition of sex and gender is found to operate – even surreptitiously – at the basis of any attempt to displace the former in favour of the latter, the same 'ontological order' is reasserted in which sex, ultimately, must be foundational. The basic point, then, is that the sex/gender distinction just does not work. The logic of the distinction is such that the intention behind it is immanently stymied: gender is conceptually tethered, and effectively weighed down, by sex in the very attempt to give it an independent life of its own.

To some extent, this conclusion functions as a problematizing criticism (and one which is really very troubling, if we take it seriously) of a whole range of cross-disciplinary research based on the category of gender, given that that category is semantically (at the very least) dependent on its distinction from sex. But how do things stand with the use of the concept of gender in the theoretical field in which the conceptual genealogy or the deconstruction of the function of the category of sex is an overt theme, or even its *raison d'être*? Furthermore, if the sex/gender distinction has outlived its usefulness, with what should it be replaced? Rather than answer these questions, the book asks a few others, askance, and offers us the Foucauldian category of discourse to make other ones go away.

Cealey Harrison claims, for example, that in *Making Sex* (1990) Thomas Laqueur remains caught within the conceptual duality, the origin of which he himself describes: 'simultaneously placing the social and political imperatives that produce the markers of difference [and thus produce 'sex'] *outside* the terms of the empirical investigation and ... *denying* that externality'. Laqueur, that is, implicitly retains the distinction between sex and the social world (by insisting on the separation of the 'real' body from its representations) although the main argument of his book is meant to demonstrate its untenability. This happens, according to Cealey Harrison, because Laqueur falls into the common error of construing discourse as a *linguistic* field of representation, into which extra-linguistic 'reality' must not be allowed to collapse, theoretically.

Fear of a constructionist idealism has Laqueur running for biological sex after all. Cealey Harrison suggests that a Foucauldian concept of discourse is the answer to this fear, although construing it as a phenomenologically reduced, ontologically agnostic methodological concept (which Foucault, as a good Heideggerian, did not) and claiming its virtue to be the ability to 'cut across epistemological ways of framing human knowledge' obviates its usefulness.

In any case, Cealey Harrison's criticism avoids a bigger question. She may have identified Laqueur's slip back into the traditional conception of the sex/gender distinction, her criticisms of which are compelling, but what if he had kept his footing? Committed to the thesis of the historicity of both the concepts of sex and gender and their referents, it would be contradictory for Cealey Harrison to claim that the meaning of the sex/gender distinction and its discursive function is somehow immutable. Granted the criticisms of the traditional understanding of the sex/gender distinction, what do 'sex' and 'gender' mean now? Any answer to this question obviously has to deal first and foremost with the work of Judith Butler, which is why it is so odd to find the treatment of this specific issue in Butler sidelined, at best, in Cealey Harrison's book.

The main criticism centres on Butler's claim that gender is melancholic because the identifications of which it is born are rooted in the (unavowable, ungrievable) loss of same-sex attachments prohibited in the 'resolution' of the Oedipus complex. Cealey Harrison objects to the description of pre-Oedipal attachments as 'homosexual', because in psychoanalytic theory hetero- or homosexuality are achievements, or the (necessarily unstable) result, of later stages of psychic development. Further, describing the child's pre-Oedipal attachments to its same-sex parent as homosexual entails an admission of the place of sex as a given, prior to the construction of gender as the melancholic loss of this attachment, a position that appears to contradict Butler's well-known thesis that 'sex' is produced as an effect of gender, and to fall back into the traditional sex/gender distinction.

I suspect that Butler's theory of melancholic gender (which she herself describes as 'hyperbolic') will not turn out to be the most enduring part of her intellectual legacy, but Cealey Harrison's criticism here suffers from a psychoanalytical deficit, failing to acknowledge the peculiar form of psychical temporality and causality (Freud's 'afterwardsness', *Nachträglichkeit*). Her broader criticism, however, concerns the importation of the category of 'gender' into psychoanalysis in the first place, arguing that it sociologizes the psyche and

– in theories of ‘gender identity’ especially – blunts the sharp instruments of psychoanalysis. It seems to me that this argument is worth considering in relation to specific instances, but in general and as a critique of Butler it is multiply displaced. First, while it may be true that gender was not a category Freud used, its subsequent use in psychoanalysis constitutes a transformation of both the discipline and the category itself, although Cealey Harrison’s criticisms always presume that it is the same old ‘gender’ of the traditional sex/gender distinction at work. Second, far more worrying than the use of the category of gender in psychoanalysis is the covert reliance of some (specifically Lacanian) theories of sexual difference on an utterly conventional conception of sex as biological sex difference – a conception, moreover, which Butler, perhaps more than anyone else, has done much to problematize. Finally, in focusing her criticisms on gender melancholia, Cealey Harrison’s treatment of Butler avoids what is surely the much more important part of Butler’s deconstructive ontology of sex and its discursive ‘construction’ through the iterative performance of gender. (If the theory of gender melancholia contradicts this, so much the worse for that theory.)

This avoidance is symptomatic. This is a very good book in so far as it correctly identifies the various conceptual problems attached inseparably to the traditional sex/gender distinction and tracks the re-emergence of the distinction, in its traditional form, in various attempts to avoid precisely those problems. But it reaches a profound impasse on the question of what should replace it. ‘Ideally’, Cealey Harrison says, the concepts of sex and gender ‘will be replaced by concepts of an equivalent level of generality’, and the current lack of such concepts sometimes explains the difficulty in escaping the old distinction (Laqueur, for example ‘locates[s] himself within the very distinction whose origins he has traced’ because the ‘new discursive space’ that would be necessary for the full accomplishment of his criticism of the distinction does not yet exist.) The book ends with the demand that we think beyond ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, but there is no indication of how that might be accomplished. (It is ‘beyond the scope of this book’.)

How is this theoretical impasse linked to the book’s philosophical deficiencies? The enquiry works within what Cealey Harrison calls the ‘sex/gender problematic’, a possible set of questions with ‘a constraining and regulatory character’. Her overarching position is that it is now necessary to do away with this problematic; that is, she anticipates an ‘epistemological break’ and a transition to a new problematic including the new

concepts mentioned above. But it is indeed very hard to imagine how we could do away with these concepts.

The impasse here is a consequence of an idealist conception of ‘problematic’ which seems unable to acknowledge the immanent transformation of the meaning and function of concepts within the field. The structure of Cealey Harrison’s critical analyses is equally applicable to her own book: tracking the historical and theoretical transformation of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ (and the book is worth reading for this), she nevertheless insists on the impossibility of this very transformation and thus fails to see the radical theoretical possibilities in Butler, especially. Cealey Harrison’s book may help keep us on our toes in the enormous task of rethinking sex and gender, but it fails to acknowledge the ways in which some theoretical work has already gone beyond sex and gender, traditionally understood. Things ain’t what they used to be.

Stella Sandford

Earth others

Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002. 304 pp., £50.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 415 17877 0 hb., 0 415 17878 9 pb.

This is a philosophy book for our time. Val Plumwood takes it as given that the current dynamic of global capitalist culture is leading inexorably to extinction. For her, this is the most powerfully threatening of the consequences of the domination of a particular form of rationality, and its associated dualistic oppositions: reason versus the emotions, culture versus nature, human versus animal, objectivity versus subjectivity, and the gendered ‘coding’ of these oppositions. The ecological crisis is, at root, a crisis of rationality – a ‘masculinist’ instrumental form of rationality, characteristically Western, which objectifies and instrumentalizes its ‘others’, whether these others are women, colonized peoples, or non-human beings of all kinds. This form of reason is at work in the division of the world into ‘subjects’, worthy of respect, and ‘objects’, fit to be ‘studied down’ as topics for reductionist science, to be used and possessed. The historical working through of the consequences of this form of rationality has produced our contemporary world of globalizing capitalism, with its subjection

of women, indigenous cultures and nature itself to its relentless logic.

In its neoliberal expression the destructive power of this economic culture is greatly enhanced by its disembedding from earlier forms of social and political regulation. The hopes that capitalist modernization will correct its malign trajectory by some inner logic of technological innovation, or that well-meaning political reforms will fix the problem, are misplaced. They fail to grasp the full depth and scope of the crisis. The situation requires nothing less than a wholesale critique of the most fundamental frames of thought and practice governing modern capitalist culture, combined with a counter-hegemonic struggle to transform radically both our relations to one another and to the rest of nature.

Plumwood's critique draws on feminist, postcolonial and ecological literatures, and her prime target is the cultural form of 'rationalism'. This is an ideology which effects a radical separation of consciousness from the embodiment upon which it depends, and elevates formal, abstract reasoning as the prime source and repository of value. Associated with masculinity, objectivity and science, it opposes itself to and devalues the female-coded subjective, emotional and ethical dimensions of experience. In relation to nature, scientific objectivity licences an ethically and emotionally evacuated project of mastery. The politics of the 'technical fix', without profound transformation of this overriding dynamic, can only take us further on the route to catastrophe.

However, to reject rationalism is not, for Plumwood, to reject reason, nor indeed science. A profoundly maladapted form of reason has acquired hegemonic status, but it can only be challenged by alternative rationalities: ones which are self-reflective, conscious of dependence and interconnection, context-sensitive and both receptive and attentive to the voices of others. Substantive rationalities, including 'critical' and 'organismic' forms, are endorsed, but related to the more fundamental requirements of ecological rationality, which entails the corrective capacity to ensure viability of ecosystems, and the coordination of them with forms of social organization.

It is in her development of positive alternatives to the dominant cultural forms that the distinctiveness of Plumwood's position is revealed. Her critique of the 'remoteness' and 'hyper-separation' between currently dominant elites and the consequences of their decisions for subordinated humans and for nature yields an imperative for a transformation of democratic institutions. Against Ulrich Beck, she argues that social

inequality and various forms of remoteness ensure that the worst consequences of ecological degradation fall on the poor and marginalized. The essential capacity for corrective feedback therefore depends on the openness of political deliberation to the voices from below and from nature. Both markets and liberal-democratic institutions are poorly adapted to hear such 'bad news from below'. Liberal democracy needs to be deepened in a deliberative and participatory direction, but even this will not be enough unless it is accompanied by a radical programme of redistribution to eliminate class exclusions. The drift of the argument is towards some form of egalitarian ecological socialism.

Furthermore, incorporating a capacity for 'correctiveness' into an ecologically rational polity requires the voice of nature itself to be heard. This in turn implies (among other things) a different understanding and practice of science. Plumwood draws on a range of well-established eco-feminist and feminist epistemological critiques of 'reductive' and mechanistic science (Merchant, Fox Keller, Harding) to suggest that the form of reason favoured in the dominant traditions of epistemology renders science open to appropriation by big capital and the state-military complex. An alternative practice of science, ethically committed, receptive to and respectful of those it studies, is needed. Such a 'dialogic' science will overcome the dualistic separation of the conscious, rational subject from the inert, passive object of knowledge central to both rationalist and empiricist philosophies of science.

Equally challenging are Plumwood's commentaries on other concepts and traditions in environmental philosophy and politics. Her treatment of the much-disputed concept of 'anthropocentrism' is particularly insightful. She distinguishes between a 'cosmic' concept, according to which avoidance of anthropocentrism would require an Olympian universalism and detachment from all trace of human interest, and a 'liberation' concept, rooted in the experience and ideas of other liberation movements. She accepts that the 'cosmic' concept is an impossibility (and would, if possible, be undesirable), but defends the idea and practice of non-anthropocentrism in the liberation sense. Just as feminist thought 'decentres' a masculinist perspective on the world, and antiracist and postcolonial thought decentre hegemonic white-imperialist modes of appropriation, so anti-anthropocentrism in the liberation sense decentres the human species, situating it ecologically and recognizing interdependence with 'earth-others'. Unlike cosmic non-anthropocentrism, this involves acknowledging the inescapably embodied and situated character of the self, but overcomes the

dualistic separation of self and other through a recognition of the non-human other as a similarly located source of agency and a possible partner in dialogue. This way of understanding the idea of anthropocentrism retains its critical power in relation to hegemonic 'centrist' ideology, and also makes links between the ecological critique and the work of other liberation movements.

So, overcoming the dominant rationality involves both resituating humans in their ecological context and, at the same time, opening a space for the ethical recognition of non-human (Plumwood says 'more-than-human') beings. Here she engages with other philosophies that have, more or less successfully, attempted to do this. First, the philosophies of animal rights and liberation. She recognizes that these have extended the



circle of ethical concern beyond the boundaries of the human species, but this is only a first step towards a full philosophical engagement with the ethical questions which arise once the human/animal boundary fence is breached. Both utilitarian and rights-based approaches are, she argues, forms of extensionism: extending ethical concern to non-humans in so far as, and only in so far as, they share abilities – consciousness, sentience, subjectivity – which confer ethical status on humans. These neo-Cartesian philosophies represent a minimal displacement of the hegemonic framework, assigning honorary human status to a narrow circle of human-like animals, at the cost of reasserting the dualist exclusion of the rest of nature at one remove.

There is also a measured critique of deep ecology, particularly in its 'transpersonal' versions, according to which personal cultural transformation leads to a fusion of the individual self with a totalizing,

cosmic 'Self'. Recognition of the intrinsic value of non-human nature rests on a notion of a higher metaphysical unity of self with nature. Plumwood is clear that, at least in Naess's pioneering vision, there is much in common between her proposals and those of deep ecology. However, she differs in putting the emphasis on recognition of the independent agency of others, rather than on merely recognizing them as bearers of value: recognition of agency is an opening to the possibilities of communication and cooperation. More fundamentally, however, the notion of 'unity' runs the risk of reactionary appropriations of deep ecological ideas by authoritarian political projects and an associated loss of recognition of the autonomy and 'difference' of earth-others. She proposes an ethic of solidarity, recognizing both continuity and difference, as preferable to one of identity.

Implicit in the argument so far is a proposal for quite radically alternative ethical, ontological and epistemological groundings for our relationship to the rest of nature. To be rejected are not just those exclusionary moves which confine moral worth to the human species or its close relatives, but also hierarchical views of the natural order. What Plumwood calls 'non-ranking', a stance which recognizes difference and even incommensurability among species, is her interpretation of inter-species egalitarianism. This avoids the extensionist logic of applying

abstract principles indifferently across the diversity of species, but allows for a context-sensitive acknowledgement of the claims of non-human others. This in turn implies (as does the alternative practice of science outlined above) a stance of openness to the independent status of non-human others as intentional agents and possible partners in communication and cooperation.

The criticism that this implies an unjustified anthropomorphism if extended beyond a relatively limited category of other animals is countered by advocacy of a much more differentiated view of mind and intentionality than the dominant Cartesian model allows. In the human case, we rely on bodily cues to interpret meaning and often give them priority over verbal evidence. Similarly, attention to the activity of other living beings reveals the many ways they communicate with each other and is a source for enhancing and deepening our own understanding of their needs. Of

course, there are limits and risks of misunderstanding, just as there are in any activity of translation, such as that between different human cultures. But this is no reason to abandon the effort.

This is an immensely rich and rewarding book, full of arresting insights and engaging arguments. If it poses at least as many questions as it answers, that is the mark of a work that is true to its own ideals of dialogue in ethics and science. Some readers will not be persuaded of its underlying premiss that our world of globalizing capitalism is on course for global catastrophe. This is more asserted than argued for, but that would have required another book. As far as this reader is concerned, the case has already been made. However, there are two issues I would like to raise. One concerns the advocacy of a dialogic ethic in our relation to other beings. I find the arguments for 'other kinds of mind' and for openness to intentionality entirely convincing. I also recognize that Plumwood acknowledges and guards against a possible anthropocentric reading of her vision: as assigning value to others on the basis of an attribute shared (albeit much more *widely* shared) with humans. However, I am not sure that she entirely succeeds in this. Perhaps we have sources for a stance of respect and wonder, even for beings – living or non-living – with which we may not be able to communicate in any substantial sense. And if the emphasis on communication has to do with allowing the voice of non-human beings to be heard in our democratic decision-making, then this voice cannot be heard directly, but only by way of receptive human mediators. This is a very important difference between a liberation ethic for nature and the other liberation movements. Here, perhaps, the ethic of solidarity dominates over an ethic of democratic inclusion.

My second worry has to do with the central role accorded in the argument to the concept of 'culture'. Plumwood rightly seeks to avoid economic determinism, which she (wrongly, in my opinion) attributes to Marxism, and conceptualizations of culture are a common way of doing this. I'm reminded of Weber's classic work on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber was quite explicit about the importance of the economic, legal and political conditions for capitalism, and about his desire to avoid a 'one-sided idealist' account. Nevertheless, his argument gives so central a place to the religious and ethical dimension that we are left with the impression that he views culture as an autonomous 'prime mover' in historical change. Sometimes one has a similar impression in reading Plumwood's argument. It is as if

the cultural form of rationalism were the prime mover in the generation of our ecological crisis, with global capitalism and its various oppressions, exclusions and devastations mere material effects. This runs entirely counter to her own critique of the ontological primacy assigned to 'reason' in the rationalist tradition. It is unclear just what causal role is being assigned to the cultural form of 'rationalism' in Plumwood's argument. What sorts of institutional structures and power relations favour one form of rationality as against another? Where might we look for social and economic sources of cultures of resistance and opposition? Given the centrality of globalizing capital accumulation and commodification to her diagnosis of our contemporary crisis, perhaps the explanatory relevance of the Marxian heritage should not be dismissed so readily.

Ted Benton

Lack without lack

Conor Cunningham, *Genealogy of Nihilism: Philosophies of Nothing and the Difference of Theology*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002. 336 pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 415 27693 4 hb., 0 415 27694 2 pb.

One trillion years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have plunged the cosmos into absolute darkness. Every star in the universe will have burnt out, leaving behind spent husks of collapsed matter. All free matter, whether on planetary surfaces or in interstellar space, will have decayed, terminating any remnants of life based in protons and chemistry. Every trace of sentience – irrespective of its physical base – will have been erased. Finally, in a state called 'asymptopia', the dark stellar corpses littering the empty universe will evaporate into a brief hailstorm of elementary particles. Atoms themselves will cease to exist. Only the implacable expansion will continue, pushing the dead universe deeper and deeper into an eternal and unfathomable blackness.

The asymptotic death of the cosmos provides an interesting benchmark in terms of which to gauge the ambit of nihilism and the ultimate insignificance of what we call 'being', for, as Lyotard once astutely put it, it marks the death of that death which, since Hegel, has functioned as the life of philosophical thought. The death of thought rather than the death *of* thought.

For theologian Conor Cunningham, philosophical nihilism is the logic of the 'something as nothing'

and of the 'nothing as something'. Unsurprisingly, the prospect of cosmological extinction plays no role in Cunningham's ambitious study, for asymptotic nothingness figures 'something' altogether more viscerally upsetting for Christian theology than 'nothingness' as a toothless conceptual abstraction. Nevertheless, Cunningham's book is compelling in its remarkable synoptic breadth and conceptual audacity. Its title is slightly misleading, for this is not a philosophical genealogy in the now-familiar Nietzschean–Foucauldian sense. Instead, Cunningham adopts an explicitly ahistorical methodology: in his analysis, the equivocal logic of the nothing as something and the something as nothing is a structural invariant running through Plotinus, Avicenna, Scotus, Ockham, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Lacan and Badiou. Thus, interestingly enough, for Cunningham, atheism is a consequence rather than a condition of nihilism. And the logic of nihilism which Cunningham discerns in premodern thinkers like Plotinus, Avicenna, Scotus and Ockham is a condition, not a consequence, of that secular atheism which has apparently (only apparently) become the norm in post-Kantian philosophical discourse.

To his credit, Cunningham never shies from engaging with the more radical aspects of the conceptual challenge nihilism presents for theology. He tries hard to resist the theological temptation to ascribe a merely privative status to the *nihil* in nihilism:

[N]ihilism ... does not lack anything, or more accurately, it does not 'lack in lacking'.... [N]ihilism may lack God but it also lacks this lack of God.... If we are to speak seriously of nihilism we must, it seems, understand nihilism precisely to be an absence of nihilism: nihilism is not nihilistic. Indeed, it may well be best to characterize nihilism in plenitudinal, rather than negative, terms. If we realize that nihilism can be understood as negative plenitude – what has been referred to throughout as the nothing *as* something – then we can realize that nihilism will not fail to provide what it is usually supposed to preclude.

But clearly, the possibility of distinguishing between positive and negative plenitude still requires a transcendent guarantor of the distinction between positive and negative, plenitude and lack. For the enthusiastic nihilist (by which I mean myself) will continue to insist that the *nihil* in nihilism is positively insignificant rather than reductively meaningless. If the death of God wipes away every transcendent horizon of significance to which humanity could appeal as an ultimate guarantor of the distinction between the meaningful and the meaningless, then nihilism as that which reveals the

insignificance of meaning cannot be condemned as a loss of meaning. Thus, as Cunningham argues, what theology must reinstate is a transcendent guarantor of 'the significance of meaning'.

This is the point at which Cunningham delivers his most impressive bout of argumentative subtlety. By depriving us of the capacity to distinguish between meaninglessness and insignificance, nihilism generates an 'excessive intelligibility' (Cunningham's phrase) that renders the possibility of choosing between something and nothing (or faith and philosophy) unintelligible, thereby depriving us of the capacity to choose between significance and insignificance, belief and nihilism. Thus, according to Cunningham, what nihilism's 'universal provision' fails to provide is the capacity to choose between choosing and not-choosing:

If nihilism cannot provide something then it can be found lacking and so a space for a critique arises, precisely because it then appears as a choice, a possibility, an intellectual stance.... Nihilism is not a choice but all choices. It endeavours to be so in an attempt to avoid lack.... It must be understood that for nihilism it is nothing to provide *something*, just as being is nothing, or it is nothing to be.... How then are we to critique nihilism? The answer may lie in rendering nihilism possible, *viz.*, after all a choice, rather than all choices. In being a choice (the etymology of heresy stems from the word for choice, *hairesis*), then it will be *a* reality. In being 'a' reality it will be but a reactive discourse which is better referred to as 'sin'.

So for Cunningham the situation is as follows: since theology is obliged to acknowledge the full force of philosophical nihilism on pain of dogmatism, the most it can accomplish is to render the possibility of *not choosing* nihilism intelligible again. The nihilistic equivalence of all choice can be outflanked by showing that the difference between choosing and not-choosing harbours a significance irreducible to the excessive intelligibility of the universal provision whereby meaning is rendered insignificant. In other words, the decision to choose (the nihilist heresy) must be shown to presuppose the irreducible significance of the difference between choosing and not choosing.

Thus, by way of contrast to nihilism's 'meontological (in)-difference' wherein nothing remains indistinguishable from something and transcendence and immanence are perpetually collapsing into one another, Cunningham strives to articulate a radical 'theological difference' between immanence and transcendence. Theology becomes possible again on the basis of a *transcendent* analogical difference between immanence and transcendence: 'For only through



the mediation of immanence by transcendence can the immanent *be*.' This mediating transcendence is the irreducibly significant difference between nihilist insignificance (the immanent indifference between choosing and not choosing) and theological meaningfulness (the transcendent difference between choosing and not choosing).

The trouble with this ingenious move is that it involves an appeal to transcendence that can only strike the philosopher as exorbitantly dogmatic. According to Cunningham, it is Christian faith that harbours the irreducible guarantor of significance. Moreover, this irreducible significance which is supposed to underwrite meaning remains rooted in the kind of equally dogmatic phenomenological empiricism for which gross molar unities remain the ultimate, non-decomposable units of meaning. As ever, phenomenology is the handmaid of theology. Thus, for Cunningham, the meaningfulness guaranteed by transcendence is invariably the meaning of this tree, this flower, this human being. And the analogical guarantor for the significance of the meaning of this flower, tree, or human being is its infinite *eidōs* in the divine mind. Accordingly, Cunningham acknowledges that for theology there is a sense in which 'only God sees, knows, does, and we, by way of analogous participation, receive the gifts of knowing in part'. But in the absence of any independent, which is to say non-theological, access to God, Cunningham might as well say that only we see, know or do, and God is merely a transcendent analogue of our partial knowing.

Cunningham's analogical isomorphy between divine *eidōs* and finite phenomenon turns the most wearily familiar furnishings of everyday phenomenological experience into irreducible ontological absolutes. The notion that phenomenology may not provide the onto-logical measure of all things, that there

may be more things in heaven and earth than are accessible to human phenomenology, is not even entertained. Christianity's lascivious appetite for mundanity, which is merely the obverse of its contempt for philosophical asceticism, has never been more transparent than it is here. When coupled with Cunningham's facetious jabs at the nihilism of 'other-worldly ascetism', this theological lubriciousness reminds us of just how debauched Christian spirituality becomes when it decides to wallow in worldliness.

Nevertheless, even if Cunningham's attempt to reinstate a transcendent guarantor for the significance of the difference between somethingness and nothingness remains unconvincing, this adventurous book does perform one indispensable service for the philosophical debate about nihilism. Cunningham has quite correctly seen that this is a debate about the ontological status of meaning. More precisely, it is a debate about whether there is some ultimate, transcendent guarantor underwriting *the significance of meaning*. Because it anchors the debate about nihilism so firmly in this question, and insists that any appeal to the transcendent or irreducible significance of meaning must ultimately be theological, Cunningham's stance allows us to see the extent to which all those putatively secular philosophies that continue to insist on the irreducibility or *givenness* of meaning remain in thrall to the prejudices of theology. By insisting that the alternative must be that between the radical difference of theological significance or the radical indifference of nihilist insignificance, Cunningham has helped narrow the middle ground of philosophical compromise hitherto occupied by phenomenologists, hermeneuticists and other lay theologians. All that remains now is for we nihilists to narrow it still further by carrying out a definitive assault on the significance of meaning.

From the perspective of a truly consequent nihilism, cosmic asymptopia illustrates the equivocality of the 'something as nothing' and the 'nothing as something' at least as well as any of the 'philosophies of nothing' analysed by Cunningham. Moreover, it does so in a way that clarifies the main lacuna in Cunningham's analysis: the failure to specify the status of the equivocating 'as'. Is this Heidegger's phenomenological 'as' of apophantic disclosure so that nothingness is meaningfully disclosed *as* something? Which is to say,

as a phenomenon? Clearly not, for in Cunningham's analysis it seems to function as vanishing mediator between the 'nothing' and the 'something', in a manner exemplified by the relation between substance and attribute in Spinoza, the relation between noumenon and phenomenon in Kant, as well as the relation between *différance* and presence in Derrida. Thus, this is an anti-phenomenological 'as': an operator of disappearance rather than disclosure – something Cunningham tacitly acknowledges when he contrasts the immanent equivocality of this annihilating 'as' with the transcendent analogy between the Creator and his creatures.

So would it be too extravagant to suggest that there is no more perfect paradigm for this annihilating 'as' than the asymptotic cosmic zero that cancels the very possibility of disclosure? That cosmic asymptopia furnishes an immanent but terminal guarantor of ontological insignificance? That, grasped as the proper name for the *nihil* in 'nihilism', this death of death effects an ultimate evacuation of sense far more vigorously than any prospect of extinction situated at the personal, civilizational or even species level?

Ray Brassier

Strange fire

Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, Routledge, London and New York, 2002. x + 218 pp., £45.00 hb., £14.99 pb., 0 415 11248 6 hb., 0 415 11249 4 pb.

Levinas and the Political can be seen as Howard Caygill's delivery of the promissory note with which he concluded his essay on Levinas in *RP* 104, on the five decades of Levinas's political writings for the French journal *Esprit*: 'Perhaps before trying to find a passage between Levinas's ethics and politics it is necessary first to recover the specific political conditions to which his ethics was a response?' The book's painstaking reconstruction of these conditions takes the form of a textured cultural history of Levinas's intellectual and political milieu and a scouring, sometimes scathing, exegesis of his writings. Beginning with readings of Levinas's early *Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* and 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism', moving through his major works *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, and ultimately targeting his late reflections on the politics of Zionism and Israeli statehood, Caygill traces the unfolding of Levinas's thought

through his 'personal proximity to the fault lines of twentieth-century political history'.

Caygill's reading positions Levinas's early but ultimately lifelong preoccupation with the French Republican trinity (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity – particularly his desire to think the trinity in terms of the last of these) against the fallout of the Dreyfus Affair, its eventual 'justice', and the politics of assimilation. It places his immersion in the work of Bergson, Husserl and the phenomenological tradition and its 'culmination' in Heidegger's ontology (the engagement with which was also to be lifelong and equally fierce) against the rise of Hitlerism and Heidegger's migration to National Socialism. It relates the building of the foundations for *Existence and Existents* and its critique of Heidegger's *Dasein* to the experience of exhaustion during years spent in the 'parenthesis' of prison camp and the 'memory of the Nazi horror'. The mobilizing of the full-scale critique of ontology and the interrogation of the relationship between war and peace, politics and ethics that emerged in intertwined projects of *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* are read against the Manichaean Cold War geopolitical landscape. Finally, the integration of Levinas's ethical, political and religious thought is presented as compelled by his commitment to think through the explosive interdependence of the holy mission of Israel (with its enduring commitment to the incessantly interruptive 'work of justice') and the State of Israel (with the opportunities for justice as well as the temptations of the idolatrous power of the state presented by the achievement of nationhood).

Caygill's study dispels the illusion that Levinas's ethical philosophy can be extricated from its political and religious dimensions. Such attention not merely to the possible implications of Levinas's ethics for contemporary political debates, but to the concrete and complex political realities that drove, nourished, and indeed occasionally captured his thinking – and to which his work responded not just obliquely but directly – has been conspicuously absent from recent treatments of Levinas's work. Caygill's consistent attention to 'how the question of the political consistently troubles Levinas's thought' permits the recovery of the richness, the scope, but crucially also the volatility of Levinas's philosophy.

It is with the foreshadowing of this volatility that the book begins. Speaking of Levinas's participation in a radio broadcast that followed the 1982 execution by Phalangist militias of refugees in the Lebanese camps of Sabra and Shatila, Caygill explains that it was precisely the unexpected 'coolness of political

judgement that verged on the chilling, an unsentimental understanding of violence and power almost worthy of Machiavelli' proffered by Levinas, a thinker whom he 'had been taught to regard as the thinker of ethical alterity and the subject of a growing body of sentimental commentary', that gave birth to *Levinas and the Political*. The pages that follow marshal the resources necessary to judge Levinas's calculated political perspective with the adequacy, and indeed the justice, that it demands.

The results are brought to bear in a climactic final chapter on Levinas's efforts at negotiating the challenges posed to Israel by its very statehood. Arguing that Levinas's response to the war crime at Sabra and Shatila has to be seen as 'a touchstone for his ethical and political principles as well as his views on Israel and the State of Israel', Caygill revisits this fateful radio broadcast. Here Levinas found himself face to face with the following point-blank question: 'Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the "other". Isn't history, isn't politics, the very site of the encounter with the "other", and for the Israeli, isn't the "other" above all the Palestinian?' Levinas's evasive response, for Caygill, 'opens a wound in his whole oeuvre':

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.

Rather than judge this as a one-time wavering from an otherwise consistent and stable philosophy of ethical alterity, of grounded commitment to thinking and performing the responsibility for and the welcoming of the other, Caygill offers the radical (but methodically and comprehensively substantiated) assessment that Levinas's 'claim is rigorously consistent with his philosophy, which we have argued recognizes the inevitability of war. To describe the other as enemy at this point is thus entirely consistent with such a reading of Levinas's ethics.'

While the five chapters of *Levinas and the Political* map the ambiguities and the openings to violence at the ethical and political conjunctions of Levinas's thought, the book's afterword departs from the tone and style of the preceding pages in order to explore an alternative way into Levinas's volatility. Entitled

'Strange Fire', it traces the appearance throughout Levinas's writings of the complex biblical theme of the miraculously enduring light. It appears as the flame of Hanukkah ('the miracle of a light richer than the energies feeding it'), whose legacy, in the words of Levinas, 'sustains the magnificent combatants of the young State of Israel'; the burnt offering of the Temple and its incarnation in the 'embers of the book' that 'provoke fire and light when breathed upon' in the act of reading; the 'sparks of enlightenment' that issue forth from the 'debate between individual readings' and 'combine into a messianic blaze brighter than the sun that consumes history' – the dangerous 'fire that is beyond history and yet can carry identity through it'. Caygill presents a haunting evocation of this trans-migrating flame which for Levinas links teaching and learning, war and peace, ethics and politics; this strange fire that 'at the moment it seems most benign ... may ignite into a terrible and uncontrollable force, not of nature but of spirit'. He concludes by hinting at the way out of this violence that is 'thankfully' offered by Levinas's essay 'The Light and the Dark', with its embrace of 'a withdrawal from the blaze of glory and its cycle of consuming, protecting and avenging fire in order to find the glory of the presence in an ember or "a little flask of pure oil" that keeps alight "our failing memory" for the future'.

It is almost as though the afterword's departure (which in its style and intent provides for a recovery of Levinas's messianic light from the economy of violent light developed in Derrida's 'Violence and Metaphysics') extends a sort of compassion to Levinas's complicity in the violence undertaken in the name of Israel. Indeed the tone and topic of this remarkable ending open onto a deeper current of Levinas's thought, one that could be said to flow beneath the apology for the Israeli state's war crimes, and the appearance of which in his work from his Strasbourg years onward now comes into stark relief: namely, Levinas's faith in this ineffable but inexhaustible fire 'that traverses history without burning'.

It is perhaps only after pinpointing the violence in Levinas's thought that Caygill's reading could open to this faith that steadfastly refuses to give up its commitment to this prophetic light. This ending undermines the ease with which we might rush to condemn Levinas's complicities, or to convince ourselves that his failure to rise to the responsibility for the (Palestinian) other – a responsibility which everything in his work ought to have demanded of him – somehow compromises his philosophy. This failure certainly does, as Caygill notes, 'open a wound in his philosophy', but it

is one that permits, maybe even invites, this afterword to serve as healing salve: the recognition of a wound is a step towards recovery. What emerges from the convergence of the forces unleashed by his study upon this final moment is the poetic notion that it is not some kink or flaw or missing link in the architecture of Levinas's thinking, but rather Levinas's faith, that makes his philosophy vulnerable – and therefore gives it its ethical and political presence.

Perhaps this does indeed deliver Levinas to the quiet but nevertheless incandescent glory that Caygill finds at the close of his book. Perhaps this is what Caygill has in mind when, in introducing *Totality and Infinity*,

he raises the possibility of a dynamic peace that is something other than the mere absence or indefinite deferral of war. There is certainly a measure of grace in an ending which shows that Levinas's philosophy is not impregnable, and which suggests that this is how, at its most visceral level, it finally succeeds in its refusal of totality. The book is, in this sense, an affirmation of the risks of philosophical practice. It documents the risks embedded in Levinas's political, ethical and religious philosophy, and ventures quite a few of its own in bringing this dimension of Levinas's work to light.

Chris Thompson

A tale of two Walters

Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 2002. 350 pp., £20.00 hb., 1 85984 612 2.

Responding to the French Left's criticism of Euro Disney in the early 1990s, Disney's chief executive officer Michael Eisner said 'the intellectual, and maybe even the Communist, when they bring their children to Euro Disney, will have a good time'. Eisner's statements invoke the dilemma surrounding Walt Disney – the avuncular studio head and the dream factory he helped to build – especially given the cottage industry in books detailing Disney's fervent anti-Communist activism and almost-as-fervent anti-Semitism. Esther Leslie's *Hollywood Flatlands* doesn't shy away from the contradictions inherent in the not-so-wonderful world of Disney; she uses them as a starting point for a fascinating story about the relationship between cartoons, modernist theory and mass culture. The book is about much more than the House of Mouse, tracing with a deft hand the aesthetic precursors of film animation in the work of Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov. *Hollywood Flatlands*, however, centres around Disney the animation giant – and his diminutive mouse – and tells us why European intellectuals, even some erstwhile Communist ones, have been fascinated by Disney since its *Steamboat Willie* beginnings.

Hollywood Flatlands follows Siegfried Kracauer's classic periodization of Disney's animation styles. In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer called Disney's shift away from the fantastic towards the naturalistic a 'false devotion to the cinematic approach' which blunted an earlier fascination with drawing 'the impossible with

a draftsman's imagination'. As Disney moved from slapstick shorts to feature-length narratives, Kracauer argued, the anarchism of the gag gave way to the moral recapitulation of the fable, and Disney features inched inexorably towards social conformism. Early Disney cartoons personified the anarchic spirit, flouting the conventions of realism with absurd acts of transformation and physical spaces that turned the laws of physics on their head. Animation aesthetics changed in the 1930s, however, when new multiplane camera technology enabled the creation of naturalistic scenes while the older single-plane animation fell victim to a spatial orthodoxy dictated by cinematic realism. The later Disney work lavishly embraced the imitative naturalism afforded by colour, but in the process illustrated the limits of bland positivism, Malevich's 'dead objective'. *Hollywood Flatlands* follows a similar critical trajectory in marking the shifts in Disney's work, beginning with the deceptively simple black-and-white animation, moving through the pioneering use of sound and colour and ending with Disneyland: a spiralling degradation from flatness to roundness, from fantasy to fidelity, and from estrangement to a comfortable familiarity. With sound technology cementing the cartoon's emotional impact, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) signalled the rationalization of studio animation by training artists in the mechanics of animal motion. This ran counter to the logic of the early Disney work, Leslie suggests, which embodied the self-consciousness of the work of art that 'conceded flatness not the fakery

of depth'. Clearly, *Hollywood Flatlands*' preference for early Disney has antecedents in Adorno's preference for Schoenberg over Stravinsky and jazz and Greenberg's championing of abstraction over kitsch.

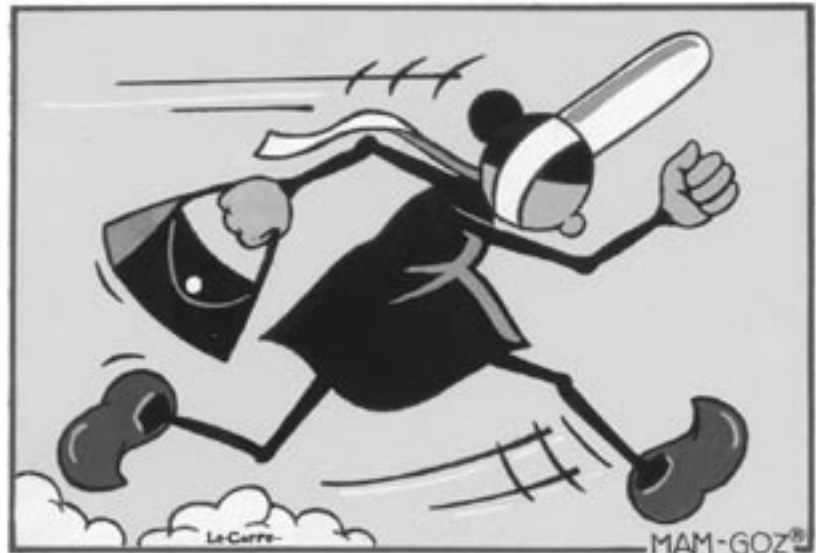
In *Hollywood Flatlands*' first chapter, the history of the 1920s European avant-garde is told through both the manifesto and the anecdote. Extended descriptive accounts of a number of animated classics proceed through breakneck sequences of clauses, hyphens and ellipses. There is some poetry in this: at its title suggests, this chapter on drawing and the avant-garde is all about 'dots and dashes'. In a single paragraph on the representation of the city, for example, we move impressively, albeit frenetically, from Döblin, Bely, Joyce and Dos Passos, to Maholy-Nagy, Kracauer, Benjamin, Erwin Kisch then Baudelaire: a procession of names, linked through staccato bursts of biography, theory and chance encounter, embodying Benjamin's famous observation that history decays into images rather than stories. However, the reader is sometimes left with the wish that more stories be told.

Rooting her method in analogy, Leslie rehearses a familiar refrain, finding that animation is an unexpected metaphor for both Hegelian idealism and capitalist alienation: because it is about movement in time – the negation of one cell after another – animation embodies the movement of thought; because it gives life to the inanimate, animation follows the logic of commodity fetishism. It seems strange that she would chose analogy over allegory – of which Benjamin wrote so brilliantly – since her previous book, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (Pluto 2000), is an excellent primer on Benjamin's work. More importantly, Disney continues to fascinate because, in addition to innovation in animation design, the cartoons are allegorical engagements with mass culture and industrialization, memory and myth.

When Leslie avoids summarizing different takes on the phenomenology of cinematic vision and focuses instead on the imbrication of cartoons and caricature within intellectual histories and social movements, *Hollywood Flatlands* really hits its stride. Like Disney itself, the book is at its best when it tells a good story.

Take Sergei Eisenstein's appreciation of the cellular nature of animation production, which readily illustrated his ideas on animism and montage. While

his extensive interest in drawing certainly fuelled his appraisal, Eisenstein also voted for *Three Little Pigs* as 1935's landmark film at a cinema conference, partly as a protest against the plodding stodginess of socialist realism. Not surprisingly, though, Benjamin is the other Walter invoked by *Hollywood Flatlands*, and it is through the trajectory of his engagement with Disney that Leslie recounts the tremendous popularity of the cartoon icon in intellectual life in 1930s Germany. Part of his larger appreciation of a commercial culture declared off limits by the orthodoxies of art history at the time, Benjamin defended Mickey Mouse as the fun-loving antithesis of bourgeois rationality, with his comic antics signalling the redemptive spirit of destructiveness: the negativity of the off-kilter pratfall that shatters – as all absurdity does – the civilized man's tenuous hold on reason. At the same time, Brecht complained that his contemporary's advocacy of the inanimate amounted to mere mysticism, while Adorno vilified the laughter of the culture industry's audience as a 'parody of humanity', a position clarified in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer saw the comic beatings of hapless Disney cartoon heroes as a ruse to anaesthetize mass audiences to the growing authoritarian brutality of fascism, allegories of conformity which signalled the collapse



of individual resistance to industrialized society.

Of course, as Susan Buck-Morss has noted, Benjamin's appraisal of Disney's progressive potential was ambivalent. In his notes to the 'Work of Art' essay, Benjamin ponders the 'applicability of Disney's methods for fascism', and as *Hollywood Flatlands* points out, Benjamin found in Disney a 'therapeutic explosion of the unconscious' which acted upon the 'dangers occasioned by the repressions that endan-

ger humanity and that civilization brings with itself'. For Benjamin, Mickey Mouse was the representation of the very reification that constitutes everyday industrialized life and Disney's films resonated with the public because they recognized their own brutal disempowerment at the hands of industrial capitalism, war and barbarism. Benjamin suggested that our fascination with the cartoon short and the animation of the object reverses reification and through this negation returns the audience, innervated, back to life: Mickey is the alpha and omega of humanity, its inanimate opposite and the very possibility of reinvigoration. However, Benjamin remained conflicted, and Leslie recounts the drama of revision as Benjamin drafted supplemental, more pessimistic, takes on Disney urged by Adorno's reservations. Nevertheless, the published version of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay cut references to Disney and Mickey Mouse alongside mention of Marxism – a consequence, ironically enough, of its commission by the Institute for Social Research, which feared the essay's uptake by its New York sponsors.

Hollywood Flatlands also accounts for the appeal that Disney held for the Nazi culture industry. While the Nazis claimed that Disney contributed to the 'Jewish bamboozlement of the people', *Snow White* was greatly to influence German animation and Disney shorts circulated in Germany through the early 1940s even though the official trading relationship was dissolved in early 1940. Indeed, Disney remained a favourite amongst the Nazi higher-ups, including Goebbels and the Führer himself, and a German ancestry for Walt Disney became part of the Nazi acknowledgement of the power of American commercial culture. Leslie's chapter on Leni Riefenstahl draws on Disney's fascination with the German fairy-tale, an observation echoed by German film journals of the time, which further piqued the Third Reich's interest in learning from Disney aesthetics. By focusing on Disney's distribution efforts in the late 1930s, coupled with the studio's production of American war propaganda films, *Hollywood Flatlands* complicates the metonymic association between Disney and Teutonic mastery, while acknowledging the work of Greenberg, Adorno, Susan Sontag and others who have outlined the connections between Nazi monumentalism, Teutonic classicism and Disney's commercial aesthetic. It might have added even more to the debate by addressing Walt Disney's links with American Nazism and the myriad rumours that he attended meetings of the American Nazi Party with his then legal counsel Gunther R. Lessing.

Despite its avowed interest in analogy, then, *Hollywood Flatlands* ultimately refuses to freeze Disney's

animation into a series of images and analogues for fascist barbarism, which do little to convey the tremendous allegorical impetus of the animated cartoon. One story that the book does not tell is that Disney's virulent 1940s anti-unionism – which resulted in the venomous anti-Communism of his testimony in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities – occurred at the same time that his *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* was praised by *People's World* as propagating a 'miniature Communist society'. When it settles down to capturing the spirit of such contradictions, *Hollywood Flatlands* aspires to, and gains, a welcome third dimension.

Nitin Govil

Moving on

Craig Brandist, *The Bakhtin Circle: Philosophy, Culture, Politics*, Pluto Press, London, 2002. 221 pp., £45.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 7453 1881 8 hb., 0 7453 1810 X pb.

'I hear voices in everything.' If the speaker were anyone but Bakhtin, we would probably conclude they were delusional, but from him the utterance is a seemingly straightforward statement of the overriding condition of his practice. It also condenses some key features and difficulties in Bakhtin's writing: the focus on speech (for example, the early attempt to assert intonation as the process which individuates both utterance and speaker), the vexed relation between word and referent, the obsession with categorizing types of discourse and their relations – an obsession accompanied by a marked refusal to acknowledge intellectual debts and confirm or deny authorship of disputed texts.

Craig Brandist's study engages with a number of these issues, and is a useful counter to versions of Bakhtin as poststructuralist literary critic *avant le mot* or simple student of the popular that still play inertially in some parts of literary and cultural studies. Bakhtin is almost always more interested in 'literary' transformations of the popular than the popular itself, and, as Brandist shrewdly notes, has nothing to say about the quintessential mass form, cinema. Likewise, the insistent corporeality of Bakhtin's rhetoric has too often been celebrated as a theory which 'turns' culture, and language into particular, 'material', with little critical attention to the alchemy that might be involved. This error is especially significant for Brandist, one of an increasing number of critics who insist on Bakhtin

as philosopher and place neo-Kantianism at the centre of their reading. Part of what is distinctive about the book is the attempt to bring this Bakhtin to a wider readership. Brandist is concerned with the dialogisms that shaped the Circle's work (in particular that of Voloshinov) and Bakhtin's later projects. Neo-Kantianism was just one of the philosophical varieties that shaped the Circle in the 1920s. *Lebensphilosophie*, in particular Simmel's account of the rift between life and culture in modernity, Gestalt theory and the work of the Munich phenomenologists, particularly Scheler's account of intersubjectivity, were also key references.

Brandist focuses on a set of contradictions which he sees as structuring Bakhtin's thought. Thus, he argues, the encounter with Cassirer in the 1930s transformed his thinking, which acquired a Hegelian inflection, making possible the various histories of discursive forms (the novelistic, the carnivalesque) for which he is best known. These 'histories' are, however, fundamentally compromised by a continuing commitment to a universal and autonomous sphere of values. But is the picture so straightforwardly contradictory? Ken Hirschkop's reading foregrounds a historicizing dimension in Marburg neo-Kantianism, where space and time were themselves conceived as scientific categories which should be subject to critique, and argues that for Bakhtin human history must always be a fundamental explanatory category once objects are dissolved into processes. Further, history is never a simple historicist registration of change, but is critically conceived in terms of its orientation to the future. Such a reading seems to make better sense of Bakhtin's many histories of cultural forms, where valorized categories both constitute actually existing traditions of discourse and embody future possibilities.

The similarities in many of the traditions that Bakhtin metabolizes might also repay closer scrutiny. Brandist intimates Bakhtin's connection with *Kulturkritik*, here and elsewhere (RP 102), and this might have been further developed. The account of the carnivalesque, the Bergsonian celebration of laughter against the mechanical, and the (ambivalent) attraction to *Lebensphilosophie* all inscribe an idealized moment of organic unity between culture and civilization and its severing by 'mechanization'. And while the categories that Bakhtin values are the realization of possibilities present in all discourse, his valorization of the literary and his figuring of the novelistic writer as historian and philosopher armed with a distinctive knowledge

are thrown into a familiar light by such comparisons. Likewise, Bakhtin's orientation to a transformed future becomes more interesting when contrasted with canonical *Kulturkritik*, where the future is conceived as more of the same, or worse.

Brandist also suggests ways in which the Bakhtin Circle's 'programme' might be revised and further developed, and his final chapter sketches some of the possibilities. This short chapter is frustrating, often reading as an outline for another book. One prospective connection Brandist suggests is with cognitive science, in its current approach to the processes of knowledge and meaning. In the most general terms this argument is persuasive, but it seems odd that Brandist does not consider the critical force that a Bakhtinian concept of genre (however problematic) might bring to fields (cognitive linguistics, but particularly pragmatics) that routinely either deny the explanatory power of textual form or banalize it. Unleashing Bakhtin (and Voloshinov) into cognitive linguistics also requires care. There is too much in Bakhtin's thought that either chimes with inadequacies in most cognitive linguistics – a neglect of the institutional – or which can be comfortably (if wrongly) appropriated to confirm a liberal model of dialogue.

There is a further tension in Brandist's own relation to Bakhtin. This is clearest in the dual function that the Circle itself acquires within the book. In one mode, Brandist is an intellectual historian and his account of the Circle and its discursive engagements is part of a commitment to contextualizing Bakhtin's ideas. But in another, Brandist wants to redeem Bakhtin for a 'properly' materialist cultural theory (the holy grail of a Marxist theory of language takes form on more than one occasion), despite his own sometimes seemingly unanswerable criticisms. In this perspective, the Circle functions as the legitimator of a Bakhtin that might have been: a set of contingencies authorizing the sketch of a critical future for Bakhtinian ideas. It may be that the problem begins in the philological conditions of the field itself, where the difficulties of defining and accessing the archive, the complex textual histories, and the comparative rarity of Russian language skills among relevant reading constituencies, call for investments which then make it very hard to 'let go' of Bakhtin. But do we need to rely on the authority of the conditional perfect? Is it not better to assess him as a resource and move on?

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