

History flows through some problems

Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2010. viii + 299 pp., £18.50 pb., 978 0 8166 5687 8.

To state that 'reality is a construction' might elicit two opposed responses. Certain philosophers and social theorists would welcome the claim, in so far as it appears to confirm the primacy of human thought and inquiry and entails a mature recognition of the inevitable mediation of language, concepts or discourse in any discussion of reality. Certain members of the scientific community might shrug and ignore such a claim as further evidence of the irrationality and irrelevance of contemporary philosophy and social theory; or, if they are still engaged in the Science Wars, they might respond more vehemently. It is the development of avenues of thought that move beyond such entrenched positions and avoid this bifurcation of responses that concerns Stengers in this work.

This is not to say that Stengers maintains, in any simplistic kind of way, that 'reality is a construction'. Rather, she investigates the way in which arguments about reality have ended up being fought on these specific grounds, within a specific set of limitations. Stengers aims to trace and re-energize the problems, conceptual blockages and opportunities which were played out in the development of modern physics, leading to its peculiar but effective self-claimed status as the only true authority on reality. A major part of this peculiarity lies in the insistence of modern physics that whatever reality is, its location and status lie beyond the things or phenomena of the world (rocks, tables, clocks, peas, amoeba) as they appear to humans. True reality is expressed in the realm of the sub-atomic, the immediately invisible access to which is granted to physics alone, which consequently has sole proprietorial rights to report upon this realm to those of us outside of its sacred walls.

Cosmopolitics, originally published in French in seven discrete volumes, of which the first three are collected here, neither accepts nor dismisses the claims of either philosophy or science; Stengers in fact has a commitment to both. In the early part of her career, she worked with the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Ilya Prigogine, and this close conceptual relation bears witness to her ongoing endeavour to 'take science seriously', and not to use philosophical techniques to

undermine or negatively critique scientific propositions whilst neglecting to partake of the immanent problems that the scientist addresses. When adopted, such a procedure absolves the philosopher of any responsibility for the consequences and implications of their abstract ruminations – something which Stengers strives to avoid. However, she is clear that her work is not simply an interpretation of the work of science (and of Prigogine in particular) or an attempt to make it accessible or acceptable for a philosophical or social scientific audience. Nor is it simply a history of ideas or concepts. As she writes:

It is not with Prigogine but because of Prigogine that I came to the conviction that it was important to celebrate experimental success, the successful differentiation between 'fact' and artifact to which experimental proof obligates us, not to authorize a vision of the world, but rather to create beings whose autonomy is *specified* by the requirements that the obligations of proof have brought to bear upon them, requirements they were able to satisfy.

Here we have some of Stengers's key concepts: experimentation, artefact, requirements and obligations.

Experimentation does not simply refer to scientific experiments, though such experiments can display the necessary elements if they also accept that what is produced by experiments are not 'facts' but artefacts. Throughout this text, Stengers adopts the term 'factishes' (with a nod to Latour) to describe the particular and peculiar types of being which are constructed by successful experimentation. Such factishes are autonomous beings, created in and through experimentation but are not, therefore, mere fictions. They have an effectivity and reality to the extent that they exhibit and respond to the requirements and obligations specified by the experiment. Stengers does not limit such experimentation to the operations of science; philosophy too, for example, can be experimental, so long as it stipulates its requirements and obligations. In this way, Stengers aims to move beyond the sterile terrain of the so-called Science Wars towards genuine productive inquiry. It is the twin notions of 'requirements' and 'obligations' that differentiate between

'scientific' or 'successful' practices and those which fall outside of these.

Much of the rest of this volume could be seen as an extension of the concepts delineated above, though each of the remaining two 'books' is much more than simple illustration. Book Two is titled 'The Invention of Mechanics: Power and Reason' and in it Stengers turns her attention to the question of the laws of physics and their supposed elaboration of the concept and reality of a 'state'. This notion of 'state' is one, Stengers argues, that haunts modern physics and modern thought. It involves the presupposition that the most objective account of reality involves a description of the conditions and status of all the items involved at a given instant. For example, with regard to the question of the distinction between the mind and the brain, a pressing philosophical, scientific and social scientific problem with implications for the very existence of consciousness, the terms in which the scientific and materialist position are formulated rely upon an assumption of the validity of the concept of 'state' without being able to explain either what constitutes it, or what it is meant to explain. 'In fact, nothing is more indeterminate than the identity of a "state of the central nervous system", and the behaviour of such a state, which is to say, the "laws" it is supposed to obey and in terms of which thought would be explained.' This is not, however, to celebrate or support those who insist that the mind, thought or consciousness are different in kind from the brain and cannot be reduced to or explained by the physical state of the central nervous system. Stengers insists that the inability of both sides of the argument to make clear what would count as evidence for their arguments, what constitutes the requirements and obligations of their respective positions, entails that we have not moved beyond Leibniz's statement that "'mechanical reasons", based on Descartes's figures and movements, would never explain perception'. Stengers does not then try to solve the mind-brain problem or to deconstruct once and for all the concept of state. Rather, she aims to delineate the original problem to which the creation of the concept of state was designed to respond. That is to say, she isolates the specificity of its development and its application in the field of mechanics. In doing so, she argues that 'proper' scientific concepts respond to the singularity of a problem and are not catch-all generalities.

Following from Galileo's work on the rate of falling bodies, there arose the problem of accounting for the velocity of such bodies at a given instant, given that they are accelerating. How can acceleration

be captured at a fixed instant? Any falling body, at any instant, has a specific velocity, but at that instant the velocity cannot be assessed in terms of any distance as it is precisely the 'timeless' character of velocity at an instant which is of interest. Furthermore, as Galileo's bodies are accelerating, this velocity is not fixed but changes from instant to instant. The answer to this problem is produced when the 'instantaneous velocity of a falling body is defined as the "effect" of its past ... And it is also the "cause" of its future'. This leads to a specific conception of cause and effect as 'reciprocally self-determining'; indeed there is a 'dynamic equivalence between cause and effect'. The success of Galileo in 'the making of the first true experimental "factish"' is to provide the measurement, the meaning of the measurement and an explanation of the instantaneous state(s) of falling bodies. This is the birth of the concept of different 'states' which in and of themselves can explain the state which precedes it or follows it. Stengers admires this construction but insists that its success is one which only relates to mechanics, to the measurement of falling bodies. The subsequent expansion of this notion to questions such as the state of the central nervous system or the state of the economy is to misunderstand the original function and extension of the concept of state and to misuse its power. This results not in elucidation but in mystification of the status and authority of science. 'I don't believe', writes Stengers, 'that there has been any concept to this day that has been so misused, that has involved such disastrous blends of intuitive pseudo-evidence and an operation of disqualification, as the concept of "state".' The insistence, by contrast, that such states have a level of objectivity and ability to explain pervades debates not just in science but those regarding the distinction between the mind and the brain, and the constitution of society. So, it is common but erroneous to hold that 'if we could fully describe an instantaneous situation (the neuronal brain, or even a society), we could deduce its behaviour over time.' The seed of such a position is to be found, according to Stengers, in what she calls the 'Lagrangian Event'. This refers to the success of the eighteenth-century mathematician Lagrange in producing a theorem whereby the description of forces is dislocated from any particular occurrence of such forces. Unlike Galileo, whose descriptions always involved the specificity of the relation of bodies to (accelerating) force and whose notion of equilibrium or an instantaneous state was tied to the experimental requirements and obligations which he outlined, Lagrange generalizes Galileo's

account so that ‘the effect of forces can be defined independently of whether the bodies on which they act are in a state of rest or in motion.’ But such a generalization is achieved by a ‘mathematical sleight of hand’, which entails that Lagrange’s theory is premised on a ‘fiction’. For, where Galileo only ever produced an account of equilibrium that was exhibited by and through the relation of accelerating force and falling bodies, Lagrange abstracts from this situation to attempt to describe the possible relation of any force on any body. As Stengers puts it:

What this means – and it is here that the power of the Lagrangian fiction comes into its own – is that the description of the instantaneous state can be construed as if it referred to a state of static equilibrium like that of the Galilean weight–counterweight situation. ‘As is’ is the keyword of the Lagrangian event.

The power of the ‘=’ sign is essential to this construction. For it appears to provide a validity and authority, explicating an equality in reality, where in fact this equality relies upon a fictionalized notion of the equilibrium of an instantaneous state which is no longer defined in relation to any specific situation or event. Some might see this as a great advance: the moment where mathematical equations became, apparently, able to describe and explain all, without assuming or being tied to anything in particular. But, for Stengers, such a procedure is unwarranted in so far as it ignores the fact that the apparent power of such equations relies upon a fictionalized concept of equilibrium.

One further damaging consequence of this is that the notion of cause appears to drop out of the equation. ‘When the economist “represents a system” using “Lagrangian” equations, he obviously avoids having to determine “causes.” He simply introduces equilibria and can, justifiably, claim that equilibrium is a neutral concept ... But he also exploits the definitional power of equivalence.’ Cause is not eliminated but is no longer mentioned, it simply becomes a functional but invisible aspect of the objectivity of a dynamic system and the states in which such a system consist and purport to explain. To sum up, Stengers argues, contemporary arguments and debates which still insist upon invoking some notion of a state or state-function to make or support their arguments do so without acknowledging the primary fiction upon which such arguments, and view of the world, rely. Our present quiescence in the face of equations as explanations of reality repeat the unwarranted extension of the limited but valid pronouncements of eighteenth-century ‘rational mechanics’ to the post-Lagrangian position where the

‘=’ sign assumes its overarching power: ‘the condition of possibility for “reducing” mechanical problems to a problem of mathematical analysis’. This is a problem that we still inhabit.

There is much more to *Cosmopolitics* than just an elaboration of the concept of ‘state’. I have focused on this argument as it indicates the depth and detail of scholarship and analysis that Stengers develops throughout her text. It also points to her specific and productive approach to science and philosophy, which eschews simple critique and insists upon a full engagement with the technical aspect and animus of the problems under consideration. The later stages of this volume consider how notions of dynamics developed into descriptions of the movements of all bodies in the universe, especially planetary and stellar motions; the rise in importance of thermodynamics; the apparently contradictory concepts of the conservation of energy and the dissipation of energy (entropy); reversibility and irreversibility (the arrow of time); the shift to the definition of motion in terms of atoms instead of planets; the ‘invention of theoretical physics’ and the faith of the physicist in a unified conception of the world, a world which we cannot see but the physicist can report upon. Stengers addresses all these with a remarkable degree of knowledge, insight and detail. She is not afraid of asking the reader to follow her into the depths of some mathematical problems. Yet she manages to do this in a way that leads the attentive reader through these difficult fields, and we soon emerge with a rewarding and fresh perspective on contemporary problems of the constitution and construction of reality. No specialist knowledge is required to manage to successfully steer a path through this book (though it might be worth looking up certain key terms, such as the second law of thermodynamics), but a level of conceptual attention is needed to get the most out of it. Having said this, Stengers’s arguments are unfortunately not always well served by this translation. Her style and mode of argument, in the French version of the text, whilst not overly simple are always clear and incisive. This is not always replicated in the English translation, and there are some clumsy constructions which produce ambiguities not there in the original. This means that the reader has occasionally to put in more effort than they otherwise might have. Yet, such effort will be amply rewarded, for *Cosmopolitics I* is not just an important intervention in the history and philosophy of science; it announces a new and original approach to the problems and procedures of philosophy.

Michael Halewood

Throw some shapes, man

Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2011. xii + 312 pp., £56.50 hb., £21.95 pb., 978 0 80475 787 4 hb., 978 0 80475 788 1 pb.

The acknowledgements to Peter Fenves's new monograph on Walter Benjamin, *The Messianic Reduction*, tell us that its material supersedes two earlier attempts to 'capture the argument proposed'. Chiefly, it expands on the fifty-page chapter found in his 2001 book *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (also with Stanford). Two features of this account are noteworthy: first, Fenves is convinced of the importance of Benjamin's study in Munich in 1916 and the engagement thereby initiated with Husserlian phenomenology; second, he insists on a direct connection to contemporary mathematical set theory initiated by Georg Cantor, through his Munich study, his great-uncle Arthur Schönflies (one of the major early exponents of Cantorian theory), and his friendship with Gershom Scholem (initially a student of mathematics). The main difference from Fenves's earlier book lies in the privileging of a note made by Scholem regarding one afternoon's conversation with Benjamin during a three-day stay in Munich.

The Messianic Reduction offers a revision of our understanding of the early Benjamin. Each of its seven chapters focuses on a particular essay along with associated fragments and notes made available in the *Gesammelte Schriften*. The chosen essays range from 1914/15 ('Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin') to the obligatory 'Critique of Violence', published in 1921. Included as an Appendix are Fenves's own translations into English of two fragments both entitled 'The Rainbow' – discussion of these form the core of two early chapters, the interpretation of which underpins the claims for Benjamin's phenomenological orientation via the philosophical treatment of colour. Other chapters read the unpublished short essays 'On Language as Such and on Human Language' (1916) and 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy' (presented as a gift to Scholem on his twentieth birthday in 1918).

Now these essays are certainly key to an understanding of the systematic structure of Benjamin's early work, but Fenves neglects the major published essays of the same period, such as the long essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*. This is perplexing: as the book admits that it does not attempt 'full coverage' of Benjamin's early work, the overall coordinates of the project, and its decisions of scope and selection,

need to be extrapolated. One might think that Fenves believes satisfactory accounts of these works can be found elsewhere but there is almost no significant reference to other scholarship in this area. Certainly the presentation would have benefited from positioning in relation to something like Howard Caygill's far clearer treatment of some of the same material in *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (1998). Indeed, it rather seems that Fenves understands his distinctive theses to overthrow previous scholarship and that the attention to the relatively unknown notes and fragments provides the apparatus to support novel readings of the essays with which most readers will be more familiar.

As an alternative explanation, vague comments in the Introduction lead me to conclude that Fenves is isolating Benjamin's 'philosophy', and as such is continuing a polemic against Bernd Witte and Rodolphe Gasché that can be seen in the footnotes to *Arresting Language*. That is, there has been some debate about whether Benjamin can be seen as a 'philosopher' since his writings lack sustained conceptual rigour and argumentation. The decision then to focus on places where Benjamin can be shown to have read and explicitly responded to Frege (with whom Scholem studied in Jena) and Russell, in notes from 1915 onwards, goes some way towards a rebuttal – the philosophical workings behind some texts can be laid out. But, at the same time, Fenves seems to accept the contours of this argument in agreeing that Benjamin does not develop his philosophical tendencies systematically, that they 'culminate' with the 'Epistemo-Critical Preface' to the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* where he breaks off because 'traditional philosophy' cannot accompany him far on his intellectual trajectory. As such, these assumptions about what counts as philosophy proper seem to lead to the exclusion of the 'literary work'. Bracketed off in this way, the philosophical coordinates of the essays on Goethe and the Romantics are lost and Fenves misses the concerted development of the metaphysics of the mythic and divine or 'holy' therein. This is a shame as it would provide more thorough textual grounding for his discussion of Benjamin's references to infinity in relation to set theory. Though present in the early essay on language, presentation of this metaphysics would have gained from

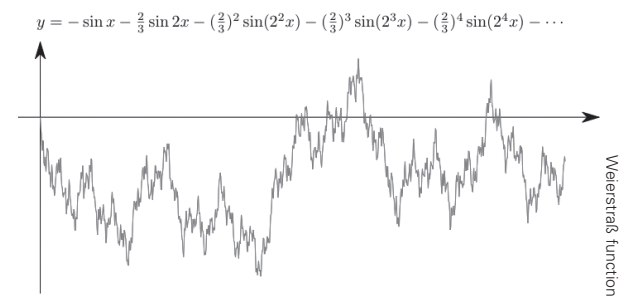
consideration of the far richer excursus of the novel concepts, not discussed by Fenves, of critique, irony and caesura. These have analogous functions in so far as mythic totality (within which there is an infinity of possible ‘inscriptions’ or expressions) finds its forms of closure suspended, interrupted or deposed (in the case of revolutionary violence) and hence opened up to the holy – a different ‘power’ (*Mächtigkeit*) of infinity.

A corollary of this misguided interpretative protocol is the weighting given to notes, fragments and unpublished private sketches. It is not clear that we can rush to accord any significant status to this material simply because it is located in the collected writings. We latecomers, who have the privilege of surveying all known writings of Benjamin in handy volumes, must develop procedures for then avoiding an illegitimate ‘levelling’ of those disparate texts into an unwarranted syncretism – ‘Benjamin’s thought’. Given Benjamin’s own writings on historical materialism, this cannot pass unremarked. At this point, I should also note that no concessions are made to a general reader in *The Messianic Reduction*: Fenves uses his own translations (not always improvements) and refers only to the *Gesammelte Schriften*. The reader will need to have those to hand, especially volumes VI and VII, to follow what is going on, since Fenves’s exposition is erratic and largely sacrificed in favour of strip-mining the fragments for citation to support his selective readings.

The claimed proximity to Husserlian phenomenology is largely based on two sources. The first is a short phenomenological exercise prepared by Benjamin in 1916, ‘Eidos und Begriff’ (‘Eidos and Concept’), which describes looking at an inkblot. The second is the reference in Benjamin’s curriculum vitae penned in 1928 (CV III in volume two of the *Selected Writings*). This two-page document does mention the place of Plato, Kant, Husserl and the Marburg School in his early studies, but indicates that these have been left behind. Indeed, he allies his current approach with Benedetto Croce, with its ‘destruction of the theory of artistic form’, not Husserl. Fenves attempts to hang the connection on the use of ‘eidetic’ in the phrase an ‘eidetic way of observing phenomena’ (*der eidetischen Betrachtung der Erscheinungen*), which is separated by three paragraphs from the single mention of Husserl, who has no copyright on the term.

Fenves comments that Benjamin does not specify what separates his method from Husserl and that his book ‘seeks to make up for this lacuna by determining the point where Benjamin’s philosophical investigations part ways with “Husserl’s philosophy.”’ But the CV overall clearly indicates an approach to literature the

like of which cannot be found in any writing of Husserl. As such, a fixed idea animates this approach, which can be dismissed quite easily. Other evidence is circumstantial: yes, Benjamin read some Husserl and some phenomenological terms occur on occasion (*Wesenheit*, *Gegenständlichkeit*), but the vocabulary and themes of the texts on colour, for example, resonate more with Wassily Kandinsky, whose own Munich connection is not discussed and whose writings are ignored.



Similar problems surround the decision to privilege the short diary entry made by Scholem in 1916, which is included in translation as an Appendix. (To repeat, this is the main differentiating feature from Fenves’s earlier book.) It is barely half a page and an alternative account is already found in the memoir *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. Now, by far the most useful passage of the book is where Fenves contextualizes this mathematical conversation about curves and the possible ‘shape of time’ in relation to the studies that Scholem was pursuing with Konrad Knopp on differential equations. Scholem records that both he and Benjamin rejected the idea that historical time is best represented as an irreversible passage in one direction along a straight line. Scholem then discusses alternative shapes – time as a cycloid, or a continuous curve that is nowhere differentiable, but every point is a sharp turn (Fenves deduces that the reference is to Karl Weierstraß’s ‘pathological’ trigonometric function, a precursor to fractals). In a rather odd oversight, Fenves provides no diagrams here, nor even an illustrative equation, so the reader is forced to turn to other books to consider the sense of the claims. Odder still, Fenves misses the open goal that would connect this reference to Appendix B of ‘On the Concept of History’ with its concluding sentence: ‘For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.’ But it is clear that Fenves wants more than to present further material to inform and complicate that gnomic text. Instead he insists in the exhilarated prose of his final two pages that this note, in connection with the Husserlian influence, explains Benjamin’s later idea of historical time, and

that such an 'enigmatic phenomenon', the true shape of time, is only 'captured' by means of a 'thoroughgoing epoche' which suspends the 'natural attitude', the belief in progress, as so to allow time 'as it truly is' to be 'freed from the mistaken image of its measurable flow'.

I would like to be able to present this coup as sufficiently intriguing to justify the book's methodological faults but in a monograph, rather than an essay, more rigour is to be expected. There is no consideration of what it might mean to decode Benjamin's text, from over twenty years later, through a note made by Scholem, but by focusing on the diary note rather than the related paragraph in the memoir Fenves misses a crucial sentence. In Harry Zohn's translation: 'I [Scholem] said *we had no way of knowing* that time does not behave like certain curves that demonstrate a steady sequence at every point but have at no single point a tangent, that is a determinable direction.' The implication is obvious: the shape of historical time can be thought but not known. As limited beings occupying the 'curve', we are not in a position to determine its shape though we can *and do* think it. As an idea, it can be orienting, but no shape is intuitable by virtue of anything like a phenomenological reduction – only structures of temporality or historicity, which are already different again.

There is a further consideration here. By isolating 'philosophical writings', Fenves tries to argue that what goes underground with the Prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book, reappears roughly fifteen years later. This evades a vexed issue in Benjamin scholarship: that of intellectual development and the fact that in responding to events he lived through, his 'thought' was dynamic even at its base. If the early writings are too rich a resource to be viewed as juvenilia (written in Benjamin's early to mid-twenties), the onus is still on Fenves to demonstrate that this early systematic orientation, Benjamin's self-described 'German period', was not abandoned, following encounters with Communism and the commission to translate Proust.

Scholem made the crucial diary entry when eighteen. Another diary entry, made by Werner Kraft in 1934, records a conversation with Benjamin in the Bibliothèque Nationale: 'in response to my question as to whether he still held to the position of 'Critique of Violence', he denied it.... What he earlier called divine ('sovereign') violence was an empty point [*ein leerer Fleck*], a limit concept, a regulative idea.' Benjamin had moved on and the essay on the concept of history does not confirm a metaphysical continuity with his early writings. The shortcut with which Fenves closes his book – connecting 1916 with 1940 – appears

wishful without reconstructing several necessary intermediate steps. There are also notes and fragments on truth and other philosophical topics dating from after 1930, and these display quite different structures.

At root, *The Messianic Reduction* fails to develop any appropriate method for reading Benjamin today. It is so partial and commences from such illegitimate premisses that I prefer the earlier book, *Arresting Language*; certainly the material on Cantor, the strongest link in Fenves's argument, is better developed there. The attempt to extend the material on Husserl in conjunction with the notes and fragments develops in such a way that those who read that material otherwise are given no reason to revise their opinions. It does not work as commentary and the attempt to move towards philosophical conclusions in the final pages goes beyond any argument or resource developed from within the book. Tellingly, Fenves does not show us a representation of the Weierstraß function, supposedly the glimpsed shape of messianic time, since, once seen, further doubts about his claims arise.

Andrew McGettigan

The better half

Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2010. 196 pp., £60.00 hb., 978 0 74863 863 5.

There's an old Ziggy cartoon that finds the eponymous misanthrope standing waist-deep in water in a flooded basement, remarking to nobody in particular: 'I wonder if this is one of those times an optimist would say it's half-empty?' Acerbic as ever, Ziggy here delivers a signal lesson on the essential pliability of the negative and the positive as ideological categories, as well as their mutual implication as concepts. If the positive and the negative are complementary forces in any given situation, then the question of which is more manifest is oftentimes a matter of perspective. In other words, if the relation between the positive and negative is arguably metaphysical 'in itself', then our knowledge of that relation as well as our assessment of it must be primarily epistemological. But as Ziggy shows us, sometimes it can be surprising to discern what is negative and what is positive in a unique case. Even worse, sometimes the negative is what turns out to be most positive; indeed the negative is what is most desirable in the last instance.

The desire to recuperate a practicable concept of negativity that does not immediately transmogrify into positivity is the driving force of Benjamin Noys's *The Persistence of the Negative*, an intervention which serves as a sharp corrective to the tendency towards what Noys calls 'affirmationism' in contemporary Continental theory. Against those who welcome the flood and insist that the best we can do is ride its waves to the ceiling, Noys insists on maintaining the 'half-empty' part to forestall the rising tide of globalized capitalism. Closely related to his concept of affirmationism (the welcoming of the flood) is the pathology Noys deems accelerationism (the desire for it to flood faster). This is the idea that the worse it gets, the better it gets. In other words, if we can allow a state of utter destitution to come about – be it through total capitalist saturation or apocalyptic collapse – then and only then will we get the emancipation we deserve. It is often the ironic sign of a critique's success that its object so often seems unworthy of criticism after the fact. It should be evident that uncritically affirming the present state of affairs not only prolongs it; it sanctifies and intensifies it. That Noys renders this obvious is one of the book's major successes.

And yet, fortunately for his subjects, as well as his readers, exasperated dismissal is not Noys's intellectual mode. Instead, he presents us with an immanent critique of the contemporary thinkers of affirmationism, isolating and cultivating the moments of negativity in their respective projects. For example, Noys focuses on Antonio Negri's early writings to emphasize the moment of the negative that permits the emergence of constituent power, the *potenza* that is always opposed to the *potentia* of constituted power – that is, the state. Similarly, with Deleuze, 'the affirmative philosopher *par excellence*', we find crucial moments of determinant negation in his 1967 essay on structuralism. The key notion here is *moments*, in the plural. Rather than the appeal to a 'teeming mass' or an absolute 'Void' that provides a groundless, though still singular, ground of infinite differentiation, what we find in Deleuze's assessment of structuralism is an emphasis on the plurality of 'points' where negativity is in play, shaping and determining a variety of sequences. It is such moments of negativity that are crucial for Noys, whose ultimate aim is not simply to erect a dam against affirmationist currents but to develop a *thinking* of negation (rather than, his book's title notwithstanding, a reified 'negative') that might yield a more robust *practice* of localized negativities.

Here, however, the conceptual slipperiness of the negative/positive relation makes Noys's own

assessments problematic. For in the final analysis the problem that Noys has with Deleuze and Negri is not so much their affective disinclination towards the negative, but simply the fact that its moment is passed over too quickly in their projects. The result is that Noys seeks a more durable negativity, one that is 'modest' and 'patient' and that correlates with the 'ruptural preservation of past and existing negations of capitalist relations'. The puzzle of 'ruptural preservation' names the problem in that it is unclear how Noys can truly maintain his negativist stripes when he seems rather quick to affirm past moments of negativity. To be sure, Noys avoids a cloying deference to May '68 and other instances of revolt; and yet his commitment to a Marxist-cum-Benjaminian conception of political praxis means tagging these revolts as cumulative instances in a metahistory of revolutionary advance. The complicating tendencies of this affirmative stance are compounded by the fact that the relation between myriad points of negativity and Noys's commitment to making these points more 'durable', effectively converting them from points to lines, is theoretically underdeveloped. One of the signal virtues of the book is its desire to decouple negativity as a practice from ruminations on negativity as a metaphysical force. But the manner in which Noys insists upon the tenacity of past moments of negativity serves to reinscribe a metaphysical pathos within them; they cease to be historical instances of negation and become instead episodes in the History of the Negative.

This equivocation points to a more fundamental one at the heart of Noys's analysis, but before addressing it further it should first be noted that each of Noys's readings – of Derrida, Latour and Badiou, in addition to Deleuze and Negri – is remarkably illuminating in its own right. His assessment of Badiou in particular manages to distil the intellectual trajectory of the thinker's four decades (and counting) in an incisive critique of the essentially *passive* role the subject plays for Badiou, as a vehicle for the consequences of eventual truths. As with Negri and Deleuze, Noys is frustrated by how quickly the negation that brokers events gives way to the affirmation of the event itself, and the consequent conversion of a negating agent into a servile yes-man to the indiscernible. Badiou has been heralded for bringing the subject back into structuralism and poststructuralism, presently and retrospectively. But Noys shows us the cost. Breaking with the linguistic play generated by the equivocal *sujet*, which ultimately tends towards the passive, Noys invites us to rethink agency even as he realizes that agents are, as Perry Anderson has noted, often subject to the same active/



passive equivocation as subjects (e.g. ‘free agents’ or ‘agents of a foreign power’).

Still, Noys prefers agency to subjectivity because the latter ‘tend[s] to ontologize or substantialize agency as a capacity of the subject’. This instance is one among several in the book where Noys makes clear his antipathy to ontology and metaphysics. Indeed, in many respects his immanent critique is classically Marxist in its rejection of idealist vanities in favour of a more pointed focus on practice, sensuous or otherwise. There is nevertheless a way in which Noys’s own equivocation regarding ontology could stand a little more critique, not as the metaphysical unleashing of the negative, but in precisely the more mundane sense that Noys also wants to see deployed in political practice. For subtending Noys’s immanent critique of affirmationism is an understanding of capitalism as a historical phenomenon that consists, in its essentials, of ‘real abstractions’. The paradox is of course the point, and here Noys’s work enters into productive dialogue with the recent efforts of Moishe Postone, Alberto Toscano and others to stop lamenting abstraction so that we might engage the machinations of capital on its own ground, which is, precisely, the abstract. The main virtue of this move is apparent; critiques of the abstract tend to criticize it in the name of something more real that is obscured by abstraction. But in so far as capitalism operates via the abstraction of the value-form, there is no putative real value that is obscured and that is thereby waiting to be recuperated. Treating

the abstractions of capitalism as real thus forestalls the nostalgia of primitivism. And yet, crucial to the disagreement between Alfred Sohn-Rethel, the source of much renewed thinking on the subject, and his erstwhile interlocutors of the Frankfurt School was the question of whether or not these ‘real abstractions’ were historically dependent upon the advent of capitalism as a social form, or instead were part and parcel of a more generalized epistemology indifferent to historical epochs. In this latter vision, capitalism becomes a variant rather than a basis, and it is for this reason that Sohn-Rethel conceived of his project as a wholesale Marxist critique of Kantian epistemology. But by historicizing abstraction he also managed to ‘ontologize’ it, which is to say he made our knowledge of abstraction dependent upon a prior abstraction inherent in our historical modality of being. The result is not so much a Marxist epistemology as a Marxist metaphysics.

This dispute eclipses an alternative, which Noys’s work gestures towards but never fully articulates. It is clear that Noys seeks to develop a thinking of the practical negations of the ‘real abstractions’ of capitalism. Time and again, he describes these ‘real abstractions’ as the ‘ontology’ of capital; abstraction is simply capital’s way of being in the world. But instead of engaging these abstractions *epistemologically* – that is, by negating their appeals to some kind of deeper ontological integrity or basis – Noys grants too much to the discursive terrain of ontology as such. For example, the concluding paragraph of his book addresses the ‘aporia of agency’ as the most urgent problem to consider. Here Noys writes: ‘Part of the necessity for the posing of this problem is to regard capitalism itself as an ontological, metaphysical and philosophical form. In this way we can more accurately assess our own philosophical and theoretical concepts of agency.’ Just because capitalism’s ‘agents’ – whether they know it or not – experience or regard it as ‘an ontological, metaphysical and philosophical form’ does not mean that I have to as a critic of it. Perhaps a first step in negating the depredations of capitalist reification might be to stop reifying capitalism as a ‘form’. Noys cautions that if ‘we do not think capitalism then capitalism will certainly think us’. Setting aside the substantialization of capitalism’s subjectivity here, which may be rhetorically astute but which goes against the grain of Noys’s own distrust of such manoeuvres, the question nevertheless insists: must we think capitalism on capitalism’s own terms? Immanent critique is all well and good up to a point, but it becomes self-defeating when it serves to reinforce the nominally ontological

soundness of a structure rather than making manifest its essentially epistemological flimsiness.

To be clear, what is advanced here is not a new accelerationism that would bring about a socio-political collapse of the structure – Noys is to be commended, incidentally, for recognizing certain virtues of the state-form – but a robust critical negativity that might bring about the collapse of epistemic appeals to ontological ground. The rendering passive of agents or subjects is Noys's primary concern, and he clearly wants to hold capitalism to blame. But the actual stuff of his critique focuses on discursive appeals to ontology and metaphysics that render subjects inert. In other words, his book is not about how capitalism makes us passive via its real abstractions, but about how theorists render us passive in their artful constructions of capitalism and the ways to engage it. To be sure, the 'real abstractions' of capitalism must be criticized in thought and practice. But arguably

the most fundamental error of the targets of Noys's immanent critique is that they ontologize these abstractions when it is more urgent that they be banalized. For negating an abstraction, capitalist or otherwise, is a quintessentially theoretical practice. Indeed, an epistemological critique makes it clear that the flood doesn't actually care whether the house is half-empty or half-full and that our own assessment in such terms gains nothing from absolutizing the contrast as an instance of metaphysics or historical ontology. Ultimately the most profound lesson of Noys's volume is that negativity is only viable, indeed is only a virtue, when it is decoupled from metaphysical reifications of the negative and conceived as the non-generalizable effects of discrete agents levelling local interventions. Noys will thus surely recognize the compliment in the critique: in this respect, *The Persistence of the Negative* is not persistent or negative enough.

Knox Peden

Different class

Andrea Cavalletti, *Classe*, Bollatti Boringhieri, Turin, 2009. 160 pp., €9.00 pb., 978 88 339 1982 9.

Recent political events have given questions of collective political action a new urgency. The upsurges in the Arab world, the workers' protest in Wisconsin, the huge demonstrations of precarious workers in Portugal – which took more than 200,000 people onto the streets in a country with a weak tradition of political mobilization – social unrest in England, France, Italy or Greece, all these have contributed to a renewed consideration of popular insurgency. They have also given a new relevance to theoretical questions concerning the collective subject of politics. If politics is to be understood as something different to the current management of state affairs, an understanding to which parliamentary democracy seems to be ever more unashamedly reduced – as can be seen in the recent turmoil over budget control in many countries of the EU – then the question poses itself as to who, or what subject, is supposed to perform such politics.

Once again theory here runs the risk of playing the role of Minerva's owl, coming too late after the facts, and their traces in social reality long exhausted. Yet perhaps the question of the temporal displacement between historical sequences and their theoretical interpretation is a misplaced one. Perhaps the rub does not lie therein, but in the role an emancipatory theory can play in the struggle for the hegemonic *interpretation* of these political events, a role

in which the deconstruction of mainstream narratives, and their associated modes of identification and classificatory schemes, plays a part that should not be underestimated. Such modes of identification and categorization provide the dominant ways in which mainstream media, and political opinion-makers associated with the status quo, have been making sense of current popular revolts.

Thinking the subject of politics outside such modes of identification has constituted the project of some of the most visible strands of political theory in continental philosophy of the last decades – the theme of the multitude in the writings of the authors who stem from the tradition of Italian *Operaismo*, such as Negri, Hardt, Virno and Mezzadra, the idea of a part-of-no-part in Rancière, the subject faithful to a truth-process in Badiou, the constitution of the contingent and articulated subject of populist politics in Laclau, or the rethinking of the emancipatory potential of a non-national conception of the 'people' in Hallward, are some of the cases in point. Common to all these is the effort to think beyond the Marxist theories of the working class as the privileged subject of emancipatory and anti-capitalist struggle, an effort to which the 'years 1968' (to borrow the expression of French historian Xavier Vigna) have contributed in a more decisive way than the collapse of the former Eastern socialist

bloc in 1989. At stake in this has been the conception of class and class politics presupposed and practised by workers' organizations, such as trade unions and the socialist parties closely associated with such unions, a conception that was strongly determined by the figure of the wage earner in developed societies. What the struggles around '68, in France and elsewhere brought with them was not only a critique of such a conception, and of its corresponding exclusions – domestic workers, immigrants, the lumpenproletariat – but also of the politics associated with them. Trade unions and socialist parties came increasingly to be accused of confining themselves to the role of representatives of the interests of salaried workers, the problem being precisely the *representation* and the *interests* at issue here. Representing interests meant, for those critiques, accepting the role of negotiating a share of the overall profits of the functioning of the capitalist economy, with the mediation of the state, and withdrawing from class politics its anti-systemic potential.

If the answer of the above-mentioned theoreticians has been to abandon the concept of class, or, at best, to reformulate it beyond recognition (as is arguably the case with the concept of multitude in the hands of the post-*Operaismo* theorists) the notion of the working class or the proletariat as collective political subjectivity was never entirely abandoned in the most radical fringes of Marxist theory, which instead tried to reformulate the idea of class taking into account these critiques. It is in the context of those traditions that the book *Classe*, by Andrea Cavalletti, a teacher of aesthetics and literature in Venice, and student of Giorgio Agamben, must be understood, even if the dialogue with those currents of thought is, in this text, an oblique conversation. Such obliqueness derives also, no doubt, from the Benjaminian inspiration of the work. It surfaces not only in the discussions of Benjamin's texts that constitute, arguably, the most important part of the book, but also, and perhaps in a more decisive way, in the style in which the book is written, where a unity based on the sequential concatenation of argument is elided in favour of a fragmentary approach, where *fin de siècle* urbanism finds its place together with sociological and psychoanalytical theories of the crowd, and with unorthodox readings of classical Marxist texts.

It is in those readings – of Benjamin, Adorno (whose fragmentary style of reasoning this book also evokes), Lukács and Marx – that the kernel of the book's reflection on class can be found, as well as a consideration of its opposite: the modern masses. Cavalletti's dialectical opposition between mass and class relies heavily on a note to the essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of its

Technological Reproducibility' – a note that Adorno, in his letter to Benjamin on 18 of March 1936, considered 'to be among the most profound and most powerful statements of political theory I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*' – where Benjamin subverts conservative discourses on the danger of the masses. In line with contemporary mass psychology, Benjamin sees the mass as a compact, driven more by emotional than rational factors, whose reactive character and unmediated responses to exterior impulses make it a potential subject of fascist and anti-Semitic mobilization. But this mass is to be found not among the popular classes, but instead in the petty bourgeoisie. According to Benjamin's political physics, the mass subsists in the compression to which the existence of the petty bourgeoisie is subjected, between the rival classes of the proletariat and the capitalist, where there is no space for the emergence of subjectivity – that is, of politics. Instead, the mass is more properly the populational continuum that the science of biopolitical governmentality constituted as its object (Cavalletti's previous 2005 book, *La Città Biopolitica: Mitologie della Sicurezza*, is a genealogy of modern security apparatuses, deeply influenced by Foucault). The mass is thus to everyday existence what class is to the revolutionary moment of rupture with the dominant order. The proletariat as a political subject, in its turn, resists every objectifying representational effort, since to the external schematizing eyes of the oppressor it can only appear as a compact mass – because solidarity, in which the proletariat constitutes itself, is invisible to any external look, to the look of non-solidarity. For Cavalletti, solidarity indeed means the neutralization of the categories of subject and object, of any relation premised on the distant regard such categories presuppose, and indeed such solidarity is nothing other than the revolutionary struggle in which class exists – a struggle that can only lead to a further compression of the bourgeois masses.

It is important to point out that the dichotomy between mass and class is not supposed to serve as an identifying device, one through which the social space finds itself divided into groups to which different political roles are ascribed. No stable identities can be obtained from the dialectics between mass and class. For the mass, becoming-class is always a hypothesis, one that has its condition of emergence in the loosening (*auflockerung*) of social compression, a loosening that is the proper work of solidarity. Solidarity, which is where class exists, means the abolition of the internal rivalry between its members and abandoning the framework where individual and collective stand as

two opposite poles. Such opposition is the mode of existence of the masses, whose compressed living is reflected in social and economic competition, a competition that tends to exacerbate as class struggles intensifies. Where the mode of living of the masses corresponds to the capitalist machine, the coming into being of class is the loosening of the grip of the machine. If class is just a hypothesis it is because if, as Benjamin warned, action is not taken in the decisive moment, then the mass can give way to the reactive hate of the crowd.

Such a summary presents, in a condensed form, what in Cavalletti's book takes a far more fragmentary approach, which constantly avoids a linear development between its fifty-five highly condensed paragraphs, and whose interrelation is instead fashioned more in the style of Benjamin's dialectic image than what we are used to expect from a philosophical or political treatise. In that regard, *Classe* could not be more different from a programmatic manifesto or a handbook for revolutionary action, and it seems to bear little relation to actual practices of resistance to capitalism. Yet it resonates with contemporary struggles. One of Cavalletti's preferred examples is the struggle over the working day. Such struggle, however, is not the struggle to reach a new adjustment of the capitalist relation itself, one in which the objectified interests of the workers, through their representatives, would be taken into account. Here, instead, Benjamin's imperative to have done with the linear and homogeneous conception of time, posited as an empty form to be filled by successive events, is transposed to a Marxist dialectics of limitation and the unlimited, where the capitalist drive to subsume every minute of workers' lives under the law of value – through the extension of the working day or through its intensification – must be met with the workers' ironic reversal of the usual moralist injunction of the bourgeois economist (which in these days is heard more than ever) to workers' frugality and parsimony in spending. To the capitalist appeal to workers' savings, the latter should respond with the parsimonious administration of their sole possession, their labour force: 'The parsimonious worker knows well that there's no instant that cannot be bought, *but precisely on account of that knows also that there is no instant that cannot be spared.*' On this basis, what Cavalletti has to offer in *Classe* is a non-programmatic communism, one that is not the enforcement of a pre-established agenda, but instead is realized through the strategic exiting of actually existing capitalist relations.

Bruno Dias

Radical, like in the eighties

Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011. 320 pp., £34.50 hb., 978 0 231 14938 9.

Dialectical Passions is a book about art and architectural theory in the wake of the New Left. It locates itself in the context of a turning tide in thinking – a movement away from the orthodoxies of what Day terms 'the long 1980s', which tended to an apolitical relativism (or at best to a politics of identity). The discourses surrounding contemporary art, in contrast, are becoming increasingly politicized, and the nature of this politics returning to issues such as the subject, history or totality that, for a while, tended to be dismissed as too metaphysical and even dangerously authoritarian. Taking such issues seriously again, Day proposes, places us in a Marxian–Hegelian tradition in which the dialectic is central.

In this regard, *Dialectical Passions* is a challenge to recent narratives of the history of postwar art theory. To problematize these, Day focuses on a thread of dialectical thought that runs back in time, through the 1980s (if in submerged form), to join with longer histories of radical discourse on culture. In particular, Day's investigation concerns the fate of notions and practices of negation during a period when such a concept was marginalized. To reconnect with a tradition of dialectical negation, she suggests, offers a key resource for an art theory wanting to engage with the radicalizing artistic and intellectual currents of today.

However, as Day astutely presents it, the politics of negation are certainly not monolithic or unproblematic, and the book sets out to explore the different 'valences' that negative thought has taken on. No-saying lies at the heart of socio-political refusal, but the negative is also the root of a melancholic 'Left-oriented nihilism'. That the book explores recent art theory as suspended between these poles seems indicative of the current state of radical thought; it also, however, marks Day's admirable scepticism towards the false comfort of easy answers, even (or especially) when these seem to hold out hope.

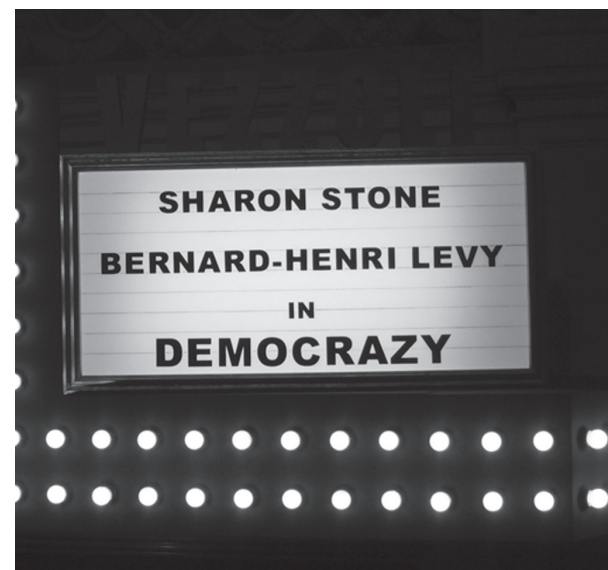
To pursue this end, the first half of the book contrasts T.J. Clark and Manfredo Tafuri, two writers with sustained but very different interests in notions of the negative, and who both exemplify the rigorous scepticism which Day champions. Day argues that Clark's conception of modernist 'practices of negation'

is at the core of his reinterpretation of Greenberg's narrative of the purification of medium. For her, the politics of Clark's account of modernism thus hinge on the relation he proposes between the formal negations of art and socio-political negation. He proposes that modern art's formal agitation does have a certain 'seriousness' in its recognition that it has implications for the institutions and languages in which power is lodged. However, for Clark, the refusal by a modernist artist such as Jackson Pollock of the established figurative and metaphorical modes through which an audience can determine artistic meaning is ultimately a symptom of the wider deadlock of a contradictory bourgeois society and culture, one that cannot be resolved artistically. This reading of the central stakes of Clark's understanding of modernism explains much about the melancholic tones of his *Farewell to an Idea*, though Day closes the chapter noting the more militant character of the Retort book, *Afflicted Powers*, Clark co-authored just a year later. Doing this, she poses us the challenge of gathering our 'afflicted powers' to transmute Clark's critical insights into a culture and criticism that moves beyond the impasse he seems to share with the artists he diagnoses.

It is Tafuri, then, who emerges as opening a view onto practices that might create a passage beyond the present. At its most obvious, Tafuri's account of the avant-garde seems (famously) somewhat pessimistic, proposing that it is precisely in its rebellion that vanguardist culture most replicates the negative and chaotic energies of capital (or, in Tafuri's term, the 'Metropolis'). Day, however, placing Tafuri's account back in the context of the debates of operaism, finds in it a far less nihilistic programme. She notes his counter-intuitively positive evaluation of the seemingly more co-opted post-avant-garde architecture and design that began to eschew rebellion against metropolitan conditions in order to work with and through them. Such art, Tafuri proposes, looks 'the Metropolis' squarely in the face. It is thus van der Rohe's active embrace of 'empty architecture' and 'silence' that constitutes a dialectical response to a 'world without quality'. Such work constitutes a Nietzschean 'completed nihilism' that Day argues comes very close to the process of the negative described by Hegel, and leads to the moment where new values become possible. Taking such a stance allows one to identify the radical moment within a contemporary architect such as Rem Koolhaas, who, like Mies, can be understood as representing a critical mode of practice that continues at the heart of capitalist culture and that has a role to play in fostering the movement to a world beyond the current one.

However, one might still wonder where such a position would leave a more explicitly political art, or what the results of translating Tafuri's logic into the realm of socio-political struggle rather than culture might be.

Rather than being organized around particular writers, the third and fourth chapters revolve around two different debates in recent art theory, and the centre of gravity of this second half of the book is the journal *OCTOBER*, taken as a key locus in anglophone art criticism in which poststructuralist and postmodern thought was taken up. The third chapter thus focuses on the debate around allegory ignited by Craig Owens's influential essay 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism' (1980).



Day traces the increasing flattening of the opposition between 'modernist' symbolism and 'postmodern' allegory as the terms became familiar in art discourse. To dismantle such an opposition, Day explores the ways in which allegory lies at the heart of modernist practices which are more canonically associated with the symbol, contrasting the more nuanced accounts of de Man and Benjamin with recent art theory's crude, periodizing opposition of the two modes.

The fourth chapter makes a valuable critique of a tendency in cultural criticism to take what writers believe to be capital's increasing dematerialization – and its subsequently enhanced powers of commodification and co-optation – as a reified obstacle to radical artistic practice. Day argues strongly that such an ontology of late capitalism draws on a misreading of the first chapter of Marx's *Capital* that has dogged twentieth-century cultural theory, namely the commonly repeated narrative that today use-value has been increasingly replaced by a pure and ungrounded exchange-value. She makes instead a close reading of Marx's dialectical articulation of use- and

exchange-value that insists on the necessarily continuing place of the materiality of labour and use-value at the heart of even the most phantasmagorical forms of financialized capital. Writers such as Foster, Buchloh and Jameson, then, end up fetishizing exchange-value, and risk envisioning capital as a frictionless machine immune to contradiction and cultural challenge. In turning away from the material relations that underpin contemporary capital they deprive themselves of grounds for resistance.

In a book such as Day's, critiquing recent intellectual trends and proposing new directions, one danger is that one's opponents become two-dimensional representatives of a reified category of thought (the 'postmodern') which one is attacking. Indeed, in a few places Day does set up a rather straw-man version of poststructuralism. However, particularly in the second half of the book, Day provides an admirable example of a properly dialectical relation to the thinkers she engages with, working through particular examples of writing with an eye for their strengths as well as their weaknesses. In this regard the book is less simply an argument against the postmodern (an argument which, in any case, has been made already), and more a Benjaminian act of recovery, through which a recent past of art theory can be rescued or redeemed for an ongoing critical project.

In this regard, Day's account of de Man in the chapter on allegory is exemplary. Day certainly comes to grips with the limits to his position. Her basic critique of deconstruction's version of the negative is clearest in her account of how de Man's complete refusal of closure becomes itself a kind of closure which, moreover, forecloses any moment of commitment. However, far from being the villain of the piece, de Man is introduced precisely to highlight the comparative flattening of conceptions of allegory in subsequent art-theoretical writing. Day notes that in spite of his association with deconstruction, de Man's work (even his late writing) is in fact often highly dialectical, citing Christopher Norris to suggest that 'deconstruction is indeed a form of negative dialectics'. At such moment, poststructuralism and its correlates seem to slip from view as the target of the work; one has the sense that Day's enemy is more properly, and more generally, the tendency of thought to harden into orthodoxy. For Day, it is, of course, dialectics which keeps it supple and in process; but as well as discovering in the 'long 1980s' a rejection of the theoretical foundations from which dialectics grew, she also finds, in its unpromising milieu, an embattled but ongoing concern with dialectical practices.

Overall, the value of *Dialectical Passions*, then, is its excavation, critique and revivification of this tradition of negation for contemporary art theory. Through her own impressive demonstration, Day shows the power of such a project to challenge thought's ossification, and to restore its 'pulse of freedom'. If it suggests that ours is a moment in which the outlines of a better future (and even the road to get there) are not yet clear, Day's critical mode of investigation, wary of both utopian mirages and melancholic attachments to the status quo, offers a way to refuse remaining stuck in an unsatisfactory present, expressing a (limited) optimism and a means for continuing at a moment in which, very possibly, things could be looking up for radical culture.

Luke White

Humming

David Toop, *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener*, Continuum, London and New York, 2010. 233 pp., £17.99 hb., 978 1 4414 972 5.

If there appears today to be an academic preoccupation with sound, and specifically with its two extremes 'noise' and 'silence', it is no doubt due to the scant attention paid to audible (and inaudible) phenomena within the history of aesthetic and art theory. Yet sound is everywhere, and runs constantly without respite. It is often seen as a polluting influence, which invades our private spaces, whereas windows can be curtained, or eyes can be shut, in order to block out unsightly visual intrusions. As ubiquitous, seamless and immutable, sound also marks an uncategorizable element, which, whilst often being the product of capital, is irreducible to it. If capital relies on the reduction of everything to a numerical count, noise is ostensibly beyond categorization. For this reason a theoretical preoccupation with sound, and particularly noise (as exemplified by the Middlesex 'NoiseTheoryNoise' conferences, reviewed by Ben Watson in *Radical Philosophy* 125), has served over the last decade to challenge not only the hegemony of the visual within the arts, but also hegemony in general.

David Toop's *Sinister Resonance: The Mediumship of the Listener* aims at a comprehensive appraisal of sound, noise and silence, both in art and in everyday life, as personal and social conclusions are eked out from the intangible experience of listening in the present, and of 'eavesdropping' upon the sounds of the past. This latter undertaking is approached through a

'close listening' in upon historical documents, such as the works of seventeenth-century Dutch painter Nicholas Maes and the writings of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, among others. Such an approach often allies listening with seeing, or with reading, in an admission that our senses are commonly interlinked. In this way a measured appraisal of listening, as an independent phenomenon which is, all the same, both connected to historical perception and embedded within the context of wider sensory perception, attempts to momentarily grasp 'listening' as it passes us by. Indeed, Duchamp's maxim that 'one can look at seeing' but 'cannot hear hearing' is a recurrent theme of Toop's study, together with Freud's analysis of the uncanny, as the ungraspability of sound lends a ghostly horror to its often banal source. Beginning with the premiss that 'sound is a haunting', Toop amasses throughout the book a dizzying array of references, many of which won't be known to the reader. Yet, in fact, where this study is successful it is in large part due to Toop's musical ability to mix disparate references and make of them a hybrid literary form, in equal parts objective study, personal reflection, and literary and musical critique. The depth of the study is such that, whilst the reader may be relieved to know that Toop opens with a lengthy account of *The Voyage of Maeldun's Boat*, an 'ancient' Irish sea odyssey, rather than opting for a recital of the by now very familiar 'Parable of the Oarsmen', from Homer's *Odyssey*, by the time he *does* introduce the latter – which has been analysed by Adorno and Horkheimer, Jameson, and recently Salome Voegelin, in her book *Listening to Noise and Silence* – much further on, it is a welcome reference that sits comfortably among other more novel citations.

Maeldun leads his men on their nautical voyage from Southern Ireland, happening upon an array of weird and wonderful islands on the way, until 'they arrive finally at the Isle of Speaking Birds, black, brown and speckled, all shouting and singing with human voices'. Having reached the island after hearing these 'human' voices from afar, the mental image of Maeldun and his crew – evoked for its uncanniness – leads Toop on to a series of personal reflections typical of the book as a whole. Among these reflections the writer recalls 'apparitional voices', which were 'picked out from the white noise complexity of a rushing stream diverted through resonant interior space below', as he lay half-awake. These deeply subjective recollections invite a further level of theoretical introspection which never actually emerges. Specifically, the reader may feel that such reflections represent an unwitting admission of the subjective nature of sound-theory, rather than a

study of sound itself, for short of dictating sounds as they occur – *psfttt, ziip, KLANG!, pfrrr, fweee* – the most Toop can hope to do is write a book about the personal impact of sound as it manifests itself for the writer. To be fair, Toop always hints at the elusiveness of sound, and indeed, of silence, which cannot, he argues with reference to the anechoic chamber – wherein the sensorily deprived hear the thudding and racing of their own bodily mechanisms – be experienced in reality. In this sense, the 'mediumship' of the listener announced in the book's subtitle refers to the individual subject, who through recollection *is* the gap between the heard object and the phenomenon of hearing – or *not* hearing – as objective phenomenon (the mechanical functioning of the auditory system). So where Toop recounts a story by the late Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata, in which a husband and father writes to his estranged wife, asking her not to let their daughter bounce her rubber ball, 'because it strikes at my heart', the nature of sound, which must always be sound heard in the past, cannot escape refraction via the cognitive apparatus of the individual, however irrational.

It is via a preoccupation both with sounds that are out of reach, and with the impossibility of absolute silence, that Toop engages in a close examination of Nicholas Maes's painted *Eavesdropper* series, in which complex domestic interior layouts reveal one or other lone subject listening in on the sound of cavorting (usually involving a housekeeper) coming from another room. In the act of straining to hear what the painted eavesdropper signifies to be audible we are invited to 'hear hearing' – contrary to Duchamp's maxim – as elusive as this possibility remains in fact. A look towards the works of twentieth-century painter Juan Muñoz and his *Raincoat Drawing* series, which reveal stark empty interiors, hints at the precise nature of the possibility of 'hearing' a painted interior. Quoting David Lynch discussing the soundtrack to *Eraserhead*, Toop references 'room tone'. Lynch says: 'It's the sound you hear when there's silence, in between words and sentences'. By inference, when we 'hear' paintings of interiors we are filling in the permanent 'silence between words' within the pictures themselves.

The hearing of silent pictures can't very well be discussed without lending an ear to the sounds we hear but which aren't really there. This Toop does by recounting personal experience – an audible emanation, whose words are 'Go to Toop' – and assuring the reader he is not mentally ill, whilst referencing Munch, who by all accounts *was*: 'The sky turned suddenly to blood and I felt nature utter a huge scream.' The mention of

Munch maintains Toop's text firmly in the dark, negative emotional register, something which could lead to accusations of shoe-gazing self-obsession. Yet the reference to Munch's *Scream* leads quickly to a mention of the photographed scream captured upon the face of a naked man tortured by a soldier in Abu Ghraib, while an earlier section references US psy-ops operations, which involved the playing of Metallica's music, repeatedly and at overwhelming volume, to helpless prisoners at a Guantánamo Bay detention facility. Silence can equally be used for torture, or merely as a demonstration of power. Indifference is a terrifying thing; God's silence being a case in point. Similarly, whispers portend betrayal and social ostracization.

All in all, Toop demonstrates that sound is everywhere, and should not be overlooked. As an antidote to the visual-centric nature of cultural analysis, *Sinister Resonance* succeeds in arguing for the centrality of sound to emotional, psychological, social and political experience. This marks a welcome break from conventional aesthetic analysis, whereby Adorno, Deleuze or Nietzsche are almost invariably evoked in terms of the rapture or breakthrough which sound might

present in an otherwise closed administered world. Such analyses are important, yet proclamations as to noise's saving graces are as hollow as those which chalk up the emancipatory role of art as such. Sound belies a darkness – psychological and social – which will not be shifted by wishful proclamations as to art's social capacity. In an early reference Toop recounts an ancient Greek myth, in which tribes of men are witnessed by Aeneas gathering around flowers and buzzing like worker bees. 'Shuddering at the scene, Aeneas asks his father, Anchises, who they are, these noisy, humming human-bees.' The reply: 'These are the souls to whom Fate owes a second body.' Contrary to common wisdom, and in light of the disembodied nature of sound, could it be – to paraphrase Jung – that mankind is in search of a body for its soul? That is to say, might transcendence from the objectifying forces of nature and capital be found through an engagement with subjectivity as mediumship, as intermediary between the exterior objectivity of nature and the objectivity that comprises the physical subject itself (as sensory and cognitive being)? Toop's analysis places the subject in this eerie in-between state.

Mike Watson

Global Foucault

Andrew Finlay, *Governing Ethnic Conflict: Consociation, Identity and the Price of Peace*, Routledge, London and New York, 2010. 152 pp., £80.00 hb., 978 0 41549 803 6.

One of the more discernible changes that has taken place in the recent past relates to responses to conflict, away from conflict resolution and diplomacy and towards the transformation of structures and practices of governance. Where the former allowed the parties, albeit with the aid of various strategies, from the coercive to the enabling, to more or less script the causes of conflict, the tendency in the latter is to move in with the diagnosis and a formula for the cure. The crucial difference between the two is that where the former recognizes conflict as the domain of the political, the latter distinctly seeks to depoliticize conflict, to extract the political from the domain of conflict. The latter frame does not simply turn conflict into a problem to be solved, but comes ready with a solution, one that is transformed into action through the agency of others, not the parties directly involved in conflict, but an international civil service at large, both governmental and non-governmental. This then translates formula into discursive, pedagogical and institutional

practices that seek no less than the reshaping of societies. The latter frame is often referred to as the 'liberal peace project', and its practices range from full-scale military intervention to pedagogical training programmes, to development projects such as the building of schools and clinics, to policing and incarceration.

As is evident from the interventions in the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, and now Libya, liberal interventionists do not see their actions as constitutive of war, even where such actions involve the bombardment of populations. Rather, what characterizes the so-called liberal peace project is the disappearance of distinctions between war and peace, war and security, war and policing, the international and the domestic, the public and the private. Private security firms, civilian bureaucrats and teachers are as likely to be involved as militaries and police forces in the project of transformation underpinned by liberal rationality. It is in uncovering these practices that Michel Foucault's

analytics of power must be rendered 'international', so that we might uncover how 'governmentality' works when articulated globally, in other people's countries. Foucault himself was reluctant to venture outside the liberal West, and mainly Britain and France, as postcolonial theorists such as Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Paul Gilroy, to name but a few, have argued. The point that these authors make is that the form that liberalism took in the West was largely shaped and determined by what it was doing in its colonies. The practices we see today in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan are but a twenty-first-century rearticulation of the colonial practices of old, ranging as they do from violence to dispossession, to pedagogy, to the building of infrastructures. Rendering Foucault 'international' points to the question of how power operates globally – and hence how sovereignty relates to the 'government' of individuals and populations, and how such government is framed by a 'security apparatus' – writ large, and indeed, today, in the name of humanity at large.

The cases highlighted above also point the lens at how liberal rationality utilizes 'culture' as a technology of government. Culture is used in the inscription of individuals and populations, so that articulations of political grievance and opposition to dispossession are translated into issues relating to cross-cultural communication. The subjectivities generated in this scheme of things are, on the one hand, the liberal self of global reach and, on the other, those on the receiving end, whose cultural particularity must variously be governed, tamed, understood. Within the discourses of liberal rationality, the former occupies a universal terrain of normality; the latter is constrained by the claims of culture. The imperative to depoliticize in order to govern can then be served not through the repression of culture, but its utilization and incorporation.

Andrew Finlay's *Governing Ethnic Conflict* seeks to apply a Foucauldian understanding of 'governmentality' to the peace process in Northern Ireland. It specifically engages with the Good Friday Agreement, with occasional reference to the Dayton Accords, which dealt with the conflict in Bosnia–Herzegovina. The immediate target of the author's critique is a name that does not usually appear in the pages of this journal, namely the anthropologist Arend Lijphart, an advocate of 'consociation', and his liberal critics. The core idea in the Lijphartian world-view is that in locations where ethnicity becomes a source of conflict any solution that is long lasting must incorporate mechanisms that give due recognition, through the distribution of

roles and resources, to the ethnic-national or ethnic-cultural groups involved. Groups are hence conferred ontological standing and hold primacy over and above individuals that reject group affiliation. For Andrew Finlay, Lijphart's liberal critics are as complicit in the reification of 'ethnicity' and 'culture' in their advocacy of consociational agreements such as the GFA or Dayton as was the original author of such agreements.

Such complicity is not simply due to the institutionalization, and hence formalization, of cultural difference, thereby reinforcing, in Finlay's view, the divisions that perpetuate conflict and enmity, but to the foregrounding of difference in subsequent post-conflict practices that seek to shape the peace through the monitoring of difference. Where liberal critics decry the continued segregation, along sectarian lines, of public spaces and institutions, they at the same time are in support of 'equal opportunities' recording and monitoring practices. For Finlay, using the trope of governmentality, support for the latter is as complicit in the reification of cultural division as are peace treaties premised on such division.

One of the issues raised by Finlay points to the role played, especially by liberal academics and intellectuals, in matters of conflict and peace. Indeed it is the case that Conflict and Peace Studies has, since its inception as a substantial research programme, been driven by a policy-oriented, vocational element that sought to have impact, and this much before the more recent imposition of 'impact' as a measure of success in academic research in the UK's research audit exercises. Nowhere is the nexus between knowledge and power more starkly revealed than in conditions where, as the author rightly highlights, a line is drawn between the assumed 'cause' of conflict and its 'solution'. Such formulaic approaches to conflict have a tendency to locate the cause variously in ethnic-national, tribal or religious divisions so that the solutions advocated involve, again variously, recognition, proportionate representation, distributive practices determined by the conferral of rights on groups and communities. Political theorists such as Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor are as guilty of reifying the group over the individual as are advocates and practitioners of consociational agreements.

Finlay wishes to place his lens on the question of how it is that liberalism can advocate peace treaties based on what he considers to be illiberal practices – placing primacy on group and communal identities over and above the rights of individuals and their wish to transcend inscriptions of group and culture. That ethnic-cultural difference can be used

as a technology in the government of populations is not, in the critical literature on the liberal peace project, a matter of contention. Finley usefully reveals the workings of this technology in a context that is not usually subjected to a Foucault-inspired analysis. However, there are specificities relating to this form of analysis as well as the Northern Ireland case that could be subject to critical scrutiny. In relation to the first, the book's focus on consociational agreements points to identity/difference as the formative moment in the government of populations, thereby pointing to a critique of monitoring practices relating to the distribution of resources defined along ethnic/sectarian lines. However, the driving imperative behind such practices – covering as they do differentials of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, for example – cannot be said to be a consequence of the reification of group rights as opposed to individual rights, but relates to the complex intersection between the two. Claims for distributive justice are hence as much a part of political struggle as they might be of liberal rationalities of government. Indeed, historically the former precedes the latter. Where Foucault's analytics are helpful in relation to the latter, the case is not so convincing in relation to the former.

The second issue relates to the challenges of the Northern Irish case and the peace process that culminated in the Good Friday Agreement. Again contextualized within a Foucauldian analysis, the Northern Ireland peace process can be understood as being not about the reification of ethnic/sectarian identities, but first and foremost as a project the driving imperative of which is security. Contextualized thus, the security apparatus that is the constitutive moment of liberal rationality points to the forms of practices highlighted in this text as 'illiberal' when they are, in fact, quintessentially liberal. Finlay's critique has its sights on what he considers to be an illiberal undermining of individual autonomy in favour of group identity. The point is to reveal how the liberal government of conduct works through the inscription of bodies as carriers of population so that both might be redesigned and reshaped. The liberal government of peace comes ultimately to be about 'self-government'. The specificity of Northern Ireland is that this 'liberal peace' was itself a culmination of a long process of 'traditional' conflict resolution where the parties concerned were/are far more involved in the scripting of the conflict than external agencies that walk in with ready-made formulas aimed at state-building.

Vivienne Jabri

Just the facts, ma'am

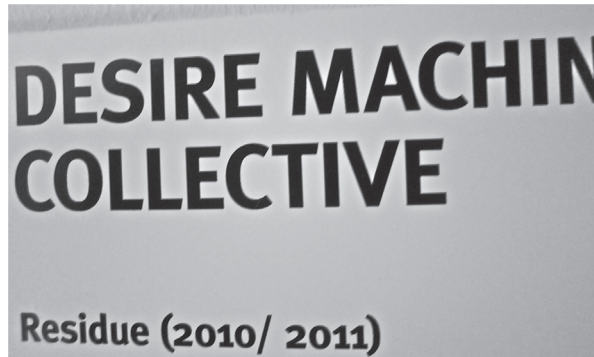
Manuel De Landa, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011. 226 pp., £16.99 hb., 978 1 44117 028 6.

In *Philosophy and Simulation*, Manuel De Landa extends and reworks ideas and arguments that he has pursued in his own distinctive way for a number of years now. The topic of this clearly written and well-documented text is the philosophical concept of emergence – the *bête noire* of 'reductionist' accounts of science and conceptual sticking point of the so-called mind-body problem – and the role that forms of research that make computer simulation experiments can contribute to its plausibility. In recent decades, the considerable growth in size and decline in cost of computational power has made the routine use of computer simulation on problems ranging from traffic flow to drug design (to say nothing of weather forecasting and risk management) not only feasible but rather widespread. The growing popularity of complexity theory, the development of research in artificial life, the growing sophistication of cognitive science have all

conspired not just to make such modelling possible on a routine basis but also to promote its development as a kind of hobbyist, 'crowd-sourced' form of research strategy (as in bioinformatics).

The interest that *Philosophy and Simulation* takes in the concept of emergence, however, does not extend quite as far as mapping the emergence of computer simulation as an element of 'technoscience', and it pays little attention to the highly instrumentalized use of simulation models in the contemporary economy. Readers who might be expecting a more detailed account of such issues will thus be a little disappointed, because what really interests De Landa is the way that simulation offers the opportunity to explore and understand emergence in what he sees as a plausible, scientifically grounded way – in a manner that, as he puts it, 'finally does justice to the creative powers of matter and energy'. It is a mathematically informed

philosophy, in this project, that provides the means for synthesizing the insights of domain-specific computer simulations into an appropriately tailored realist ontology that would specify the kind of concrete emergent wholes in which we can 'legitimately' believe. (The mistake of early emergentists was to enrol their explanatory scheme in an account of vague nebulosities such as 'Life' or 'Mind', which then appeared as inexplicable brute facts.)



Starting with a brief reinterpretation of the problem of emergence, and offering a more expansive conceptualization (with a familiar nod to Deleuze) of what an emergentist causal explanation should be able to account for, *Philosophy and Simulation* moves from research on cellular automata, through artificial chemistry, the use of genetic algorithms to simulate evolutionary dynamics, the Prisoner's Dilemma, neural networks, the emergence of language, and beyond. De Landa evidently knows a great deal about simulation and is able to weave together heterogeneous forms of research with considerable aplomb. His strategy of re-reading Deleuze in the light of contemporary science is, as ever, suggestive, and it gives his account an explanatory richness that is otherwise lacking from the discussion: the mathematics of computer simulations makes it possible to develop a plausible account not just of how actual properties of entities emerge but also how not-necessarily-actualized tendencies (types of motion of fluids, for example) and capacities (a knife can cut flesh, for example) emerge as well.

De Landa is criticized for misreading Deleuze – a criticism he generally seems quite comfortable with – and his strategy of knotting together scientific research and philosophical argument to a point where they are all but indiscernible is a move that won't harm his claims to realism. However, it might raise questions about the way in which his arguments are generally rather dependent on a clichéd view of philosophy as wishful thinking and science as a hard-nosed adherence to 'the facts' – a position that buys into a socially rather well embedded understanding of the hierarchy

of scientific knowledge and the legislative claims to authoritative judgement it embodies. This translation of philosophical arguments that De Landa makes through the presentation of the findings of some forms of scientific research is both the most interesting and also, perhaps, the most frustrating thing about his work in general. Science per se and the broad scope of its judgements never really seems to pose too much of a philosophical problem for De Landa (a trait he shares with many), raising the suspicion that the selective adherence his work displays to its findings is actually something of a rhetorical strategy.

Whilst such a criticism is hardly sufficient to invalidate his core arguments, the move he makes does guide his views about simulation in particular directions as well as relieve him of the need to establish a more nuanced argument about specifics. Thus, whilst *Philosophy and Simulation* certainly makes concessions to the idea that computer simulations don't always tally with available evidence, it never seems to occur to De Landa to examine research that is critical of work using simulation, to develop a more conceptually nuanced account of how it operates in different sciences, or indeed to explore the interplay between computer simulation and other forms of research in the same field. In particular, since a key part of his argument about the value of computer simulations rests on the observation of an isomorphism between the behaviour of mathematical models and available evidence in specific fields, it would seem that a more detailed account of what 'available evidence' might mean is required.

To the extent that the focus in *Philosophy and Simulation* is on the development of a general philosophical argument about emergence, it is perfectly legitimate to ignore some of the more troubling or perplexing questions about what such models show and what they might say about science. However, as the intense debates about inter-species competition and the use of predator–prey simulation models in studies of animal ecology, for example, suggest, there is a rather complex link between the assumptions of modelling systems and the findings of empirical research. The fact that under particular conditions certain biological species successfully evade the frequently modelled predator–prey dynamics of inter-specific competition does place a slightly different interpretation on the problems to which computer-simulated patterns of emergent behaviour are a solution – a point that Isabelle Stengers has made rather forcefully. So, whilst it may be the case that 'available evidence' indicates a set of dynamics that can indeed be modelled using

simulation experiments, this actually doesn't tell us very much about the inventive ways in which a species can generate alternate solutions to a general problem (perhaps exemplifying the 'creativity of matter' De Landa wants to pay tribute to).

A related difficulty concerns the assumptions that De Landa makes about the generalized applicability of mathematics inherent in computer simulations. Mathematics occupies two positions in De Landa's argument. On the one hand, mathematical claims are used to give a more precise conceptual status to a key idea of the book: that of the 'possibility spaces' that form the basis of the tendencies and capacities pertaining to emergent wholes. On the other, there is the mathematics that is actually used in computer simulations. The role of mathematics is critical for grounding the claim to realism of simulations of emergent phenomena, because it points towards the existence of mechanism-independent elements in emergence. The discovery of similar patterns of behaviour in chemical and meteorological processes (convection) and the ability to capture these patterns using sets of equations, for example, suggest that computer simulations do indeed point to something real. Through a discussion of the notion of a 'possibility space' (in theoretical biology, these are sometimes called 'fitness landscapes') De Landa makes an argument, once again, for the mathematics of singularities as the crucial elements around which the dynamics of emergence revolve – maths here becomes both epistemologically and ontologically privileged for understanding the mechanism-independent element of emergence. On the other hand, though, *Philosophy and Simulation* is rather quiet on how the mathematical models for use in specific fields of research are derived and handled. He talks a little about the 'art' of mathematical models, but says nothing about the interaction between the generation of such models and other forms of research in specific fields. It would, for example, have been interesting to read more about the use made by biologists of mathematical models, or the peculiar assumptions made by economists when they develop their simulations.

Undoubtedly concepts from topology are helpful for arguing more precisely about how we can give greater mathematical plausibility to the unactualized capacities and tendencies that emergent explanations need to be able to account for but do little to tell us about how mathematical equations become relevant for understanding phenomena in particular fields. In fact, *Philosophy and Simulation* occasionally gives the impression that there is something rather casual and easy about producing knowledge through computer

simulation, suggesting that it is simply a matter of setting the parameters of a series of equations correctly. It is, of course, highly unlikely that De Landa thinks this to be the case, but since there is little in his account to complicate or situate computer simulation as part of a conflicting set of knowledge practices (by contrast with Philip Mirowski's studies of economics, for example), it is an easy inference to make.

Imaginative defences of philosophical realism are certainly to be applauded, and given the critical role that mathematical modelling occupies in both scientific and technical practices today, questioning computer simulation is undoubtedly important. *Philosophy and Simulation* does an interesting job of the former via the latter, yet it does so, finally, without challenging some of the most entrenched clichés to which realism gives rise, and without addressing the complexities of the implication of computer simulation in different kinds of knowledge practices and the terrains on which they operate.

Andrew Goffey

Divine violence

Bill Griffiths, *Collected Earlier Poems (1966–1980)*, Reality Street, Hastings, 2010. 366 pp., £18.00 pb., 978 1 87440 045 5.

The British poetry avant-garde of 1960–2000 has been scandalously ignored by public institutions and intellectuals, while a literary establishment with a vested interest in claiming the death of modernism promoted their own diminished version of poetry. Poetry distributed by commercial publishers in that period conformed to the way postwar social democracy made sense of the world. Now that that period is over, it's possible to read the poets who were ignored and discover a negative phenomenology of the epoch: not an ideological image but a radical demolition of ideology.

Poetic subjectivity is a touchstone: how to break away from the self that has adjusted to reality. Beat poetry offered a radical refusal of conformity: at its best, ecstatic form (Ginsberg's *Howl*, McClure's *Brown Book*), the paradise and hell that ordinary life conceals, and, at its least radical, a set of alternative identifications with marginalized lifestyles. What Bill Griffiths brings to the surface is something else: a self as yet unformed, the raw stuff of sensitivity that the

social self is fashioned from. In his poems, intimacy is a shock; it is caught out of order, a syncopated interruption to the rhythm of everyday life, causing a reader to catch his or her breath: 'Morning s'blue / early, edgy, special / lay like a gun / in await / some sort sun's exploding.' The most intimate self, a self capable of suffering hurt, is touched at the moment of the missing beat, when something else jumps in, as when 'At running in the sun / I thought / this serious, my world is.' Standard rhythm ('I thought my world is this serious') would prevent the unanticipated stab of the real that breaks through. Real intimacy, as opposed to narcissistic self-exposure, occurs when the rhythm of everyday life is broken.

Griffiths was born in Middlesex in 1948 and made a big contribution to the alternative poetry scene in London in the 1970s. After Margaret Thatcher came to power he moved north to Seaham, among pit towns ravaged by closures. There he plunged into the rescue of Northeastern dialect, a selection of which he published in *Pitmatic*, exposed corrupt councillors in his *Ghost Tales*, and wrote a great deal of poetry. The *Collected Earlier Poems* stops in 1980, and the equally extensive and varied later work awaits a similar volume.

Griffith's poems expose the anxiety that underpins social life – the body under threat, the mind obfuscated by fear. As a Hell's Angel, he experienced first-hand the violence of prison and police. Prison is the fairly obvious apex of the violence of the system. Less obvious, but equally important, is how it focuses the degrading effect of expulsion from society (what else do the Coalition cuts say to newly poor?): 'where else the screws say / thief you're a thief you / hey you thief come on – / you're a thief ain't you / thief –' Here again, but on a raft of violence, a word breaks in before the person can think who or what he is. He has no time to lay his hands on the social categories that include him by excluding him; he is condemned before he can speak. Prison tells him who he is. To face out the seduction of identifying with violence is to touch the bottom, embrace degradation in its root sense, force prison onto its own ground: 'prison / like houses / going in a sort of late dog / watching, hey master – / all built, / blocks, octagons.' To meet negative order at its foundation – that is, naked domination – requires not just acceptance of vulnerability, of the fact of being broken down (there's no macho stance in these poems), but the strength to go through that zero point without submission of any kind, even to mere survival. It's the power of poetry itself, strange as that sounds in times when poetry is generally assumed to be light

entertainment, that gives an adequate counter-force to all that prison does. As it was for Blake, poetry for Griffiths is pure creation, supplanting all gods and other powers: 'on a top top of Primrose Hill / there I watched (didn't I know?) watched itz / CREATING. In quiet / the families (and the buildings) around / and the park arose. / Breathing, and the grass coupling / to the air, and me / in the loop.' This dares to absolutely reclaim the forces of production.

Prison is the uncreative at its nodal point. It is the ally of social anxiety: the walls, screws, and their language, are designed to control those for whom social anxiety, and its dulling through consumer aspirations, doesn't work – that is, the obdurate psychopaths. (Though in times of systemic crisis, prison will be the state's remedy for large numbers of people driven by a greater anxiety.) Griffiths doesn't identify with the psychopaths; nor does he idealize prisoners as heroes, or let himself be the moral prisoner of outrage. What he seeks, and finds, is something more free and difficult. As with this: 'Jesu 'pecker / My eyes is loose with worry;' and this: 'Got trumpet you / screaming as an elephant / dog, fist, ground / god of an hiding'; and this: 'see this this is Angels getting the booting of their lives in Scrubs / this is Johnny / This is me picking up snout bits in Brixton.' The words stab: here is the direct violence of the society, all pretension to humanism unmasked. The violence of prison exists, where prison is production, not to protect but to bind capitalist society into imaginary unity, but giving a meaning to systemic violence.

For Griffiths, humanity doesn't exist as a value: in prison he learned what humans are capable of when, as he put it, no one is looking. He declines to draw on the fund of outrage deposited in ordinary language, because the moral economy of outrage buys into the existing order's profession of fairness. Instead he touches the underside: 'And love / Works to mix you up miscates the soul / Love is / Shooting blood out of a bloke / Red-laking, is / Being shut in the breasts of her.' More than a disturbance of semantics (love as prison is in the end an old topic), Griffiths introduces a turbulence where words connect and disconnect before they have a meaning. At that deeper level, where there is no social distinction, violence and love touch each other, without sadism; there are vital decisions to be made about who he is, and no need to seek sensation, that mark of dulled sensibility.

These poems take readers through a swirl of things not yet separable as discrete objects: the eye swims in a world that is not yet ordered. Immersion in this primary magma makes the senses alert and revitalizes

language, though to the eye and ear unwilling to abandon ordinary reality it may feel like fuzziness. Words cluster and move apart according to their sounds and shapes, the rhythm of things, and the set of sense at any given moment. Thanks to this unlimited plasticity there is as much abandon to the senses in Griffiths as there was in Keats. Different, though, is the destruction of the existing objectivity: appearance, in a world where all visible and invisible goods are for sale, has to be destroyed before it can be remade. This is especially the case with *Cycles*, the book Griffiths wrote in the mid-1970s, when he was a member of the group including Bob Cobbing, Eric Mottram and Barry MacSweeney who temporarily transformed the Poetry Society into a radical institution. Cycle Four takes the act referred to in its title, 'On the Burning of York Minster, 1829, by Jonathan Martin', as an allegory of destruction and creation: 'at / flowers right-now, full / az all foals (in its scouring) / oughta topple off their knees / at the glass around // quick qui'-violet burned exhibited // az mist made at its force ... / (the rose roof-clouds) // ... tumbling (as dice) through the po-lice points.' The incendiary action has broken the cathedral into fragments that flash (flowers, violet, rose) in the steaming air, with strange repetitions ('quick qui'-violet') whose rhythmic intensity prevents them being mere snapshots and makes them burst through the envelope of resemblance and recognition, shards of a possible life. Even 'po-lice' is broken into syllables, by a force more radical than bikers who can break through police points, because it summons the form of change itself, like Mallarmé's dice, Lucretius's veering atoms or Benjamin's divine violence. Where Griffiths is difficult to read, it's because the counter-force is won through concentrated work of understanding and imagination, more demanding than the idea of a counter-culture that merely reverses hierarchies and doesn't break the rules by which reality itself is formed.

Griffiths's material is not governed by a hypothesis of release from repression, nor by the simple nihilism of destruction for itself, nor, as with some British poets of the 1970s, by identification with counter-dominance, in the shape of leathers or anything else. His wager is far more far-reaching. Thus the story of inter-gang violence in 'War w/ Windsor', where Windsor refers to the Windsor chapter of Hells Angels, ends with a complete refusal of any gesture of domination: 'And now it is time to say to the kings and queens of England, you only reign by election and getting god's grace, before that you take your contract & keep it or god and crown is taken away from you as it was from

other kings & queens ... Fealty, or the link between monarch and subject is revocable, as are all feudal ties.' The poem critically exposes the Angels' codes of dominance as a symptom of power in Britain and invokes instead the force of popular sovereignty.

Griffiths's sense of what poetry can do comes out of the 1960s but, and this is crucial, with a quite definite and explicit rejection of ideology. He spoke of working towards a 'negative system', a kind of zero point of any intellectual, moral or social order. Like Keats's 'negative capability', it's a power of transformation that finds itself in negation, grasping things at the point of their emergence as form. Normally it's impossible to hold anything at that level: a pattern leaps in to stabilize it. If to make objects recognizable we bind perceptions into received patterns, Griffiths keeps the energy of the initial encounter alive and gives it objectivity through subjecting the sounds and shapes of words to unending variation. He sabotages the machinery of making sense and in its place puts a different kind of sense. He found in prisoners and psychiatric patients a place where ordinary meaning ceases to function and a utopian fringe starts to be glimpsed. The standard complaint against experimental poets, that they don't communicate with the public, won't stick in his case: he does communicate, in all its childish brightness, an utterly fresh contact with the world: 'az a mist like a magenta / soundful & holy & blank, bole and apple ... / this shovelling / will be bulging head of Spring, swift she will // Reynard got fur togs for his job ... / tiny like tagman.' A reader who can melt and float in this magma, where everything meets, full and empty, child and adult, is reminded of Rimbaud and his slogan *Changer la vie!*

The Angels, whom he came to see as a parody of rebellion, are a microcosm for Griffiths because they display the hidden complicity between a given social order and anxiety converted to violence in order to have a self and be capable of experience. Thus 'rat's fur on 'is anorak ... in the laps of set pattern ... of signury ... fame, congruity ... cabal-care ... being zips (that's violable)' rapidly exposes dominance exercised through authoritarian uniform and prestige ('signury', a typical Griffiths neologism, exposes the spectacle of lordship) combined with zip fetishism – that is, the need to be open, perverted into penetration by violence. The poem accurately nails in the word 'violable' the connection between violence as code of identity and the state of being violated by systemic violence. This includes bankers. As strong as early Stones lyrics but faster and more critical.

William Rowe