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Philosophizing post-punk

Ben Watson

Philosophers are talking more about music than they did in the past. This is partly to do with the rise of Adorno's star in the philosophical firmament and the fact that over half of his writings are devoted to music. But it is also because a generation that imbibed punk in its formative years is now in a position to choose the cultural objects of its intellectual scrutiny. So when a book appears called *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–1984*, it raises the temperature of intellectual debate.* This was the period when fascism loomed as an electoral reality in England, and the Left made anti-racism an inescapable feature of mainstream politics. Music was crucial to the process.

The material basis for music's cultural relevance is its industrial production and commercial distribution, initiated at the close of the nineteenth century and indelibly associated with the political upheavals of the 1960s. Mass production makes discussions of music turn ineluctably towards politics and social theory. Irony and sophistry flake off. To talk about a musical experience, you need to put yourself in the picture. Discussants wax autobiographical, they posit determinate social identities. Class issues – long hounded out of academia – become graphic and pressing. It was not for nothing that black America coined the tag 'soul music'. In a secularized, commercialized society, music *is* the locus of the soul; social being becomes unavoidable, specific and poignant.

In philosophy, things began with Nietzsche on Wagner (first for, then against) and were stoked by Adorno's polemics against classical harmony in favour of twelve-tone. Today debates turn around Noise, and the possible demise of music as system: as usual, the 'death' of something proclaims a new burst of life. Punk was the last time music and philosophy crossed paths in a memorable way, as pop was infected by a situationist critique of the social-democratic consensus. Guy Debord's admiration for the antisocial sullenness of the London proletariat suddenly became a cultural phenomenon in itself. However, punk was buried by those who came to praise it. Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming* told its story in the light of eventual commercial success, abolishing its sense of terminal crisis and reducing it to yet another rags-to-riches showbiz fable. Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* sidestepped punk's challenge to representation by ignoring its class politics – Dada, the situationists and punk were all glossed as terminal romanticism. For anyone who had seen the Sex Pistols, attended the F-Club in Leeds, or had fights with fascists at Rock Against Racism gigs – or simply walked down the street wearing clothes that were an invitation to get beaten up – these books were a drear disappointment. They hid punk's risk and violence behind a genteel screen, betraying its confrontational ethic with a liberal language of justification.

So it is hardly surprising that Simon Reynolds's *Rip It Up* has been flying off the shelves. With 126 fresh interviews with the protagonists, pictures researched by Jon

*Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–1984*, Faber, London, 2005. xxx + 577 pp., £16.99 pb., 0 571 21569 6.

Savage, and 550 dense pages written by a blogger 'too young' to have witnessed the Pistols, it promises to register what things felt like for the groundlings – those excluded from the scene-setting events in London, 'too late' but fully participating in punk as a mass phenomenon nonetheless. Those who cite 1976–77 as the 'real' moment of punk are those for whom it was a springboard to TV celebrity. Genuine punks – 'losers' from the spectacular point of view – actually lived punk between 1978 and 1984.

The morbidity of positivism

In telling the story of these years, Reynolds steps into a troubled zone, strafed with political and philosophical brickbats. A mild version of deconstruction – a kind of radicalism-with-compromise – is the name of his game. Green Gartside of Scritti Politti tells Reynolds that when he met Jacques Derrida, he 'told me what I was doing was part of the same project of undoing and unsettling that he's engaged in'. For Reynolds, society is a stable, reasonable entity 'unsettled' by a few dashing highwaymen like Gartside and Derrida. Unversed in Adorno, Reynolds is unaware that the crisis of Western metaphysics has social roots: society cannot get beyond its own hidebound concepts. Commentators on mass music ignore Adorno's analysis at their peril.

Adorno emphasized psychic liberation, mimesis, mad love and musical freedom. His focus on the musical object meant he could see through the ideological packaging that surrounds the consumption of music. Like the 'conspicuous' in consumption, it is not completely discarded, but it stops being the whole deal. Like a manufacturer testing a sample, Adorno honed in on music's appeal to the unconscious, revealing the sedimented historical content behind personal taste. For Pierre Bourdieu, such insights confirm the cynic's conviction that all culture is a prop for power. For Adorno, in contrast, cravings for musical freedom are glimpses of a new social order undistorted by domination. Despite his pessimism about formal politics, Adorno understood that capitalism is creating the preconditions for freedoms undreamt of in antiquity. Hence his depressive mania: a new world is possible, yet balked.

Writers committed to particular genres, such as free jazz (Philippe Carles, Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free Jazz Black Power*, Paris, 1971), funk (Ricky Vincent, *Funk*, New York, 1996), rock (Joe Carducci, *Rock and the Pop Narcotic*, Los Angeles, 1994), country (Nick Tosches, *Country*, London, 1989) or rai (Bouziane Daoudi, Hady Miliani, *L'aventure du rai*: Paris, 1996) are duty-bound to defend generic integrity against commodification, and so make aesthetic distinctions. However, pop is not a musical genre: it is what sells. Hence writing on pop cries out for categories like capital, labour and commodity, since they are the determining forces in this 'genre'. Adorno's warnings about the consumption of false images of freedom are highly pertinent here: the listening ear needs to be rigorous about objective actualities of form.

In his acknowledgements, Simon Reynolds offers 'a fervent salute to the journalists and editors of the weekly rock papers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, his 'prime research resource'. However, he's wrong to call 1978–84 'the golden age for British music journalism'. It was certainly better than what passes for music journalism today. (How can an industry which couldn't even generate a hit denouncing the war in Iraq provide an object for serious criticism?) But the *real* golden age was the underground press of 1966–69; although the pre-punk *NME* (1975–77), with its relentless negativity about corporate label fads and ploys, was pretty hilarious too. Punk was its bruised and bloody offspring. That said, 1978 to 1984, when the *NME* vied with *Sounds* to cover the struggle against the National Front, was certainly compulsive reading. So much so, in fact, that anyone who read those weeklies then will yawn their way through Reynolds's book: fad follows fad with a remorseless lack of logic. The conscientious page-turner has no way of avoiding the imbecilities of Kevin Rowland, Martin Fry or Lydia Lunch. Despite the 126 extra interviews, the *NME* sets the template, and the book reads as a



breathless précis. Relief comes on page 517, when Reynolds loses faith in chart pop, and begins to make his own judgements. But it has been a long haul.

The author's 'subjective' viewpoint should not just be there to provide moral asides once a story has been told (like Robert McNamara looking glum about genocide in Vietnam); it is an essential moment in the unfolding of any objective account. What was *Reynolds* doing during this period? Which gigs did he attend? How did he earn a living? Did he meet anyone at gigs? Was he ever scared? How did punk and post-punk challenge his sense of identity, his view of the British class system? Without information about the storyteller, we can't get critical purchase on their story.

Reynolds has some political opinions, of course. We can plot them. He's a liberal, so the market is a force of nature. He thinks Thatcherism was a response to unions that were 'too strong'. He talks of interventionist governments 'propping up ailing industries to preserve jobs'. He also mentions 1970s 'race riots'. Now, the *Daily Telegraph* may have called them that, but everyone involved at street level recognized them as anti-police riots that brought whites, blacks and Asians together. A waft of confidence and good humour swept through the riot cities like some exhilarating drug.

The clichés come thick and fast: Tony Wilson's Factory Records used situationist ideas, but Guy Debord wouldn't have approved. Bob Last's Fast Product anticipated a new kind of left-wing sensibility, a "designer socialism" purged of its puritanical austerity and pleasure-fear'. Following the 'mods versus rockers' binary (half an idea baked into academic orthodoxy by Dick Hebdige and Simon Frith), Reynolds conceives pop as a natural homeostatic system, working 'through a kind of oscillating, internal pendulum, swinging back and forth between two extremes. Some kind of return to rock values (if not inevitably to guitar music) was bound to happen.' Postmodernism provides Reynolds with the sophistry to avoid musics outside his ken: hip-hop is dismissed as 'fantasies of rebellion and street knowledge'. In the first 500 pages the only pre-punk band mentioned is the Beatles, and this definition of pop music as victorious commercial product shapes the book. Reynolds would doubtless be aggrieved

to be called a racist – he’s appreciative of two-tone and the Specials, and even has the nous to realize Live Aid was collusive with Thatcherite anti-statism. But attention to sales figures rather than musical form inevitably underplays the contribution of blues, funk and reggae. He quotes Luc Sante on Blood Ulmer, Luther Thomas, Oliver Lake and Joe Bowie, but he has no inkling that No Wave Harmolodics was a Hendrix-scale leap forward in how rock can be played, a revolution forced underground by a music industry in retrenchment. (We had our own exponents, from Nottingham, called Pinski Zoo, but they didn’t chart, so they don’t count as ‘post-punk’.)

The black hole in pop opened up by the Sex Pistols led more adventurous punks to explore dub reggae, Free Improvisation and revolutionary politics. Reynolds, though, remains faithful to the commercial farce. This positivism deprives him of musical objectivity, of critical stance: all he can do is detail once again the careers of those whose names sold music papers. He’s aware that things got worse from The Pop Group through to ABC and Frankie Goes To Hollywood, a sorry decline into image, commercial scam and unit-shifting. However, lacking an understanding of how capitalism prioritizes product over musical event, Reynolds can only remark on a lack of ‘passion’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘substance’. Deprived of Adorno’s notion that truth might be at variance with society as currently constituted, Reynolds can’t function as a critic. His exclusive fixation on music that makes a return on capital (‘pop’) deprives him of any sense of the *struggle* involved in making music. There is no sign of the broken lives and bleak desperation caused by the brutal way the music industry siphons money away from working musicians and small venues. Real people are elsewhere; what we have is Narcissus in his bedroom, stacking his albums.

Walter Benjamin diagnosed morbidity as a symptom of commodity fixation and it is intriguing how often ‘marble slabs’ come up in Reynolds’s descriptions of beauty in music (Joy Division, Young Marble Giants and Scritti Politti). Christopher Gray’s *Leaving the Twentieth Century* (a pioneering translation of situationist texts issued in 1974) was apparently ‘the radical-chic fetish object of its era’. This description derives from Marcus’s glamorization of the book in *Lipstick Traces* (and the photo of a distressed cover in *The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*). But anyone who read *Leaving the Twentieth Century* at the time felt viciously alienated, not just from consumer objects, but from non-revolutionary contemporaries, music-scene small talk, academic protocol and pop-biz machinations. Debord’s polemics threw the reader into a storm of radical politics quite beyond Reynolds’s feeble radar. It was something you read and tried to put into action, but rarely mentioned (its Lukácsian terminology was usually incomprehensible to anyone with the nerve to carry out its proposals). This action-not-words spell cast by the situationists was only broken in the late 1980s, with the publication of *Lipstick Traces* and the advent of Stewart Home. Action is not a word in Reynolds’s vocabulary.

Thermidor as lukewarm shower

Reynolds detests the organized Left. Rock Against Racism is only mentioned in order to berate its ‘puritan’ dogmatism and to defend the ‘unaligned’ individual (in this case, the ridiculous Howard Devoto). In fact, it was the Left’s attention to punk that created his ‘golden age’ of music journalism. When Gavin Martin wrote sourly about the huge 1981 Leeds Carnival Against Racism in *NME*, the next week’s letters page carried nothing but indignant rebuttals. Reynolds opines that a single quote from Jerry Dammers ‘did more for anti-racism than a thousand Anti-Nazi League speeches’, but it was activists in the ANL who originally arrived at that conclusion! That’s why we headlined the Specials at the Leeds Carnival. It was precisely because the ANL was *not* centred around political speeches, but around gigs and street action, that it attracted support, and eventually smashed the National Front.

Musicians and grassroots promoters make gigs happen, escalate community, amplify socialist intelligence; moneymen and obsequious journalists manufacture stars, sell crap records and screw everything up. Reynolds is keen that we see things from this 'other side', appreciate the ambitions of entrepreneurs like Paul Morley and Trevor Horn, and break with the Left's 'guilt-racked puritanism'. This way we can all get a piece of the pie. But, as he admits at the end of *Rip It Up*, all he's left with at the end is an overblown and vacuous product like Frankie Goes To Hollywood, a boy-band prototype. Without attention to form, it is impossible to appreciate what is decimated by the commercial *ratio*: the delirious madness of a musical event, the beauty of unpredictability, the one-off situation. With his orthodox cultural studies agnosticism about musical form, Reynolds can only moralize retrospectively about the fame game. Critical spike crumbles to chatshow falafel.

By the end, as often in counter-revolutions, the 'theoreticians' mended the breach (Bob Last, Green Gartside, Trevor Horn, Tony Wilson) and successfully turned post-punk into a viable consumer option. The abysmal reign of New Order, Simple Minds and U2 beckoned. Reynolds notices that in formal terms, post-punk tunes by Wire, Josef K and Joy Division are similar to tunes by Altered Images, but he fails to draw the conclusion that it is the same paltry pabulum tweezed for different niche markets. In 1985, two journalists from the *NME* with ears alert enough to hear the straitened parameters of its 'alternative' – Richard Cook and Graham Lock – tried to introduce post-punk consumers to Free Improvisation. However, Derek Bailey was hardly chart fodder, so they left to join the jazz magazine *Wire*. The critique of capitalism and class society – so strikingly made by the Sex Pistols – was no longer deemed saleable. Instead it festered underground, until in the United States the grassroots networks built by Bad Brains and other Washington DC hardcore bands exploded at the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization in 1999. That is a different story of course, but, like Free Improvisation and Harmolodics, simply to mention it reveals the pinched horizons of Reynolds's tale. Never trust a music writer who calls the Sons of the Pioneers 'anodyne'.

Reynolds's obsession with chart placings (abstract knowledge) rather than live gigs and personal response to records (concrete knowledge) explains the failure of *Rip It Up*. With no negative dialectic, the particular is never given its due, much less used as a critical lever on the general. The writer attempts to speak 'objectively' for the mass consumer, but this putative entity is abstract and dominated. However bellettrist it may sound, properly objective cultural criticism needs to start by registering subjective (even disgraceful) responses. When music is treated as social fact rather than potential truth, the past will never make its 'tiger's leap' into the present. This is writing in which *nothing ever happens*.

Convinced that there is nothing relevant outside the text of the recorded product, Reynolds cannot explain the forces acting on the records he examines. In fact, he cannot interpret the records at all, and – paradoxically for someone who rarely acknowledges quirky, unofficial responses – emerges with something as arbitrary and subjective as 'taste'. This is because he remains obedient to the priorities and perspectives of the capitalist pop industry, allowing the commodity to dictate what constitutes musical culture. In *Rip It Up*, there is no appeal to the tribunal of live performance. But this is an essential element in decoding records. You only had to witness the gigs to know the Specials were a real collective – combined, conflictual and uneven – and that Dexy's Midnight Runners were a contrived charade. Without unrepentant insistence on the subjectivity of musical experience (Adorno hearing the opening of Mahler's First as 'the unpleasant whistling of an old steam engine', for example), pop writing won't achieve objectivity. It will just be witless and toothless.

Philosophy's malaise

Philosophy and its history

Pierre Macherey

For as long as philosophy has existed it has been intimately concerned with and profoundly perturbed by its history – a history from which it would very much like to unburden itself, without really knowing how.* In order to specify the character of this discomfiture we will borrow Kant's distinction between the two forms that 'subjective' knowledge can take, according to whether it is acquired *ex principiis* or *ex datis*. Because it treats *principia* as though it were dealing with *data*, the history of philosophy is characterized by a complete blurring of this distinction. There is a permanent lag between questions of right and matters of fact, which, because it challenges rationality – whether philosophical or otherwise – introduces a malaise. In response to this challenge, Merleau-Ponty put forward the thesis of the 'everywhere-nowhere'. This thesis makes it possible to understand why, when what is at stake is philosophy – which can be encountered as a whole in each philosophy, even if under the form of its negation – the traditional dilemma of inside and outside, which translates the above challenge, ceases to be pertinent. Under these conditions, how can we remedy the malaise in philosophy? By striving to live with it – that is, by turning it into the object of an inexhaustible curiosity. When all is said and done, this should constitute the very task of the history of philosophy.

ABC

Having roused the philosophers of Antiquity, the so-called 'master argument' was at the heart of Leibniz's reflections and still preoccupies philosophers concerned with logic today. It can thus be said to traverse the entire history of philosophy. It is known, according to the complete formulation attributed to Diodorus Cronus, solely on the basis of a passage from the

Discourses of Epictetus (II, ch. 19). This is how the 'master argument' is presented by Epictetus:

The Master Argument appears to have been propounded on the strength of some such principles as the following. Since there is a general contradiction with one another between these three propositions, to wit: A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible, and C) what is not true now and never will be, is nevertheless possible, Diodorus, realizing this contradiction, used the plausibility of the first two propositions to establish the principle, nothing is possible which is neither true now nor ever will be. But one man will maintain, among the possible combinations of two at a time, the following, namely C) something is possible, which is not true now and never will be, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible; yet he will not grant the third proposition A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, which is what Cleanthes and his group, whom Antipater has stoutly supported, seem to think. But others will maintain the other two propositions, C) a thing is possible which is not true now and never will be, and A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and then will assert that an impossible *does* follow a possible. But there is no way by which one can maintain all three of these propositions, because of their mutual contradiction.¹

The interest of Epictetus' manner of presenting the problem is that it generates three types of solution: 'A) everything true as an event in the past is necessary, and B) an impossible does not follow a possible, and C) what is not true now and never will be, is nevertheless possible.' Once we have recognized that it is impossible to have A, B and C simultaneously without falling into insoluble difficulties, these three solutions can be schematically presented as follows:

* This paper was originally presented at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, in the seminar 'La Philosophie et ses dehors' (Philosophy and its Outsides), 5 May 2003.

1. A and B, but not C, which says that ‘something is possible, which is not true now and never will be’, meaning it is not required that all possibles realize themselves (this is the solution opted for by Diodorus himself);
2. B and C, but not A, which says that ‘everything true as an event in the past is necessary’, since it is not possible to make it so that what has taken place did not take place (this is the solution opted for by Cleanthes);
3. A and C, but not B, which says that ‘an impossible does not follow a possible’, which is the basic pre-supposition of reasoning by *reductio ad absurdum* (this is the solution opted for by Chrysippus).

In a work devoted to this subject, Jean Vuillemin exploits this schema with the aim of bringing the entire history of philosophy – confronted with the examination of this single problem whose universally discriminating character has been postulated from the outset – under the framework of what he calls an ‘a priori system’.² From this point of view everything happens as though the various historically registered philosophical doctrines were called to occupy the slots of an ensemble which ideally pre-exists its filling out, and which, by providing the conditions for their logical formatting, allows their content to attain a kind of atemporality.

Now, when Epictetus carries out the detailed presentation of this schema, he has a very precise goal in mind, as he explains immediately after this presentation by developing the main theme of this chapter of the *Discourses*. He supposes that someone asks him which of the positions thereby configured he considers most worthy of being retained, a demand which he refuses to satisfy, declaring: ‘I have received the following account ... for this reason I am no better than the grammarian.’³ In other words, Epictetus claims that his only purpose was to reconstruct the present state of the question, by adopting the point of view of the one who today we call a ‘historian of philosophy’. For Epictetus this does not entail the need to take a personal position on the substance of the question. That is because, were he to break his reserve in this regard he would, by the same token, be deprived of the distance indispensable to survey the question objectively – or, as we would be tempted to say, to survey it without a philosophical state of mind. In order better to characterize this attitude which he has forced himself to adopt, and which he energetically refuses to abandon – something that does not prevent him, as we shall see, from finding no justification at all for it – Epictetus refers to the type of information that one

can reasonably hope to draw from the attentive reading of an author like Homer, for instance, regarding the subjects he has dealt with: ‘When asked, “Who was the father of Hector” he replied “Priam”. “Who were his brothers?” “Alexander and Deiphobus”. “And who was their mother?” “Hecuba. This is the account that I have received”. “From whom?” “From Homer” he said.’⁴ This information can be corroborated by any reasonably attentive specialist of Homer’s work.

Returning to the master argument, which has provided this comparative exercise with its starting point, Epictetus adds the following reflection, thereby raising the discussion onto a plane that is no longer simply technical but partly moral:

If I am a vain person, I can astonish the company, especially at a banquet, by enumerating those who have written on the subject. ‘Chrysippus also has written admirably on this topic in the first book of his treatise *On Things Possible*. And Cleanthes has written a special work on the subject, and Archedemus. Antipater also has written, not only in his book *On Things Possible*, but also a separate monograph in his discussion of *The Master Argument*. Have you not read the treatise?’ ‘I have not read it.’ ‘Then read it.’⁵

Today this display of erudition, whose facetious character is emphasized by its cumulative aspect, can make us think of the innumerable masses of details which concern, in the last instance, only specialists, who aim above all to impress one another and to occupy the most favourable positions in their disciplinary field. These details bear little or no relation to the core of the questions at stake, tending rather to discourage those who would want to engage themselves in their treatment. They saturate current publications in ancient philology, with their flaunting of secondary or tertiary literature, which end up making us completely forget the allegedly primary literature that gave these texts the occasion to exist and proliferate. Epictetus demands of such specialists, whose principal effort seems to be that of inculcating the one whose credulity they exploit by putting him in the position of knowing necessarily less than they do about the question, and of not having already exhausted the immense documentary material with which scientific publications nourish their footnotes – these indigestible notes akin to the table talk of sated diners – and this is what he wanted to get to all along, that they answer the following question:

And what good will it do him [to know all this]? He will be more trifling and tiresome than he is already. You, for example, what have you gained by the reading of it? What judgement have you formed

on the subject? Nay, you will tell us of Helen, and Priam, and the island of Calypso which never was and never will be!¹⁶

One could not state more clearly the manner in which such a practice of philosophy metamorphoses it into fiction, emptying philosophy of its real substance after it has severed it from its authentic interests.

In the rest of the chapter Epictetus explains, on the basis of this detour through the master argument, that the true Stoic is not the one who, having studied the doctrine in books and having perhaps compared it to others, is capable of quoting the list of solutions that have been provided for such and such a problem – a problem whose effective stakes remain alien to him and which he has more or less lost sight of in the course of the comparative exercise. Rather, the true Stoic is the one who, faced with the problem in practice, placed at the very heart of the storm that unleashes the elements of the problem in a manner impossible to ignore, reacts to it by reaching his own opinion and finding the requisite attitude. This is the attitude which, putting erudition aside, marks out the personality of the true sage, the one who has been able to make the philosophy that he defends in his own name effectively his, by incorporating it, instead of turning it into a neutral and aseptic, and ultimately anonymous, object of consultation. Now the master argument, which deploys its premisses on a purely theoretical plane – in which hypotheses that draw the core of their interest from the way that they are formulated are coldly confronted – is precisely, by its very nature, alien to the demands of a practical philosophy that pursues its ends in a wholly other way and refers to entirely other types of criteria.

It is striking, let us note in passing, that the main source for a problem that has become classical in philosophy, such as the one of contingent futures – which constitutes the typical example of what one could call a speculative problem that consists in confronting a paradox whose elements the pure understanding is required to disentangle – treats it as not belonging to the order of preoccupations of true philosophy. This effectively relegates the problem to the level of a historical curiosity, the mere preoccupation with knowing what Diodorus said, and how, in the manner of his saying it, he managed to set himself apart from positions of the types defended by Cleanthes and Chrysippus. This is a problem which, rightly, does not interest a great deal of people, even though it has already caused rivers of ink to flow.

We have begun by dwelling on this rather particular point with the intention of highlighting that it is not

only recently that philosophy has experienced difficulties with regard to the historian's take on problems, or that it has felt the need to demarcate itself from such an approach in the hope of preserving the authentic character of its own stance. Of course, no one is obliged to adopt Epictetus' extreme position and equate theoretical and practical philosophy, whose reciprocal relation is certainly more complex. Still, it must be admitted that philosophy faces difficulties with its own history, which is the occasion of a rather severe malaise. This malaise could even be the index, or the symptom, of what constitutes its problem *par excellence*, the one in relation to which it defines itself as philosophy – even if this means trying to find a solution for the problem while regularly failing to do so, which in turn reasserts the problem and reinforces its urgency. The first thing to be done, then, is to identify the nature of this difficulty – that is, to understand the fundamental problem which lurks within philosophy interrupting reflection, in the double sense that it both provokes and blocks it.

Original and reflected history

It is immediately clear that the difficulty in question presents itself in a twofold guise, due to the polysemy of the word 'history'. Like all forms of rational activity, philosophy 'has a history', first of all in the sense that it presents itself as an activity of thought in the process of development, an activity that has already begun and that – to the extent that each of its realizations situates itself in the prolongation of the efforts that preceded it – also presents itself as permanently needing to be continued, making it unfinished, or even unfinishable. But philosophy also 'has a history' in the sense that, whatever its allure, be it progress, decadence or errancy, this development of its activity is accompanied by a movement of reflexive reprise. In the first place it takes the form of a remembrance, which, at a given moment in its own 'history' – as a matter of fact in the midst of the eighteenth century, on bases that had been laid in the previous century when the idea of modernity started to take shape – began to take the guise of an organic knowledge, structured in the mode of an autonomous discipline, with its specialists, its formative lineages, its corpus, its interests, its proper methods and objects, which in turn fully became something like contents of thought. The second sense doubles the first, upon which it is apparently dependent. Strictly speaking, we can conceive that history in the first sense, original history, may take place in the absence of history in the second sense, reflected history. It seems this is what actually

took place up to the epoch of which we have been speaking, but not the reverse. We are nevertheless allowed to ask whether during the entire period in which it was not systematized, reflected history did not accompany the development of original history in other forms, as could be verified, for instance, in Plato and Aristotle.

The question then arises of whether this duplication takes place according to a relation of conformity or full concordance, as we could expect from approaches that are strictly parallel to one another, or whether instead it introduces a lag between the two movements, a lag which opens up a distance between them. Something like a gap, a space in which a contradiction can appear – that is, an occasion for disorder: this would be what, at base, poses a problem in the history of philosophy, once the latter is simultaneously grasped under both forms, original and reflected. Consequently, the real difficulty is not that of understanding that philosophy has a history in a single sense – which is a feature not just of philosophy but of all activities of knowledge, not to mention other human undertakings – nor of understanding how it came to have a twofold history, which, under potentially multifarious forms, also concerns all activities of knowledge, none of which can enduringly exercise itself in a completely spontaneous way without turning back on itself. It is above all the difficulty of justifying the conditions whereby these two histories relate to one another, given that they coexist in a relation of either agreement or disagreement, proximity or distance, such that they either corroborate or perturb one another, or at the very least hollow out a void between them in which an unthinkable unthought comes to lodge.

Let me try to reformulate this difficulty in another way, leaning on the account proposed by Kant in the oft-quoted analysis of the transcendental methodology of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which examines the architectonic of pure reason. Kant begins by noting that every kind of knowledge can be examined from two points of view, one objective, the other subjective. Objectively, it is identified in itself relative to the content to which it relates and according to the modalities in which it relates to it. Subjectively, it is characterized as a function of the conditions of its acquisition by the subject that retains it, as being not only a knowledge in general, stated in the third person, but a knowledge [*connaissance*] which the subject has made its own because it effectively knows [*sait*] it – that is, possesses it in the first person. Apprehended from this second point of view, knowledge, Kant explains, can itself take two forms: either it is rational

knowledge, *cognitio ex principiis*, or it is historical knowledge, *cognitio ex datis*. *Cognitio ex principiis* finds its justification in itself, to the extent that it is developed solely on the basis of its initial principles, outside of any other element of appreciation, according to the modalities proper to an *ars inveniendi*. The validity of *cognitio ex datis*, on the other hand, is authenticated with reference to external elements – in this case, the acquisition of knowledge consists in the assimilation or integration of these elements to subjective ratiocinating consciousness, which has not spontaneously drawn them from its own functioning, but had to ‘learn’ them, by subjecting itself to the rules of an *ars docendi*. It is through this *ars docendi* that *cognitio ex datis* has been instructed, in the framework of a structure of teaching of which these external elements have themselves been the instruments.

The particularity of philosophical knowledge – one can speak in this respect of a veritable paradox – is that its *principia*, once engendered as such by the philosophers who are their authors, can take the form of *data*, susceptible, once instituted, of being taken up again just as these authors have left them. This seems to blur the distinction between the two forms of knowledge: knowledge *ex principiis*, which naturally takes place in the framework of an original history wherein it is formed by its own dynamic, and knowledge *ex datis*, which situates itself in the framework of a reflected history, offering an image that more or less conforms to a model with which the first provides it and whose reality it transposes onto another plane. To put it in yet another way, in the particular case of philosophy, a form of knowledge can objectively be *ex principiis* (i.e. rational), while subjectively being *ex datis* (i.e. historical): this is what happens for instance when I become aware, on the basis of elements of information that are provided to me in its regard, and that are almost entirely borrowed from a bookish culture, of a previously constituted system of thought.

Kant takes Wolff’s system as his example – and this example, for its part, is not innocent, because a dogmatically inclined system is, better than any other, open to an apprenticeship of this kind. But this does not stop one from referring to an entirely different kind of example, like Diodorus’ aporia, as Epictetus’ does – a system that I try to understand by assimilating its premisses as completely and faithfully as I can, premisses that present themselves to me as factual givens and not as principles of law. What exactly, in the case of philosophical knowledge, is the difference between factual data and principles of law? It is that the first pre-exist in forms that are no longer susceptible to

being transformed, since they are nothing other than what their given existence makes them be, and only offer themselves to be appraised or registered such as they have thus been given; whilst the second, principles of law, which relate to a rational examination, are open by the same token to a critique that makes them appear as not already entirely constituted in their definitive form, but still in the midst of elaboration, and as such susceptible of being modified, or even suspended or suppressed. Factual data are intangible, since only the conditions under which they are communicated are, if the need arises, discussable or falsifiable; whilst principles of law can be criticized at any point and if needs be rejected as such for the sake of other principles. In the case of historical knowledge, we are dealing with a receptive, which is to say passive, form of thought, which is assigned to the one who learns from another, that is the student whose sole task is to acquire already elaborated items of knowledge without needing to take part in their elaboration or to take responsibility for it. In the second case, we are dealing instead with an activity of thought that presents a truly active dimension; that is, an activity able in a spontaneous manner to invent magisterially – which is to say to produce according to its own logic, without having to follow the lessons of a master – new truths, instead of being content with replicating and reiterating them as already fully formed and offering themselves to be identically repeated, without any possibility of a rectification that would irremediably alter them.

What we call ‘history of philosophy’ would thus be entirely caught up in this dilemma of activity and passivity, fact and law. It is an apparently insoluble dilemma, which is why it can be perceived as the problem par excellence of philosophy considered as such, a problem which is the symptom of an undeniable malaise. That is precisely what Kant was getting at in the passage from which we borrowed this argumentative schema. In fact, Kant uses it to show that the form of knowledge which, on the grounds of its intrinsically rational vocation, we would be most tempted to relate to philosophy – that is, mathematics – entirely escapes this dilemma. That is why one can, without any problem, that is without perverting its content, learn mathematics and not only *a* mathematics, whilst – in a formula which is well known even though its premisses are seldom reflected upon – one does not learn philosophy, but only learns to philosophize. Why is it not possible to learn philosophy? Because such an undertaking immediately comes up against the need to choose which philosophy one is preparing to learn or teach: effectively, one can at most learn or teach a phil-

osophy, for example that of Descartes or of Spinoza, which is not the same thing as learning philosophy *tout court*. This raises the extremely embarrassing question of knowing what kind of relation there can indeed be between philosophy as such and philosophies considered in the particularity to which the name of their author brings its signature.

There are two equally unsatisfactory solutions to this question. Either one admits that philosophy is what several philosophies have in common, for instance those of Descartes and Spinoza – which implies that it would be possible to extract the principles shared by these two philosophies and on which they would identically rest, principles whose paucity and feeble rational tenor we can easily imagine. Retaining only those points on which Descartes and Spinoza agree and eliminating those on which they disagree, one would, strictly speaking, end up by fabricating a vague rationalist vulgate, but one would certainly not have the elements with which to elaborate a philosophy worthy of the name, which is to say a truly consistent philosophy. Or one admits that philosophy is what cannot be located in any particular philosophy because it transcends the latter’s particularity, in a manner that makes it something apparently ungraspable, definitively unknowable, akin to Kant’s thing in itself, which holds itself behind all phenomena but cannot be presented or found in any of them. We may then hazard the conclusion that what is called philosophy has as much reality as the Kantian thing-in-itself or Descartes’ positive infinite, of which we possess a clear and distinct idea, allowing us to say with certainty that it exists without being able to specify the content of this idea, which, being unanalysable, is also incomprehensible.

Whence the suspicion: what if philosophy didn’t exist, or at least only existed in the form of a *de jure* demand incapable of being transformed into a *de facto* reality? That would explain the inevitable dilution of content that this notion undergoes when we pass from original history to reflected history.

Everywhere and nowhere

Faced with this dilemma – in which we can glimpse philosophy’s most intimate wound, the index of a difficulty that it will overcome only in an illusory way, a difficulty that permanently summons it and in which we are permitted to discern, correlatively, its *raison d’être* – Merleau-Ponty, in his presentation of an encyclopaedia of famous philosophers that appeared under his editorship in 1956 with the publishing house Mazenod (the text was reprinted in 1960 in *Signs*), proposes the formula ‘everywhere and nowhere’. This

formula serves as the title of the presentation, in which we find a reflection on the problematic relation that philosophy entertains with its own history, or rather with its histories, whose connections are more or less harmonious or conflicted.

Starting with the traditional question, ‘How could we possibly see one single philosophy developing through different philosophies?’⁷ Merleau-Ponty sets out the main shortcomings of the Hegelian response to this interrogation, a response which, by subjecting philosophies to the dialectic of the already and the not-yet, finally comes down to flattening all of them onto the formalized figure of a single system. Because of its global character, which makes it totally absorbing, this system, whether completed or in the process of its realization, reproduces the particularity of different philosophies by ideally, or even fictively, annulling the properly historical dimension of said particularity. In such a perspective the different philosophies, transmuted into ‘moments’ of the system, translate its formal dynamic by enclosing this dynamic in a space of pure presence. In this space, every actuality is transcended by the miracle of a becoming or development which, as it progressively advances, suppresses itself qua becoming and takes the form of an accomplishment. Hegel’s thesis is effectively that history, as a succession in the course of which different stages negate one another, thus finds in itself the means that allow it to return upon itself and negate itself in the form of absolute negation, the negation which, turning against itself, takes itself directly as its object – which is the condition of its overcoming, of its suppression as a pure and simple negation that is nothing but negation. This rational miracle is also an unfathomable mystery. From its standpoint, Merleau-Ponty writes, ‘Truth is that imaginary system, the contemporary of all philosophies, which would be able to retain their signifying power without loss. An existing philosophy is evidently no more than a crude sketch of such a system.’⁸ But the failure of such an enterprise reveals at the same time its obverse: the exploded, definitively fragmented reality of what we call philosophy, which escapes any attempt at recollection, and, at the risk of turning into an assortment of opinions, is infinitely dispersed in its manifestations, which can be coordinated among one another only on the basis of their insurmountable differences. Whence the conclusion to which Merleau-Ponty moves: ‘There is not a philosophy which contains all philosophies; philosophy as a whole is at certain moments in each philosophy. To take up the celebrated phrase again, philosophy’s centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.’⁹

It is this conclusion that is distilled in the formula from which we set out: ‘Everywhere and nowhere’.

By the same token, the logic of the ‘everywhere and nowhere’ makes relative, and ultimately even indifferent, the separation between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. What we call particular philosophies, such as they appear in the space of original history – each seemingly sufficient unto itself – are really closed entities, on the model of a pure inside that would shut itself off from any intrusion or contamination by an outside, with the latter diagnosed as representing a threat of alteration. In reality, what makes a historical philosophy into a figure of thought resembling no other, to be apprehended in its unsurpassable singularity, what makes it in all senses of the word ‘unique’, is also the principle that disturbs and destabilizes it from the inside, imposing upon it a limit that is its own, the limit that it itself fixes by drawing it out of itself. This limit is also the cause of all its troubles – that is, of the questions that can be posed with regard to such a philosophy, questions that account both for its difficulty and for its interest. There would not, or would no longer be, any grounds to be interested in a thought that appears self-evident, presenting no difficulties of any sort, and about which there is no reason to interrogate oneself. Behind their apparent closure, the most systematized philosophies thus conceal a profound malleability and permeability that troubles them, opening them to expectations that they interpret as external to their own order, while they themselves, through their own logic, call upon the severe necessity of these expectations, without which these philosophies would not be what they are.

That is why it is incorrect to say that different philosophies take place in History with a capital H, which would constitute the field wherein they globally develop. Rather, it is their own history which lies within them or comes to them, a history to which they offer a temporary place of welcome, a more or less stable or fortuitous shelter, which under no circumstances can take the form of an inaccessible fortress, impenetrable to any external assault – had such a thing ever really come to pass, we would certainly know about it. From this point of view, the *Kampfplatz* discussed by Kant – which is the terrain on which historical philosophies face off, displaying their weapons, which are in principle their arguments – is also the space in which they confront their real conditions of existence, some, if not most, of which belong to the order of the non-philosophical, from which these philosophies can never completely subtract themselves. In fact, it is difficult to see how the philosophical could exist independent of the dialogue

it continually entertains with the non-philosophical, a dialogue that represents alterity-to-self, this intimate difference which is precisely what makes of the philosophical something unique and incomparable, albeit not something totally separate. The fact that philosophy is permanently exposed to appearing in the guise of something in which it does not truly recognize itself and which involves an element of undecidability is doubtless a threat to its existence, and the source for it of a painful malaise – but it is also the matter from which philosophy's existence draws its substance and its sustenance. It needs it imperatively, in order to drive the movement whereby it launches itself towards new figures of its realization.

The paradox of philosophy, mentioned at the outset, can thus be stated in the following manner: the philosophical is fashioned using the non-philosophical,



under conditions which mean that the philosophical is permanently exposed, or even called, to undoing itself and returning to a non-philosophical state, following the double game, which we have already identified, of *cognitio ex principiis* and *cognitio ex datis*. Philosophy undergoes the ordeal of this alternation, which provides it with the plot of its history, on the two planes of its original and its reflected history. This is an alternation wherein the exchange of the philosophical and the non-philosophical, which keeps philosophy's truth in perpetual balance, is indefinitely effectuated. That is why, in such a context, the well-known thesis of the end of philosophy – with its multiple and even contradictory occurrences – is just one of the provisional forms taken by the exchange between the philosophical and the non-philosophical, a form to which it is consequently impossible to accord a definitive character. If philosophy has ended or is ending, which can be legitimately argued, it is because it is never done ending, as well as retracing its steps, at the risk of moving on the spot or getting lost. By the same token, philosophy never stops erasing its traces as soon as they are made, or at least it never stops trying to. That

is why everything happens as if philosophy had never begun, which makes it necessary for its undertaking ceaselessly to start again from zero. From this point of view, the fact that philosophy has a problem with its history and is thereby ill at ease with itself is no longer a cause for surprise but rather appears as its normal condition of existence, inasmuch as it is possible to speak of the normal form of a paradox. Philosophy is present even in the figures that seem to signify its absence by confronting it with the risk of that which it is not. There is thus no reason for philosophy to be afraid of its own history, even if it is revealed that philosophy is definitively not allowed to live in peace with its history, that is to produce and represent itself to itself as a completed form in which its secret would be elucidated and its enigma dissolved, sapping for evermore the discourse of history and reducing it to the status of futile babbling.

Consequently, one will say that even though history produces philosophy, it never succeeds in explaining it completely, unless it metamorphoses into philosophy, for example by becoming a philosophy of history. In the text already quoted, Merleau-Ponty writes along the same lines that 'historical "explanation" is a way of philosophising without seeming to, of disguising ideas in things and thinking imprecisely. A conception of history explains philosophy only on the condition that it becomes philosophy itself, and implicit philosophy.'¹⁰ It is this capacity of philosophy to play on the two modes of the explicit and the implicit, and, following Merleau-Ponty's formula, of 'disguising ideas in things' – but also, and why not, of disguising things in ideas – that allows us also to understand why never having begun philosophy also never has to end. One does not leave philosophy. It is in this sense that philosophy is 'everywhere and nowhere', inside and outside, equally where it is presented and where it is absent, absent to itself, to what it was and to what is not it – which Merleau-Ponty once again interprets in the following manner: 'Philosophy is everywhere, even in the "facts", and it nowhere has a private realm which shelters it from life's contagion.'¹¹ By 'life', we must understand here the life of facts, a life which elevates the productions of philosophy, that is to say its principles, to the rank of facts: facts which are principles, principles which are facts. Let us say so again, there is no serious reason to be surprised or scandalized by this. If philosophy is exceeded by its history, it must not forget that it is in permanent excess of it as well, since it manages to impose upon history its own significations and its problems, which draw their signifying value from being and remaining in

expectation of their resolution. That is why the modality proper to the assertions of philosophy reveals itself to be interrogation, an interrogation which philosophy turns towards both the inside and the outside, against itself and against the external elements that produce philosophy by disturbing it.

Interminable analysis

We thus begin to glimpse the rather particular nature of the ‘becoming of philosophy’, a formula used by Gérard Lebrun as the title for his superb study of the difficult relation of philosophy to its history, which concludes volume three of his *Notions de philosophie*, published in 1995 and edited by Denis Kambouchner. This becoming is not just the one into which philosophy is caught up by the need to invest itself in the different figures of philosophy attested by history, which it does at the risk of losing itself as Philosophy in the singular and with a capital P. It is also the becoming into which these different philosophies are caught up inasmuch as it is not obvious that they can be learned in the mode of the *cognitio ex datis*, since they offer themselves to permanent reinvention; as if, under the very form in which they are recorded by their texts, they still betoken a *cognitio ex principiis* from the point of view of which they are the objects of discussions, discussions whose course seems as if it will never come to a close.

Kant, who hoped by the path of critique to bring back peace to philosophy, deplored the fact that the entirety of philosophy’s past history unfolds as though on a battlefield where, in all senses of the expression, it displays its divisions. In effect, this history has been marked throughout its unfolding by spectacular ‘quarrels’: the one between the friends of the forms and the friends of matter, at the time of Plato; the quarrel of universals in the Middle Ages; the *Pantheismusstreit* unleashed in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century, which resonated in France with a delay of a few decades under the name of the quarrel of pantheism; the quarrel of Christian philosophy in the twentieth century – to mention only a few salient episodes in an epic full of sound and fury, in which, as though discussion were impossible without dispute or diatribe, the bitter voices of discord and invective have never been silent for long. This permanent controversy does indeed cast suspicion on the rational, or even reasonable, character of philosophical activity, which naturally tends to transform its debates into confrontations whose tenor seems more political than scientific, and which privileges violence – in the last instance the conflict among wills – over

intellectual persuasion through proper argument and demonstration. Philosophical activity thus tends to value, or allow to prevail, theses which seem as though they can only be affirmed by opposing and trying to destroy one another. To be more precise, even if at the outset they could be presented as personal squabbles pitting individually named and identified protagonists, these bellicose quarrels later propagated themselves into wider communities of opinion, called to commit themselves to this kind of debate, and summoned to stand under the banner of one side or the other, to choose their camp, in the framework of what became veritable field battles in which there was often little hesitation in forcing the dead to take up arms.

Yet should we be infuriated by an approach which Althusser, who played this card unrepentantly, could define as ‘class struggle in theory’? The opposite of the differend, which would emerge from its resolution, would be indifference, resulting from an artificial neutralization of the labour of philosophical thought, required at all costs to stick to a single path of development – something that would perhaps be tantamount to suppressing it as philosophy. After all, isn’t the most effective instrument that philosophy can resort to in order to make itself understood, by polemicizing against it, that of giving itself a more or less fictive or real adversary, the refutation of which furnishes it with a pretext to highlight the positive aspects of its own approach? Can we conceive Theophilus without Philaethes, this other ‘Phile’ to whom he is intimately bound by the discussion he entertains with him, a discussion which is far more than a controversy between extrinsic and independent positions?

This phenomenon has also preoccupied the history of philosophy, when this appellation has designated more specifically the study of the doctrines of philosophers, a study that has itself given rise to sometimes fierce debates, and that moreover has contributed to restoring to this separate discipline, which the ‘history of philosophy’ has become, properly philosophical stakes that do not merely concern the methodology of the history of ideas. It is thus, for example, that in the second half of the twentieth century the interpretation of Descartes’ thought gave rise in France to two fiery quarrels whose echoes still resonate today. In the 1950s, there was the one between Ferdinand Alquié, advocate of a reading of the cogito that one could term ‘existentialist’, and Martial Gueroult, the partisan of the order of reasons. Aside from its often technical details, this discussion was concerned more generally with the question of knowing whether reading a philosopher presupposes the examination of the personal

genesis of his thought, making this thought into a singular mental experience, or whether its single aim is to reconstitute an impersonal and essential argumentative and demonstrative structure that takes its place within a global typology of systems. Then, during the following decade, there was the somewhat agonizing dispute between Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida around the reading of a few lines in the first of the *Metaphysical Meditations*, a discussion that quickly became rather heated, even virulent, and in which, as in the previous case, the community of people taking an interest in philosophy was implicated as witness. Starting from the consideration of what on first impression could appear as a matter of detail, this dispute brought to light far larger stakes concerning the nature of philosophical discourse and the events of thought whose site or occasion the latter represents. The immediate conclusion to be drawn from this is that we will never be done reading and rereading a 'classic' like Descartes, to the extent that his discourse is the bearer of intellectual stakes that far exceed the epoch for which it was written. What in effect is a great philosophical work like the *Metaphysical Meditations*? It is not, at least not only, a repertoire containing a certain number of ready-made ideas that would be deposited within it and in some sense frozen as they await reactivation, a reactivation that would take the simple form of a *cognitio ex datis*. It is a machine for forging ideas and arguments, in the form of an active and living reflection, one of whose most far-sighted forms is the dispute or quarrel – which, from the standpoint of critique, leads us back to the demands of a *cognitio ex principiis*. By this very token, as we have already had the occasion to note, the distinction between these two forms of knowledge is fundamentally blurred.

Let us approach this difficulty from yet another angle. In 2000, the medievalist Michel Zink organized, in the framework of the activities of the Collège de France, a symposium whose proceedings have been recently published under the title *The Work and Its Shadow: What Can Secondary Literature Do?* The object of this meeting was the notion of *Sekundärliteratur*, a notion that was initially forged in the framework of German university studies to designate any textual production dependent on a pre-existing textual basis, reputed as 'primary' in relation to it – the question remaining open, of course, as to whether this primaryness can enjoy an absolute standing or whether it is instead merely relative. In the introduction to this volume, which gathers together texts devoted to a theme of apparently only very limited interest, con-

cerning first and foremost the practices and problems of erudition, Zink justifies the title he's chosen in the following terms:

Secondary literature is like the shadow projected by primary literature: if the latter disappears, so will the former. The shadow does not exist without its object. We could even say that it lives in the shadow of primary literature, and even that primary literature puts it in the shadow. The shadow does not exist without the object, but it prolongs the object, confers upon it in turn its reality. Peter Schlemihl learnt it to his detriment. And when painting became able to represent shadows, it made a decisive step in the representation of the real.¹²

Works about which one does not speak or no longer speaks, and which do not fuel or no longer fuel a new textual production that would entertain its living memory – its flame, so to speak – are as if they never existed. Having fallen to the status of dead letters, they risk being lost forever. Hoffmanstahl wrote an opera libretto based on the story of the woman with no shadow, whose body, as transparent as a crystal, is devoid of the possibility of bearing a posterity. Whence the glory and the misery of secondary literature: a subordinate, or even slavish, literature, without which the mastery of the primary literature on which it rests would have no way of being exercised and would remain of the order of an unrealized potentiality, doomed to remain as such.

In order to treat this stimulating question, Zink called upon specialists of literature (like Fumaroli and Compagnon), sociologists (like Bourdieu and Casanova), art historians (like Bonnefoy), but not philosophers, a surprising omission on his part. For who more than philosophers is affected by a problem such as this? As if permanently burdened by the past history of their discipline, represented in the great doctrines that for them play the role of primary literature, but in relation to which they cannot fail to ask whether they are not themselves already secondary literature, philosophers do not know how to get rid of this problem, nor what to do with it. The dilemma of either living with them or without them is apparently insurmountable and constitutes one of the limits against which the philosophical enterprise interminably butts – whence, as we have seen, its malaise. Does not one of the main accusations levelled against *continental philosophy* rest on the supposedly verifiable fact that it has been unable to decide this dilemma, allowing itself to be embarrassed by the weight of an omnipresent reference to traditions of thought that are the manifest symptom of the absence of an effectively living and autonomous

thought? The latter would be a thought, carried out in the present, of a reasoning activity faced with real problems, that is to say problems entirely posed on their own *ex principiis*, an activity which should be able *de jure* to do without any memory, since the latter is bound to slow down or even completely hinder its advance.

This suspicion – which in the first place concerns the very practice of philosophy and presents the latter's attachment to history as the symptom of a veritable illness, and not simply an episodic malaise – equally concerns, on the secondary plane assigned to it, the work carried out by the historians of philosophy. This brings us back to our initial problem. The following question arises: by outliving their authors, and projecting their shadow or their images on history, which leads them to don the guise of general figures of thought connoted as -isms – as is the case, for example, with Descartes when he becomes the warning or pretext for 'Cartesianisms' more or less faithful to the initial spirit of his avowed and declared thought, as it was formulated by him *ex principiis* – are philosophies not doomed to function outside of themselves, in a mode that could be called non-philosophical, to the extent that it escapes the criteria defining its original legitimacy, and, far more than to the demands of a *cognitio ex datis*, responds to those of other principles that renew its content either totally or in part? And is it not the historical fate of philosophy, or at least of philosophies, to become something non-philosophical, or otherwise philosophical, which would perhaps be the form par excellence of their accomplishment? We could then speak of a becoming real of philosophy, and it would be fair to say that philosophies, even when they believe they are interpreting the world, have contributed – perhaps unbeknownst to themselves – to its transformation. This is so even if such a transformation does not go, at least not entirely, in the direction they would have predicted. Moreover, this is the reason why, even when they come from the remotest past, all philosophers partake fully in our present, in which they are integrated as though they were our contemporaries, in forms which are therefore not only those of antiquarian remembrance, melancholically turned towards a past transformed by its lack of actuality.

This takes us back once again to Merleau-Ponty and his reflection on the fact that philosophy pursues its enterprise 'everywhere and nowhere'. This leads him precisely to re-examine the case of Descartes, in relation to the scission introduced into Descartes' thought by the sequence of his interpretations, carrying him away in the movement of his own becoming.

This scission is the one that takes place between, on the one hand, the Cartesian mode of thought that we represent to ourselves as being that of 'Descartes *en soi*', whether it be that of the system or that of an intellectual experience carried out in the first person, and, on the other, 'Descartes for us', the Descartes of history, infinitely deployed and dispersed by the successive attempts at elucidation or exploitation of this thought. This is a history which, as contradictory as it may appear to us, is nevertheless the index of Descartes' fecundity and constitutes, always in the present, the reality of what we gather, more or less legitimately or fictitiously, under the name of Descartes. That is what Merleau-Ponty means when he writes:

Sartre once contrasted the Descartes who existed, lived that life, spoke those words, and wrote those works – an unshakeable block and indestructible landmark – and Cartesianism, a 'wandering philosophy', which necessarily escapes our grasp because it changes endlessly in the hands of its inheritors. He was right, except that no boundary marks the point where Descartes stops and his successors begin, and there would be no more sense in enumerating the thoughts which *are in Descartes* and those which *are in his successors* than there would be in making an inventory of a language. With this reservation, what counts certainly is that thinking life called Descartes, whose fortunately preserved wake is in his works. The reason why Descartes is present is that – surrounded by circumstances which today are abolished, and haunted by the concerns and some of the illusions of his times – he responded to these hazards in a way which teaches us to respond to our own, even though they are different and our response is different too.¹³

That is why 'that thinking life called Descartes', to take up Merleau-Ponty's fine formula, is for us today the object of a reflection which exceeds it and makes it more a motive for perplexity than a reassuring reference, appropriately enclosed in the limits that would preserve its perfect self-coherence. Descartes claimed to have attained certainty by emerging triumphant from the ordeal of doubt: that does not stop his certainties from being doubtful for us, in the sense that we will never be done interrogating their content. Now this difficult, even tragic, and in any case paradoxical condition is the one shared by all philosophers worthy of the name, philosophers who commune in the uncertainty of their certainties, which is also the certainty of their uncertainties. Let us quote Merleau-Ponty one last time:

Even if we consider only one philosopher, he swarms with inner differences and it is through

these discordancies that we must find his ‘total’ meaning. If I have difficulty finding the ‘fundamental choice’ of the absolute Descartes Sartre spoke of, the man who lived and wrote once and for all three centuries ago, it is perhaps because Descartes himself did not at any moment coincide with Descartes. What he is in our eyes according to the texts, he was only bit by bit through his reaction upon himself. And the idea of grasping him in his entirety at his source is perhaps an illusory one if Descartes – instead of being some ‘central intuition’, an eternal character, and an absolute individual – is this discourse, hesitant at first, which is affirmed through experience and use, which is apprised of itself little by little, and which never wholly stops intending the very thing it has resolutely excluded. A philosophy is not chosen like an object. Choice does not suppress what is not chosen, but sustains it marginally. The same Descartes who distinguishes so well between what arises from pure understanding and what pertains to the practice of life happens to map out at the same time the program for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders he distinguishes. Philosophical choice (and doubtless all other choice) is never simple. And it is through their ambiguity that philosophy and history touch.¹⁴

What Merleau-Ponty calls ‘the programme for a philosophy which was to take as its principal theme the cohesion of the very orders [Descartes] distinguishes’ is the very programme that Merleau-Ponty himself took up qua original philosopher who places himself within the approach of a *cognitio ex principiis*, remaining at the same time an attentive and demanding reader of Descartes, in whom he does not just see the object offered to a *cognitio ex datis*. That is because he reasons from Descartes – that is, on the basis of the problem or network of problems that for us bears the name of Descartes. He does so by attempting to measure what constitutes the properly immeasurable character of Descartes, the immeasurableness that impels his discourse beyond his initial explicit choices and turns it into a discourse replete with implicit indications, a discourse susceptible to having a history that would endlessly repeat its enigmas, exploring the secret which, doubtless forever, must remain hidden beneath the name of Descartes.

To conclude what aims to be the most faithful, albeit fatally incomplete, evocation of a problem, and not the presentation of its eventual resolution, inasmuch as the latter can be rationally envisaged, let us refer to the analysis of the ‘Becoming of philosophy’, proposed by Gérard Lebrun. Lebrun examines the project of a ‘philosophizing history of philosophy’ such as, it seems, it was formulated for the first time by Kant in

some working notes written in 1793. He then excavates the antinomies that the realization of such a project inevitably confronts. This seems to put the representation of the becoming of philosophy on the side of what could be termed a merely ‘philosophized’ history of philosophy. A recognition of this kind seems reason enough to despair. What is the philosopher left with to sustain an interest in the history of philosophy and in philosophy itself such as it presents itself through its history? To such a question, Lebrun proposes what appears as a modest answer: it is the spirit of curiosity, he says, which justifies the attention that we persist in lavishing on the texts of the tradition, and which leads us to see in them something other than an archive indifferent to the need to philosophize – a need which, to satisfy itself, should supposedly be able to do without documents. In effect, we will never be done asking ourselves questions about these texts, which in turn stimulate rather than sap our invention. Yes indeed, philosophy, as revealed by the contradictory movement of its history, is an extraordinarily curious and uneasy thing. Let us repudiate the vain illusion of an intellectual comfort that would put an end to this malaise by satisfying our curiosity in such a way as to exhaust its content. Let us continue to be occupied and preoccupied with philosophy, knowing full well that this undertaking which neither begins nor ends will never reach a verifiable result. Let us never finish entertaining and propagating this malaise within philosophy.

Translated by Alberto Toscano

Notes

Thanks to John Sellars for the Epictetus references. All notes are the translator’s.

1. Epictetus, *Discourses*, ed. and trans. W.A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1925–28; vol. 1, pp. 359–61.
2. *Contingence ou Nécessité. L’aporie de Diodore et les systèmes philosophiques*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1982, p. 61.
3. *Discourses*, p. 361.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 361–3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Everywhere and Nowhere’, in *Signs*, trans. R.C. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 127; translation modified.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 129.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
12. *L’œuvre et son ombre. Que peut la littérature secondaire?*, Fallois, Paris, 2002, p. 11.
13. ‘Everywhere and Nowhere’, p. 128.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.

W.G. Sebald and the modern art of memory

Stewart Martin

The reception of Sebald's literary works has been, with few exceptions, rapturous. Internationally, across both the popular and literary press, they have been hailed as melancholic and strange masterpieces, late rejoinders to the high tradition of European literature. This judgement has been sustained academically, well beyond the disciplinary confines of literary studies. The bibliography on him is already lengthy, extended by his sudden death in 2001, which seems to have encouraged a eulogistic tone in mimetic homage to Sebald's own mournful prose.¹ Within two decades it appears that Sebald is in the process of becoming a landmark of contemporary intellectual culture.

The reasons for this reception are multiple. 'Holocaust writing' is a conspicuous and well-established genre of contemporary fiction. It is a crude label for Sebald's work in so far as Nazi atrocities are dealt with only indirectly, through their deferred effects and traces, and as one of a number of historical catastrophes. Sebald is perhaps less a 'holocaust writer' than a writer of destruction, or, to use some of his own words, a writer of the natural history of destruction who takes the whole passage of European history as his subject matter. But it is precisely his awkward relation to 'holocaust writing' that has generated such attention. He writes not only about the suffering of Jews but also about the devastation wrought by the Allied bombing of Germany, interpreting German silence about this not as being due to conservative nationalism, but as an extension of the mechanisms of repression developed during the Nazi culture of war – although this has clearly weakened recently. He also diagnoses the German postwar capitalist work ethic as a direct consequence of this repression. Perhaps less conspicuous to his Anglo-American readers, he directly and intimately identifies with Jewish victims, effacing the received ethical distinction between victim and (German) perpetrator. Sebald is interesting and significant because he deals not merely with what has

been repressed within cultural consciousness, but with what has been repressed by the dominant scenes and institutions of memory, with what the memory of the repressed itself represses. This is controversial but also timely, as the recent commemorations of the bombing of Dresden indicate. It is largely Sebald's criticism of German nationalism and his stitching of this episode into an epochal history of destruction that has saved him from the nationalist sentiments about the 'German holocaust'.

Yet the interest in Sebald's articulation of these arguments derives principally from further peculiarities of the genre of artwork that he has developed. Of particular interest here is less his poetry – such as his first extended poem *After Nature*, or his books of poems and pictures written in collaboration with artists, *For Years Now* with Tess Jaray and *Unrecounted* with Jan Peter Tripp – than his series of pseudo-novelistic works, which have to date had the greatest impact: *Vertigo*, *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Austerlitz*.² Here text and images – often, but not exclusively, photographs – are combined in what, besides their marketing as novels, appear to be a curious combination of genres, perhaps most akin to informal biographies. The characters are people haunted by horrific experiences of the past, often in relation to the Second World War, and narrated by a biographer or co-memoirist who sympathetically, painstakingly and self-consciously records their activities and testimony. And yet, despite the description of real people and events and the provision of apparently factual evidence throughout – enforced by the use of photographs – these biographies are often fictionalized, but to an indeterminate degree. This, by turns mundane and hallucinatory, fusion of fact and fiction articulates the persistent theme throughout the works: memory and the attempt to mourn traumatic and repressed experiences. The simple separation of fact and fiction does not grasp the phenomenon or task of

memory. The re-assemblage of traces of the past into a coherent experience cannot be achieved by the mere presentation of facts, and so neither can this experience be written off as fiction. This ambiguity is the medium of memory as well as any artwork that aspires to the self-conscious illusion of truth.

Sebald's art of memory resonates with an intellectual period that has become preoccupied with the literary and visual culture of memory, repression and mourning among the long shadows of the Second World War, darkened by the fading of avant-garde utopianism. Besides the all-too-quaint admiration for Sebald's learnedness, there is the recognition of an oeuvre that articulates many of the fundamental concerns of contemporary cultural theory. Is this not the latest and perhaps greatest post-Benjaminian art of memory? Certainly, it is not despite but because of Sebald's attention to the lost, buried and untimely that his work is seen as so timely. There is a sense of fulfilled anticipation in the reception of Sebald's art, even gratitude.

Sebald has developed a genre formed through the synthesis of a number of minor genres – biography, autobiography, diary, travel writing – and non-artistic forms – the scrapbook, the family or holiday photo-album – that are combined to create a late attempt to mourn the traumatic experience of the First and Second World Wars, and thereby salvage the ruins of the tradition of European literature these wars produced. He has attempted to suppress the kitsch dimension of these genres, forming an innovative, syncretic genre in which the novel – modernism's syncretic genre par excellence – can be rejoined, albeit with the self-consciousness of its historical ruination. The accumulation of his biography-like texts suggests a form of combination beyond the parameters of the published books, as if Sebald were constructing a larger, unfinished, and perhaps unfinishable work; perhaps a melancholic reworking of Balzac's modern epic, the *Comédie Humaine*, a 55-volume set of which appears towards the end of *Austerlitz*.

However, modernism begs to be judged in the light of the latest historical formation of its materials. And in this respect Sebald's work displays an indifference or limitation that demands criticism. The most striking effects of the cultural and political landscape since the Second World War have been repressed in Sebald's art. The collapse of the Soviet Union, the processes of decolonization and recolonization, the resurgent globalization of capitalism, the overdetermination of memories of the Holocaust by its propaganda function in the politics of the Middle East: all these phenomena



are scarcely detectable. The theoretical and practical transformation of the use of image and text – especially in relation to digitalization and the Internet – and the novel genres emerging from these changes, are equally absent in any direct form. It is this that gives his work its sentimental, arty and conservative quality, despite the deep, near-suicidal melancholy that is an almost constant theme. The rather middlebrow appreciation of his learnedness partakes of this conservative pleasure. For anyone sensitive to the cultural and political narcissism of this melancholy, it's not that pleasurable. The uncritical appreciation of Sebald's work as an art of memory intensifies the opposite judgement: that it is an art of forgetting, or perhaps an allegory of forgetting and its ironies.

Art, which relates to truth as much by what it does not say or show as by what it does, promises to avoid repressing what it does not remember. But mere appreciation cannot grasp this. In simply affirming art, it reifies what art says, apologizing for what it does not say. Appreciation is conservative and philistine. Only criticism can avoid this. But what form the criticism of the modern art of memory should take is not self-evident. It requires methodological considerations, even at the risk of giving up an immanent critique of the artwork. The most reflective responses to Sebald's work to date have done little to advance this task. Walter Benjamin's model of criticism is decisive here,

not least because it is clear from Sebald's own literary criticism as well as certain allusions in his artworks that Benjamin is profoundly influential. So a detour into Benjamin's analyses turns out to be less of a departure from the immanent context of Sebald's artworks than it might seem.

Benjamin's model

The criticism of the modern art of memory still does well to look to Benjamin's analyses, where we find that all three terms – the modern, art and memory – lose their self-evidence and enter into mutual questioning. Memory is not treated as an ahistorical faculty that applies indifferently to whatever it remembers, but an ability that is culturally constituted by what it faces. Memory forms the subject, it is not merely a mechanism or item for a subject. Correspondingly, it is not merely an object for a cultural theory in general, but forms the theory that grasps it. What is generated is not a universal cultural theory but a cultural theory of modernity that is nonetheless defined by structures of universality. The relation of memory to modernity is crucial for Benjamin, since what is at stake is the crisis of traditional forms of memory in the face of this culture of modernity; the question of how new forms of memory have been or should be developed to negotiate this culture. Art is not immune to these transformations, but defined by them, in so far as its function as a mode of memory is central to it. Thus the question arises of how art is formed or changed, indeed whether art is even possible.

Of central importance in approaching this force-field of concepts of modernity is the phenomenon of newness and what happens when it becomes an overdetermining structure of cultural experience. If the new is no longer subordinate to the past, but becomes the basis for valuing the past, then this institutes a logic of negation that does not stop at overcoming the past. It proceeds to absorb the present as that which is soon-to-be-past. The future condenses this tension most acutely: it appears to be supported by the negative power of the new, but, in so far as it is generated out of the present, it remains subject to its fate. Separation from the present overcomes this, but with the suspicion that it is a mystical creation out of nothing. This temporality of the new dissolves the promise of the new as something different into the always-the-same, transforming history into a linear passage of destruction. Christian messianism, which inaugurates unrepeatable time in the event of Christ's finite appearance and then generates its linear projection in the promise of a second coming, is trans-

formed into a 'history' of destructive indifference by its incomplete secularization, killing off God without giving up the temporality that anticipates his coming. Hence Benjamin's angel of history: its head is turned away from the future since heaven is now present only at the beginning as something lost, transformed into an apocalypse that blows outwards in an irresistible force, and without redemption the passage of time is experienced as perpetual destruction.³ This functions as a theological-archaic correspondence to the abstract labour time of capitalist accumulation; the endless horizon of surplus value unveiled as wreckage unto oblivion.

Memory, at least according to its *prima facie* function as a faculty for retaining the past, faces a crisis within this culture of the new. Modernity destroys memory while making it essential. The new threatens to negate memory, but it is only through retention of the past that the new is recognized as new. The horizon of the new overdetermines everything that has happened, and yet this overdetermination generates a massive intensification and totalization of history, with memory, at least tentatively, as its organ. The overwhelming proliferation of the new and the development of new memory technologies with superhuman powers of storage and recall, renders memory an embattled, personalized faculty, ironically resorting to the active forgetting of the new in order to preserve itself. It is in this context that Sebald's art asserts itself.

1

Among Benjamin's analyses of what, at least retrospectively, we could construe as a modern art of memory, two are particularly interesting in this context. The first is in his essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. This examines the novelty of Baudelaire's lyric poetry as a response to the transformation of the structure of experience within modernity. Benjamin is preoccupied with the extent to which experience is formed, not only in relation to conscious memory but also to unconscious memory. As he remarks, drawing on Bergson: '[Experience] is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data.'⁴ Although Benjamin does not say so, Bergson hereby exposes the structural modernity of Kant's conception of experience as immediate auto-affection, and enables its criticism in relation to the unconscious or 'traditional' substrate of experience in memory.⁵ This is the secret history of Bergson's philosophy, despite his own hostility to any historical determination of his account. For Benjamin, this responds to the crisis

of experience in modernity, in so far as unconscious memory is traditionally provided by auratic forms that are destroyed in modernity.

Benjamin defines aura as the 'unique manifestation of a distance', that which is essentially 'inapproachable' and can therefore not be retained or grasped completely or immediately. Epistemologically, aura cannot be grasped completely by consciousness, but remains unique, 'lost to the memory that seeks to retain [it]'. It is only through an unconscious memory that we can approach it, as something that resonates with our consciousness without becoming fully conscious. Aura makes objects appear to be subjects, returning our gaze: 'To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.'⁶ The mode of attention appropriate to aura is therefore that which recognizes its uniqueness and essential inapproachability: ritual or ceremony. Temporally, auratic objects are not subject to finite history, but stand outside it, as something infinite or eternal that, although approached in and through history, cannot be reduced to its finite appearance.

The decline of aura is due to a number of factors. This is usually understood in relation to reproducibility. Mass reproduction of identical copies destroys the uniqueness of aura and, by implication, its inapproachability; it becomes graspable by the perceiver not just as property, but as something consciously retained. But the temporal decay of aura is key to Benjamin. The abstract quantifiable labour time of industrialization and, more fundamentally, capitalist exploitation is, as Benjamin puts it, a 'homogeneous empty time', in which time is never fulfilled and always incomplete, in debt to past or future value. Destruction rather than completion is the nature of this time. Each unit of new time increases a progressive nexus of debt, in which the shock of the new does not achieve self-presence but the repetition of the same, concealed under the illusion of progress. In terms of the redeemed time of aura, Benjamin describes this as the time of hell. Quoting Joubert, he writes:

'Time ... is found even in eternity; but it is not earthly, worldly time.... That time does not destroy; it merely completes.' It is the antithesis of time in hell, the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started.⁷

In less theological terms, it is what Benjamin calls 'now-time' [*Jetztzeit*], which forms the object of an alternative history:

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the

presence of now-time. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history.⁸

The affect of the negative logic of the new, shock, dominates the consciousness of modernity for Benjamin, from the industrialized factory to the metropolitan crowd, to gambling. But this consciousness does not amount to experience: it is something merely lived through (*Erlebnis*) rather than really experienced (*Erfahrung*). This is a historical and epistemological crisis for experience in so far as it is auratic forms that enable the relation to unconscious memory needed for experience to be achieved, while aura is destroyed by this modern culture of shock. Hence the question Benjamin pursues in relation to Baudelaire is 'how [his] lyric poetry can have as its basis an experience for which shock experience has become the norm?'⁹

It is Freud – in particular, his text 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' – that underpins Benjamin's theoretical conception of this modern formation of experience, in so far as Freud describes how traumatic or shocking stimuli bypass consciousness, entering into unconscious memory and acquiring their power over consciousness precisely through remaining unconscious. Far from being a purely receptive faculty, here consciousness is revealed to function defensively, providing protection from external stimuli. Benjamin concludes:

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it is so, the less do these impressions enter experience [*Erfahrung*], tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life [*Erlebnis*].¹⁰

Thus, like his reading of Bergson, Benjamin diagnoses a historical unconscious to Freud's resolutely ahistorical analyses, rendering him a theorist of modern experience. The subject's consciousness of the shocking culture of modernity is merely lived through as a defensive mechanism, necessarily resistant to the internalization needed for full experience. Instead, if this internalization of shock takes place, it does so unconsciously, and cannot be voluntarily recollected. Experience within modernity requires forms that negotiate this new culture of shock, enabling the convergence of consciousness with unconscious memory, and thereby enabling a new, distinctively modern form of tradition and aura. This task also defines a distinctively modern form of art.

Proust is key to Benjamin's account, in so far as Proust's differentiation of *mémoire volontaire* and *mémoire involontaire* makes the crisis of experience

within modernity explicit, codifying the separation of conscious and unconscious memory. The immense, and essentially unguaranteed, work of recollection required for Proust to 'experience' his childhood, is revealed to be a distinctively modern art of memory, which seeks to generate experience through the convergence of voluntary and involuntary memory, without the traditional forms of auratic attention; the modern individual compensating for the loss of collective ceremony with the intensive labour of self-reflection.¹¹ Thus Proust's transformation of the novel is determined by this modern condition of memory. For Benjamin, it recovers storytelling in an age of newspapers. Benjamin understands newspapers to be a form without aura, in which information is presented independently of a narrative relation to tradition. This is due to the montage of items, as well as their mass circulation. The passing on of information is no longer required, and with that goes the embedded layering of experience that each storyteller contributes in their recounting, the narrative producing experience through the combination of tradition and information.

However, the extent to which this crisis of experience is a response to shock is most explicit in Baudelaire. His lyric poetry enables experience of shock through 'correspondences', allegories that pierce modern life with images of prehistory, accessing an unconscious memory that converges with conscious memory to produce experience:

What Baudelaire meant by correspondences may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in a crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of the ritual.... The correspondences are the data of remembrance – not historical data, but data of prehistory. What makes festive days great and significant is the encounter with an earlier life.¹²

The correspondences function like acts or forms of repression in which shocking affects of the present are both fended off and absorbed into an unconscious form, a prehistory which becomes the allegorical presentation of what is repressed, enabling a convergence of conscious and unconscious memory. As such, they generate aura out of shock. The correspondences exit the negative temporality of the new, accessing a time outside of history, a completed time. It is in this sense that Baudelaire and Proust re-establish aura in the age of its decline.

2

The second aspect of Benjamin's analyses that is of particular interest in considering a modern art

of memory is his discussion of the emergence of new memory or information technologies, especially photography. Considering his texts dedicated to photography after looking at 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' is problematic but also productive. This is because the problem of experience that structures this essay does not have the same presence in essays like 'A Small History of Photography' (1931) or 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936). More pointedly, the decline of aura does not receive the same treatment. In 'Some Motifs' photography is treated as a non-auratic form, which extends 'the range of the *mémoire volontaire*'¹³ or conscious memory, without enabling a convergence with unconscious memory and therefore experience. In other words, the lack of photography's aura presents a problem here whereas in the other essays on photography this problem is, or at least appears to be, absent. In 'The Work of Art' the decline of aura is embraced as productive of a new mode of attention: distraction. The ceremonial, ritual or cult value of an auratic work is replaced by its 'exhibition value', in which the absorption of the spectator into the work is inverted, with the spectator absorbing the work. Whereas in 'Some Motifs' this immediate consciousness of the work, without relation to unconscious tradition, disabled experience, in 'The Work of Art' this loss is not a problem, but the emergence of a new capacity for the masses to enter into a critical and political use of art. Film does not enable attention to unconscious memory in a culture of shock, but prevents this, making shock its medium:

Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in film its true means of exercise. Film, with its shock effect, meets this mode of reception halfway. Film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent minded one.¹⁴

The only unconscious discussed here is photography's 'unconscious optics'.¹⁵ But this should not be confused with the unconscious memory of aura. The optical unconscious is precisely non-auratic in that it enables the conscious exploration of vision: 'Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye – if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man.'¹⁶ It is not that photography cannot be auratic. Benjamin discusses how early portraiture participates in a 'cult of remembrance', in which the

faces of loved ones return one's gaze.¹⁷ But the task at hand here is not to re-create aura, but to achieve its decline; something he attributes to Atget's deserted street scenes.¹⁸

There are perhaps two obvious ways of interpreting this divergence in Benjamin's analyses. The first is that they present separate historical tasks: the decline of aura and the attempt to resist this, with Baudelaire and Proust; and the decline of aura and the attempt to affirm this, with Atget and film. Perhaps these are appropriate to two historical moments, although there are clearly crossovers – Proust, for instance. The second answer is to interpret 'Some Motifs' as a response to Adorno's criticisms of 'The Work of Art'.¹⁹ Adorno ultimately saw little else in the decline of aura than the dominance of exchange value, as Benjamin himself seems to admit at one point: 'To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction.'²⁰ Adorno elaborated Benjamin's conception of the re-establishment of aura in the age of its decline as the structure of modern art's autonomy, making the measure of this whether art withdraws from the universalized heteronomy of a society of exchange value. In this sense we can see Adorno's conception of autonomous art as the self-conscious illusion of utopia, as a form of what Benjamin conceived as completed time or now-time.

Besides these responses, and without replacing them, there is another dimension to Benjamin's reflections. This is indicated in his essay on surrealism. Here photography is understood in relation to a conception of experience that draws on:

the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded', in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct.... No one before [the surrealists] perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic ... – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.²¹

Here Benjamin suggests an alternative, distinctively modern art of memory in the perception of the outmoded energies of things. Now, this quality of the outmoded is in many respects akin to the quality of aura. It is something passed over or lost, which derives its power from being lost. This power is therefore akin to unconscious memory. There is a sense in which the 'dialectical image' that is produced here is a convergence between our immediate historical consciousness of the present and its unconscious; liter-

ally that which the present has repressed, concealed in the negative logic of the new and fashionable. The convergence of the outmoded with the desires of the present releases the shock that was repressed in its original occurrence, fuelling what Benjamin describes as 'revolutionary experience, if not action'.²² As such, this is a distinctively modern form of experience and modern form of art, because it emerges from out of the destructive logic of the new.

Criticism

What can be learnt from these analyses of modern art of memory and its criticism? If their focal point is modernity as a mode of experience, memory is considered as a dimension of this experience, both as its relation to the past or tradition and as its condition of possibility. What kind of experience is possible in modernity? What is the modernist mode of tradition? And how does this enable the critique of the empty homogenous experience of the new? How does the task of modern experience transform art, its genres and its very possibility? These are some of the questions Benjamin bequeaths to the criticism of the modern art of memory.

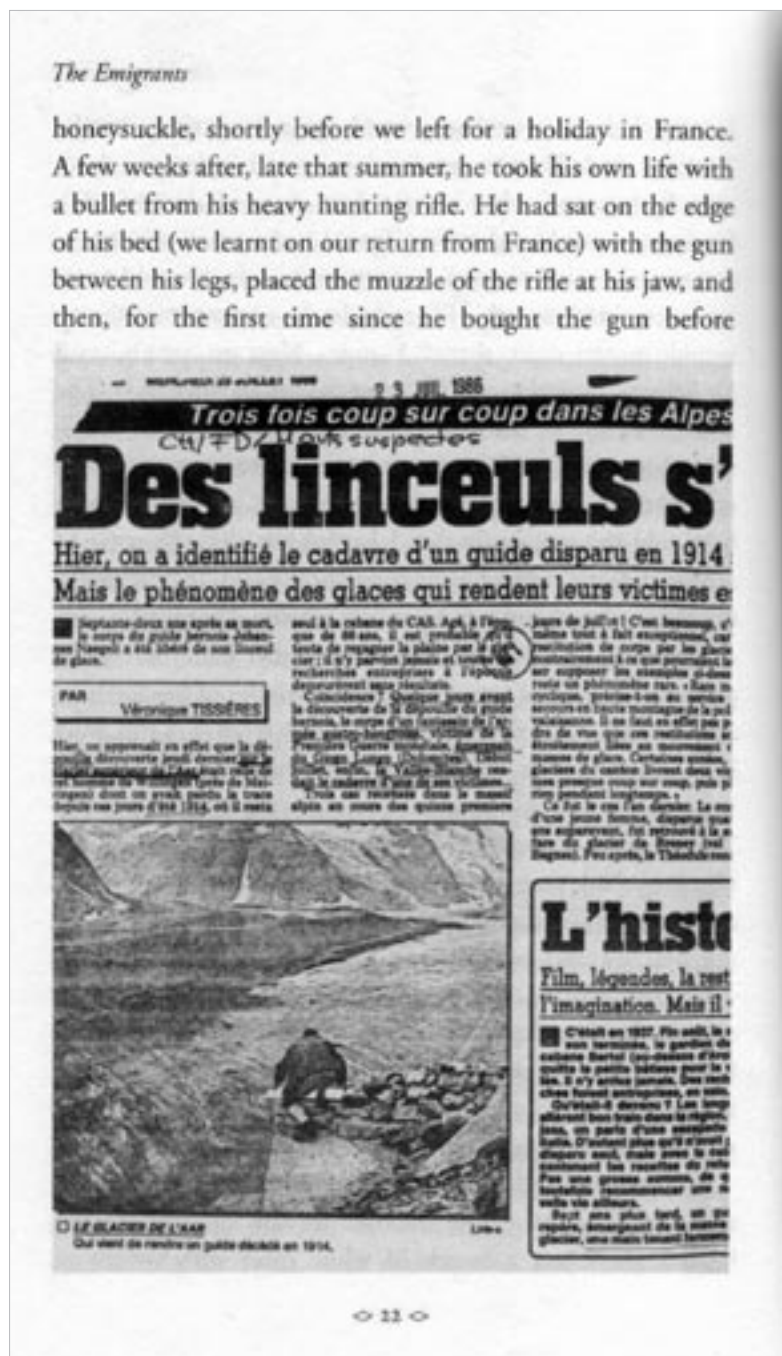
But the precise concept of criticism at stake here is not clear; certainly, it does not seem to be completely consistent with the previous models that Benjamin developed in his early thesis on 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism' (1919) or in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' (written 1919–22, published 1924–5). Benjamin's thesis describes how the Romantics conceived of criticism as both the completion and the destruction of the artwork. This is because they conceived of the authentic artwork as making a claim to present the absolute, which therefore cannot be judged according to some external, pre-established rule. Criticism must be derived internally to the work in the process of reflection that, for the Romantics, is its medium. Criticism, essentially conceived as the surpassing of all restriction, begins affirmatively by drawing out the absolute process of reflection presented by the artwork. But it develops through criticizing the limitation of the artwork's reflection, which is an inevitable consequence of its finite existence. It is in this sense that criticism both completes and destroys the artwork.²³ The model outlined at the beginning of 'Goethe's Elective Affinities' is broadly consistent in proposing a dual task. Here the distinction is between 'commentary' and 'critique'. Commentary examines the 'material content' of the artwork, critique examines its 'truth content'. But here the task is historically constituted in so far as 'the more significant

the work, the more inconspicuously and intimately its truth content is bound up with its material content.’²⁴ Critique therefore benefits from the historical ageing of the work in which its truth content comes loose from its material content.

These models of criticism can be seen at work in Benjamin’s later essays in various ways, but perhaps the key question is how they relate to the unconscious content of modern art and its experience. The implication is that there is a link between examining truth content and examining unconscious content. This is enforced by the extent to which shock is the topic of the later essays, a topic that is entirely absent from the earlier essays. In many respects, Benjamin’s late model of criticism is oriented to a traumatic model of experi-

ence, informed by Freud’s analysis of the unconscious. At least, this is what we can derive here in the attempt to develop a model of criticism for the modern art of memory. Adorno was especially attentive to the precise form of the unconscious at stake in Benjamin’s analyses, since he saw at stake here a dialectical theory of reification as a form of forgetting.²⁵ Benjamin’s account of experience had shown that the modern art of memory was directly dependent on how forgetting had taken place, to such an extent that it must be seen as simultaneously an art of forgetting. The implication is that certain forms of forgetting enabled critique just as they enabled experience. This meant not merely the rejection of reification, but, as Adorno put it, ‘a distinction between good and bad reification’;²⁶ namely, a distinction between forms of reification or forgetting that enabled experience and critique, and forms that did not. This sense of a modern art of forgetting infuses Adorno’s account of autonomous art. It is in these terms that I think we can understand Adorno’s conception that ‘[Artworks] are themselves the unconscious historiography of their epochs.’²⁷ This conception is deeply obscure in Adorno’s work, so what is offered here is not so much explanation as construction. My suggestion is that we should proceed by diagnosing Freud’s model of the interpretation of ‘dream-work’ as homologous to Adorno’s formal-historical criticism of autonomous art.

Freud’s concept of interpretation, as applied to the dream-work, examines the dream as the result of the ‘work’ done by unconscious impulses or processes on conscious experiences, transforming them into the strange reality of the dream. The grammar of this work can be established according to mechanisms of condensation, displacement, and so on. These mechanisms are not the unconscious itself, but merely the way it takes effect, transforming the ‘manifest content’ of the dream – what the dream is literally about – into the ‘latent content’ of the dream or the ‘dream thoughts’ – namely, what the dream draws on and organizes to produce the dream as it appears.²⁸ This



model of interpretation can be mapped onto formalist criticism's distinction between subject matter, form and content, where content is not conflated with what the artwork represents – this would be subject matter – but what is generated through form, so form involves a transformation or distancing of subject matter and content. There is a homology between these two models, in so far as manifest content corresponds to subject matter, form corresponds to dream-work, and content corresponds to latent content. However, the relation of this model of criticism to the unconscious is not clear here, unless it is reduced to the latent content. But this does not grasp the unrepresentability of the unconscious, and therefore provide a model for the unrepresentability of art's relation to truth. If the truth content of art is (structurally) unconscious, then it is not reducible to latent content, but only indicated by it. The 'latent content' of art is more akin to art's subject matter (as indeed for Freud it was part of the dream's subject matter) or perhaps art's form.

Benjamin's conception of the optical unconscious does not grasp the unrepresentability of Freud's psychic unconscious, despite Benjamin's claim that there is a direct homology between the camera and psychoanalysis. ('The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.'²⁹) Benjamin suggests that the optical unconscious is shown directly by photography. This is why it is not auratic. But the unconscious is only shown indirectly by psychoanalysis. This is why it is suggestive for the criticism of aura in its modern form. Adorno was more sensitive to this homology but also more sceptical. He was highly critical of psychoanalytic theories of art in so far as they read artworks as documents of subjects for analysis, thereby combining subjectivism with pre-artistic literalism. But this criticism does not write off the interpretation of 'dream-work' as a structural model for art criticism.³⁰ Adorno follows formalist criticism in differentiating between subject matter, form and content. His principal concern is to reject both the reduction of form to external armatures, and the reduction of content to thematic or depicted ideas. For Adorno, art only becomes art through form, which transforms subject matter from its everyday significance into an autonomous significance. Art succeeds where it transforms the heteronomous determination of subject matter – the logic of exchange value – into its autonomous determination: this is its relation to truth and explains the term 'truth content'. For Adorno, this truth content is both historical and not positively presentable: hence the resonance of his riddle-like conception of art as 'unconscious historiography'. Art relates

to truth by what it says in not saying it, what its muteness communicates. This is a historical relation. Art is autonomous in so far as it transforms its historical materials into something that appears to be independent of history. In this sense art is the result of a form of repression or forgetting. It internalizes experiences that are not registered within historical consciousness, and holds them there, as if they were unconscious. It does not merely conceal this material, but reveals it as something concealed, mute: a self-conscious illusion. Art is therefore a form of societal repression that is capable of revealing that repression; hence the sense in which it is 'unconscious historiography': a modern art of forgetting that enables memory, experience and critique within the conditions of modernity. But as such it demands criticism that confronts art with the historical substance from which it is formed. Adorno referred to this as 'second reflection':

Second reflection must push the complex of facts that work-immanent analysis establishes, and in which it has its limit, beyond itself and penetrate to the truth content by means of emphatic critique. Work-immanent analysis is in itself narrow-minded, and this is surely because it wants to knock the wind out of social reflection on art. That art on the one hand confronts society autonomously, and, on the other, is itself social, defines the law of its experience.³¹

In this passage we can recognize Adorno's inheritance of Benjamin's conception of criticism as the move from commentary to critique, from material content to truth content. As he goes on to make clear, in a passage that draws on Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire, the point of departure for this criticism is the modern:

Artworks are archaic when they can no longer be experienced. This boundary is not fixed, nor is it simply continuous; rather, it is fragmentary and dynamic and can be liquefied by *correspondence*. The archaic is appropriated as the experience of what is not experiential. The boundary of experientiality, however, requires that the starting point of any such appropriation be the modern.³²

As second reflection, criticism subjects artworks to the historical substance from which they are made, seen from the perspective of the present, not in order to reduce them to official history consciousness, but in order to reveal what their autonomy preserves from this consciousness. Neither does this criticism reduce art to what can be positively known – that is, brought immediately to consciousness. Second reflection exposes art to what it does not say in order to reveal the truth revealed by this silence.

The unconscious historiography of Sebald's art

Clearly, Sebald's art is structured fundamentally by the issues that emerge from Benjamin's analysis of the modern art of memory, none more so than the experience of shock, which, mediated by its repression and unconscious affects, dominates the life of many of Sebald's characters. The general absence of shocking episodes in the works, their lack of drama and their atmosphere of stillness, confirms this negatively. They exude a post-traumatic exhaustion. But whereas Benjamin examines shock as the affect of the advent of modernity, Sebald's works revolve around the Second World War, which emerges as the telos of this history of shock: what Benjamin anticipated with his back turned, like his own angel of history. In this, Sebald's works suggest the post-history of Benjamin's world, its realization and destruction.

The relation of memory to traumatic experience in Sebald's works seems to inherit Benjamin's analysis. The shocking experiences that dominate the lives of his characters are not registered consciously, but persist in a displaced or unconscious form, haunting their life, and generating the, often impulsive, attempts to recollect the events that first caused the trauma. The characters and the narrator – which are frequently so similar as to suggest a relation of alter-ego, both between themselves and Sebald himself, since we cannot just assume that Sebald is the narrator – often attempt to reconstruct childhood experiences contemporary with the Second World War. Through these biographies Sebald's art of memory combines two models of unconscious memory that were only joined theoretically for Benjamin, namely Proust's *mémoire involontaire* and Freud's unconscious memory traces. Sebald and his personae recover a childhood that is not consciously remembered. But, unlike Proust's serene, bourgeois domesticity, Sebald's childhood is the scene of Nazi Germany. Childhood therefore condenses with the shock of the war, and its recollection becomes subject to the repression of this trauma. Except that this is suffered by Sebald's characters, not himself. What structures the narrator's reconstructions is guilt that his childhood was serene, hence his projection onto sufferers. Sebald's suffering is strictly retrospective, a kind of latent shock at his childhood innocence, which is rendered tragic by the impossibility of a more mature reaction. This generates the compulsive memorizing in the works, the disgust at forgetting, but also their narcissism. In exposing personal recollection to the historical events that it was innocent of, Sebald limits the narcissistic tendency of memoirs by the lucky, but his 'tragedy' of innocence

is also compensation for lost love. There is something of a political Oedipal drama here, in which the trauma is having been wrenched from mother country, which qualifies the pathos of his exiled homelessness. But there is also a structural solidarity between Sebald's narrator and his co-memoirists, since both necessarily recollect this past in the light of its subsequent personal and social-historical significance, and as an artefact of its narration. This underpins Sebald's modern art of memory: the narrative art of reconstructing traumatically fragmented memory traces. As such, Sebald's art directly engages with the modern experience of tradition that Benjamin articulates as the convergence of conscious and unconscious memory in the culture of shock.

However, Sebald's work is also deeply problematic in what it remembers. *Vertigo* is structured by a relation between two periods: 1913, which is the date the narrator ('Sebald') researches in Italy and his childhood before the Second World War. Thus it recollects a pre-history to the wars, in a way that suggests Benjamin's transformative historiography of past futures: the recollection of a past when a future was possible that was different to what the future became. Sebald's travelogue around Europe's ruins renews the literary genre of the grand tour, but in the self-consciousness of its destruction. But this eulogy is only redemptive if we remain blind to the obsolescence of this European panorama in the transformation of post-1945 international politics. This renders Sebald's melancholy provincial, a conservative Eurocentrism, and turns its charm into ideology. What is out of time about the book is less its recovery of prewar Europe, than the fact that it was written at the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union but without a trace of how this has transformed its landscape. The fact that this may have been unintentional – *Vertigo* was first published in German in 1990, although the narration indicates it was written in 1987 – may excuse his knowledge, but not the historical significance of the novel.

Yet if Sebald's work suggests the inheritance or post-history of Benjamin's analyses, it also suggests the post-history of capitalism. The shock that Benjamin diagnosed as an affect inherent to the cultural dominance of abstract labour time appears in Sebald to have been absorbed in the world wars, as the apocalyptic realization of capitalism. Contemporary capitalism is overlooked in Sebald. For Austerlitz, the character in whom reflection on the history of capitalism is most explicit in his research on the history of capitalist architecture, the twentieth century is too terrible to contemplate:

As far as I was concerned the world ended in the late nineteenth century. I dared go no further than that, although in fact the whole history of the architecture and civilization of the bourgeois age, the subject of my research, pointed in the direction of the catastrophic events already casting their shadows before me at that time.³³

Sebald's narrator and characters live with their eyes averted from the explicit processes of contemporary capitalist exploitation and commodification. They live in a leisure time, especially that leisure time earned by a whole life of work, retirement. This is the time of a technocratic middle class, of which Sebald's own extracurricular writing while an academic is itself an instance. Contemporary capitalism is not experienced in Sebald's works. It is their environment, from which they turn away or repress. In this they confirm Benjamin's suspicions about whether late modernity can be experienced. But they also appear to give up the task of a modern art of memory, which would consist precisely in trying to enable experience of this late capitalist culture. This is the conservative and resigned effect of the novels, the sense in which their charm derives from their harmlessness. They mourn the world wars as if that was all there is to worry about. The traumas of the post-1945 world disappear.

This conservative effect can only be prevented by a critical or symptomatic reading, which examines them as a form of repression of contemporary capitalism. This means a second reflection on the correspondences that, following Baudelaire, Sebald seems to employ.

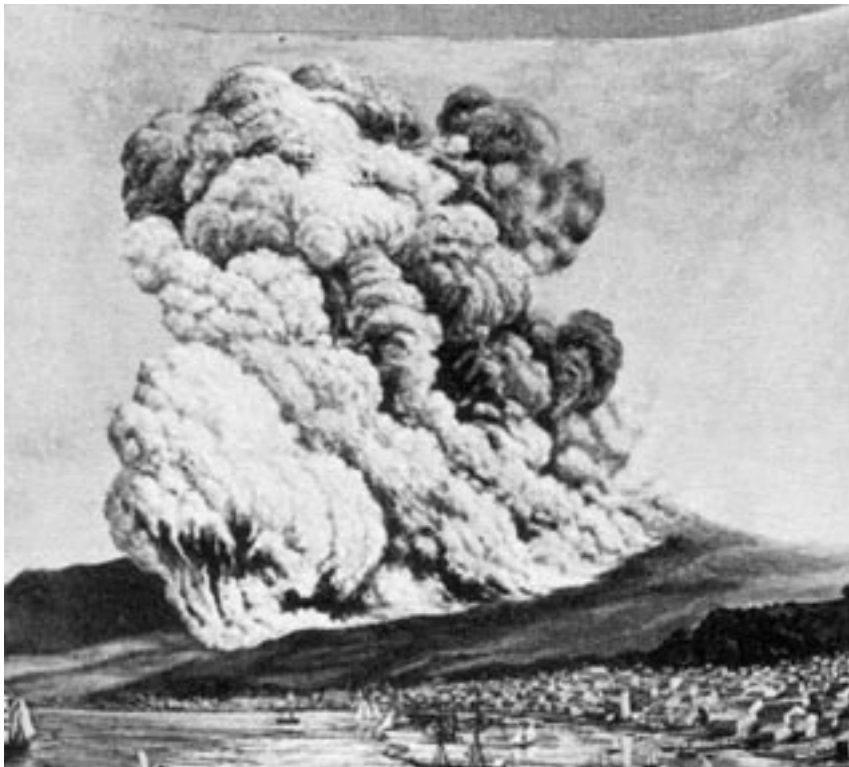
The Rings of Saturn has an epigraph that provides a description of its name:

The rings of Saturn consist of ice crystals and probably meteorite particles describing circular orbits around the planet's equator. In all likelihood these are fragments of a former moon that was too close to the planet and was destroyed by its tidal effect (Roche Limit).³⁴

This suggests a correspondence between the Allied bombing of Germany and the pre-historical destruction at the origins of the cosmos. Saturn – a traditional allegory of sadness – becomes renewed as an allegory of the fragmented universe of the war; it also suggests the formal principle that structures Sebald's narrative collation of memory traces. As in Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire, what is evoked here is an allegorical attempt to enable experience of the traumatic, and therefore unexperienced, human apocalypse of the bombing. However, in relation to the lack of explicit recognition of contemporary capitalism, we can see this correspondence as having a further, unconscious significance: that of enabling experience of the traumatically shocking experience of contemporary capitalism through its allegorical relation to the destruction of the war. In this way it provides an allegorical landscape that depicts concealed forms of contemporary destruction as if they were prehistory.

Sebald's works need to be read as forms of repression, both in order to recognize what they do not say, and in order to recognize what they say in not saying

it. This criticism is needed in order to reveal how they are modernist artworks; that is, how they generate the self-conscious illusion of autonomy within a culture in which all autonomy is subjected to commodification, the heteronomous exchange of equivalents. Sebald's works must generate this autonomy if they are to be artworks, but criticism is needed to reveal their truth content and prevent their autonomy decaying into a simple lie. The greater the pressure of complete commodification becomes, the greater is the effort needed to wrest anything from it. The need for art to repress its environment therefore threatens to slip into



wilful ignorance. Criticism is needed to distinguish repression from ignorance. This task is not eased by artworks that avoid ignorance through a more exact imitation of the present, where criticism is needed just in order to discern whether they are in any sense autonomous. But art cannot resolve this exhaustively by internalizing criticism, since its truth content is by nature unconscious or unsayable. And in order to prevent this decaying into mystical appreciation, the friction of art and its critique must be maintained.

Sebald's works suggest a recognition of this double bind in their almost indiscernible play of fact and fiction generated by the use of quasi-documentary photography, and the theoretical self-reflection of his narrator and characters. The openings of *Vertigo* and *The Emigrants* are brilliant lessons in the theory of memory. However, this cannot be taken as sufficient. Apologies about respecting the artist's views miss the point. Sebald's works only survive their ideological function in so far as criticism demonstrates that this is self-critical; that they provide allegories of the inability to experience the present, the utter melancholy that often seems to be the only sensitive response to the present. This melancholy is repulsed by the beautiful patina that cloaks Sebald's relation to the present. It is not merely generational insensitivity to a dying memory.

Looked at this way, the distracted mode of reading Sebald's works becomes conspicuous; how their auratic quality is generated through this rather than through simple absorption. This is indicated by the extent to which Sebald's language is pervaded by the list of names. At once exotic and meaningless, they accumulate, generating a distance from the subject matter, even when concerned with the most traumatic events. These lists are dragged into narration through the extended sentence, such as *Austerlitz's* recounting of H.G. Adler's book on the Theresienstadt ghetto where he discovers his mother had perished, which is treated in a single sentence covering ten pages.³⁵ Sebald's employment of photography is of particular interest here. The photos in Sebald's books are self-evidently mass-produced. Indeed, this is ingrained in their poor print quality, which is akin to the quality of newsprint or worse, and without the colour that has defined newspaper images for the last decade or so. Certainly, they are an impoverished version of the photographs we assume they reproduce. This makes them conspicuous, as if they were trying to look like old newspapers. They mimic the informational regime of montaged image and article, but without the circumvention of the caption, and set within an extended narrative,

layered by generations. It is as if Sebald has tried to recover the role of the storyteller Benjamin had described, but from within the teeth of the newspaper, with a directness that Proust does not even approach. This is the modernity of Sebald's art. And yet it is not that modern. They echo old newspapers, which now automatically suggest research and missed news. They draw on the outmoded, but the effect is not the release of pent-up energies. Perhaps this would rely on a more complete exposure to the obsolescence of the mnemotechnologies that Sebald is employing – his camera, but also his pens and paper – in relation to the technologies that are on the brink of superseding them. Perhaps we need to wait a while before we are shocked at the fact that Sebald doesn't use the Internet to trace his family history, but the aeroplane and archive.

The fact that the images are black and white, while we readily assume that at least some of the original photos would have been colour, is also conspicuous in the context of the new image technologies that are available to printing now. The images are stripped of the particularity of different generations and variations of photographic prints. Anyone who has looked at a family album or any collection of photos that spans a considerable period of time, such as those that Sebald frequently presents, will be aware of the range of formats and photo-techniques that permeates such a collection – size, borders, shape, colours, and so on – and how this informs our experience of the time recorded. All this is suppressed in their reproduction in Sebald's works. The modernist or constructivist reading of photography that Benjamin heralds in his 'Short History of Photography' emphasized how photography generated a new visual language independent of the painterly qualities of surface and texture. The reproducibility of the negative on multiple surfaces and in multiple forms rendered the surface of the singular print secondary to the ontology of photography. This was crucial to what Benjamin attributed to their loss of aura. However, photos did not cease having a surface, and this remains central to the existence of the photograph, even if it only becomes insistent to those figuring the image as a precious object. This is not the strictly optical surface that Jeff Wall demonstrated through the mirrored gazes of the figures in 'Picture for Women' (1979), but the literal surface. This is the topic of an existential ontology of photography, to which even Barthes's *mathesis singularis* was insensitive.³⁶ Sebald's works suppress this, but so crudely perhaps as to reveal this suppression. The impoverishment of the reproduction forces us to scrutinize the image surface for signs of

the original photograph that remains unrecoverable, unapproachable. In this Sebald's images are auratic, but in a distinctively modern form. A further consequence of this experience of Sebald's images is that it refers us to the printed text along with the image, as if the poor reproduction was like a fog that merged them together, reducing the images to schemas or signs and the words to images. Sebald's books take on the quality of illuminated manuscripts, but in a modern, darkened form.

Metaphysics of destruction

Benjamin's historiography examined history as natural history, in order both to reveal the correspondences to prehistory generated by the secular experience of the new, and to diagnose how this emerges from the melancholic decay of divine experience: 'To his horror the melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature.'³⁷ The collapse of divine history into nature is transformed by seeing that this does not lead only to empty homogenous time, but that profane history also enables redemption or utopia, completed time. This transformation of melancholy underpins Benjamin's art of memory. It is not the same as Freud's model of successful mourning, which is dominated by a discipline of assimilation to the reality principle of the status quo. What is suggested is rather that melancholy is overcome by the happiness of completed time, freed from quantifiable, incompletable time, whether of the past or the present. This is also the happiness of the radically new, a time that is not just the future as the soon-to-be-destroyed.

Benjamin's conception of natural history finds an echo in Sebald's use of the phrase 'the natural history of destruction'. Sebald attributes the term to Solly Zuckermann's unrealized report on the ruins of Cologne after the Second World War. It is the title of the translation of his book of literary criticism, *On the Natural History of Destruction*. This was first published in German in 1999 as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (Air War and Literature),³⁸ but the reference is not an invention of translation. In the course of the book he offers a definition:

Is the destruction not, rather, irrefutable proof that the catastrophes which develop, so to speak, in our hands and seem to break out suddenly are a kind of experiment, anticipating the point at which we shall drop out of what we have thought for so long to be our autonomous history back into the history of nature?³⁹

In this, Sebald indicates his relation to a renewed melancholy as the overdetermining experience of

modernity. An allegorical expression is suggested in *The Emigrants* with Alphonse's theory of the universal fading of colour, which caused him to cover his spectacles with grey silk when he painted in order to make him compensate and use brighter colours, so as to capture the world as it might have appeared originally. The ruins and devastation that litter the landscapes of Sebald's books are like fossilized traces of this natural history, frozen remains of what was life.

The moments of happiness, resolution and beauty in Sebald's novels suggest an exit. But in the light of what they repress they do not seem a successful mourning for those living in the present, so much as an intensified melancholy, for which only the most undialectical dimension of Sebald's art resonates. The decay of progress into universal destruction suggests a metaphysics of destruction: an inverted Platonism that reveals the infinite ideas to be ciphers of catastrophes that form all human affairs. Intellectual intuition is replaced by trauma, and finite appearances are replaced by unconscious memory traces.

Notes

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1. A comprehensive bibliography of Sebald's reception can be found in the first monograph on his work: Mark R. McCulloch's *Understanding W.G. Sebald*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia SC, 2003. See also Rüdiger Görner, ed., *The Anatomist of Melancholy: Essays in Memory of W.G. Sebald*, Iudicium Verlag, Munich, 2003; and 'A Symposium on W.G. Sebald', *The Threepenny Review*, Spring 2002, www.threepennyreview.com/samples/sebaldsympos_sp02.html.
2. W.G. Sebald, *Nach Der Nature: Ein Elementargedicht*, Greno, Nördlingen, 1988, trans. M. Hamburger, *After Nature*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2002; with Tess Jaray, *For Years Now*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2001; with Peter Jan Tripp, *Unerzählt*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich and Vienna, 2003, trans. M. Hamburger, *Unrecounted*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2001; *Schwinde: Gefühle*, Eichborn, Frankfurt, 1990, trans. M. Hulse, *Vertigo*, New Directions Books, New York, 2000; *Die Ausgewanderten*, Eichborn, Frankfurt, 1993, trans. M. Hulse, *The Emigrants*, New Directions Books, New York, 1996; *Die Ringe des Saturn: Eine englische Wallfahrt*, Eichborn, Frankfurt, 1995, trans. M. Hulse, *The Rings of Saturn* (1998), Vintage, London, 2002; *Austerlitz*, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich and Vienna, 2001, trans. A. Bell, *Austerlitz* (2001), Penguin Books, London, 2002.
3. '[The angel of history's] face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage

- and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is called progress.' Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, Fontana, London, 1968, p. 249.
4. Benjamin, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939), in *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. H. Zohn, Verso, London and New York, 1973, p. 110.
 5. 'The title [of *Matter and Memory*] suggests that it regards the structure of memory as decisive for the philosophical pattern of experience. Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data. It is, however, not at all Bergson's intention to attach any specific historical label to memory. On the contrary, he rejects any historical determination of memory. He thus manages above all to stay clear of that experience from which his own philosophy evolved or, rather, in relation to which it arose. It was the inhospitable, blinding age of big-scale industrialization.' Ibid., pp. 110–11. Benjamin is indebted to Max Horkheimer's essay on Bergson, 'On Bergson's Metaphysics of Time' (1934), translated in *Radical Philosophy* 131, May/June 2005, pp. 9–19.
 6. Ibid., p. 148. Benjamin doesn't quite say it, but a further implication here is that something has aura because it faces us as 'something' with an unconscious.
 7. Ibid., pp. 136–7.
 8. Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', pp. 252–3.
 9. Benjamin, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 116.
 10. Ibid., p. 117.
 11. 'In saying that it was a matter of chance whether the problem [of resurrecting his own childhood] could be solved at all, [Proust] gave the full measure of its difficulty. In connection with these reflections he coined the term *mémoire involontaire*. This concept bears the marks of the situation which gave rise to it; it is part of the inventory of the individual who is isolated in many ways. Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (quite probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness.' Ibid., p. 113.
 12. Ibid., pp. 140–41.
 13. Ibid., p. 145.
 14. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, pp. 233–4.
 15. Ibid., p. 230.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid., p. 219.
 18. Ibid.
 19. See Theodor Adorno, 'Letters to Walter Benjamin', in R. Taylor, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 1994, pp. 110–33.
 20. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 217.
 21. Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, Verso, London and New York, 1979, p. 229.
 22. Ibid.
 23. See 'The Concept of [Art] Criticism in German Romanticism', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (1913–1924), Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1996, pp. 116–200.
 24. Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', in *ibid.*, p. 297.
 25. 'Is it not the case that the real task here is to bring the entire opposition between sensory experience [*Erlebnis*] and experience proper [*Erfahrung*] into relation with a dialectical theory of forgetting? Or one could say, into relation with a theory of reification. For all reification is a forgetting: Objects become purely thing-like the moment they are retained for us without the continued presence of their other aspects: when something of them has become forgotten. This raised the question of how far this forgetting is one capable of shaping experience, which I would almost call epic forgetting, and how far it is a reflex forgetting.' From Adorno's letter to Benjamin, 29/2/1940, in *Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, trans. N. Walker, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 321.
 26. Ibid.
 27. '[Kunstwerke] sind die ihrer selbst unbewusste Geschichtsschreibung ihrer Epoche...', Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1970, p. 272. Hullot-Kentor translates this as '[Artworks] are the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch...', producing a paradoxical neologism that nonetheless brings out the force of this concept more clearly. See *Aesthetic Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p. 182.
 28. See Sigmund Freud, 'The Dream-Work', in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. Strachey, Penguin Books, London, 1991, pp. 381–651.
 29. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 230.
 30. 'For psychoanalysis, artworks are daydreams; it confuses them with documents and displaces them into the mind of a dreamer, while on the other hand, as compensation for the exclusion of the extramental sphere, it reduces artworks to crude thematic material, falling strangely short of Freud's own theory of the "dream-work".' Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie*, p. 20; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 8.
 31. *Aesthetische Theorie*, p. 518; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 348.
 32. *Aesthetische Theorie*, p. 518; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 349.
 33. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 197.
 34. See the opening pages of Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*.
 35. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, pp. 331–41.
 36. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), trans. R. Howard, Vintage, London, 2000, p. 8.
 37. Benjamin, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 145.
 38. W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction*, trans. A. Bell, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2003.
 39. Ibid., p. 67.

Late Merleau-Ponty, revived

Eric Matthews

Since his untimely death in 1961, Merleau-Ponty has undergone a *postmortem* decline in interest, though he has never fallen entirely out of view: not only has he retained a following among philosophers, but he has attracted considerable attention from psychologists, sociologists and literary theorists. Now, however, there are signs of a more general revival, with the publication of a number of books and articles on his work, inspired in part, perhaps, by the reflection of some of his central themes in the contemporary analytic debates between such figures as Evans, McDowell and Peacocke. Much of the revived interest focuses on Merleau-Ponty's later thought, as expressed in the posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, and other works written in the last years of his life.

Three recent books are part of this revival.* *Nature* is based on notes for three courses that Merleau-Ponty delivered at the Collège de France, in 1956–7, 1957–8 and 1959–60. The concept of nature was crucial to his later thought. The other two books are commentaries on his philosophy. The work by Mauro Carbone is entirely concerned with Merleau-Ponty's later thought. The *Cambridge Companion* is a collection of essays, most of which at least take into account developments in his later period.

Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is often presented as a move away from the Husserlian phenomenology of his major early work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the direction of more Heideggerian ontological concerns. But this is rather oversimplified. Even in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty was a 'phenomenologist' only in the sense that he had an aversion to abstract theorizing; but, as Carman and Hansen rightly point out in their Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion*, he was already dissatisfied with Husserl's sharp distinction between subject and object. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he chides

himself for not being sufficiently dissatisfied on this issue in his earlier work, and tries to set out more plainly a rejection of the distinction. But, despite what he says there, the basis for such a rejection was already present in his earlier conceptions of embodied subjectivity and of human being as being-in-the-world. In *The Visible and the Invisible* we can see his attempt, never completed because of his death, to develop the logical implications of these conceptions; and in his lectures on *Nature*, written at the same time, we can find clues to help us in interpreting his aims in that work.

The unfortunate thing, from this point of view, is that what we have of these lectures is not a full text of what was said, but only a version based in part on notes taken by an unknown student who attended the first two courses and in part on Merleau-Ponty's own very sketchy and often illegible working notes. It is impossible, of course, to place too much reliance on this kind of evidence: it is often obscure in expression, and it is always difficult to tell whether the text expresses Merleau-Ponty's actual thinking or simply the student's perhaps garbled understanding of it. Ironically, instead of using the lectures to help in understanding *The Visible and the Invisible*, commentators often have to use their interpretation of the latter (itself an incomplete and obscure text) as a key to understanding the lectures. Nevertheless, in the absence of much else as evidence for the later thought, we are obliged to make whatever use we can of the clues we can find here.

So what was going on in Merleau-Ponty's later thought? Carbone several times cites a remark of Merleau-Ponty's from another late text, 'Eye and Mind'. Merleau-Ponty there says that he feels that a 'mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being' is taking place in our age, and that what is

* Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, compiled and with notes by Dominique Séglaard, trans. Robert Vallier, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2003. xx + 296 pp., £69.95 hb., £14.95 pb., 0 8101 1445 3 hb., 0 8101 1446 1 pb.; Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2004. xi + 93 pp., £39.95 hb., £15.50 pb., 0 8101 1363 5 hb., 0 8101 1986 2 pb.; Taylor Carman and Mark B.N. Hansen, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005. 406 pp. £40.25 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 521 809894 hb., 521 00777 1 pb.

needed is to develop a 'new ontology' to give expression to that mutation. What is meant by an 'ontology' here seems to be an account of the relation between consciousness and what we are conscious of. 'The ontological problem', Merleau-Ponty says in *Nature*, is 'the problem of the relation between subject and object'. In the Cartesian ontology, which provided the framework for classical physics (and so for science in general in the early modern period), this relation was conceived of as holding between a disembodied and timeless subject and an entirely external objective reality. Classical science is thus based on an 'objectivist' conception of nature, as an 'in-itself' to which we, as subjects, have access only from the outside. This objective reality, which includes our own bodies and living matter in general, is seen as existing in an absolute space and time, and as operating in accordance with causal laws.

Nature

Merleau-Ponty is by no means against science. Indeed, he says in *Nature* that we need 'to be interested in science in order to know what Nature is'. Science is 'experience in its most regulated form', and so must be our starting-point in thinking about what we mean by nature. Nevertheless, ontology is not part of science's business, and must rather result from philosophical reflection on the results of science. One reason why we need a new ontology is that science itself has developed in new directions in the twentieth century. In particular, quantum mechanics has forced us to reformulate the way we see the relationship between ourselves and nature, and above all to abandon the sharp distinction between nature as 'in-itself' and ourselves as 'for-itself'.

In the Cartesian ontology, 'nature' had a double meaning. On the one hand, it meant 'something about which we cannot say anything except through our senses'; on the other, nature 'is known as *constructum*'. In the first series of lectures, Merleau-Ponty reviews some of the attempts made by post-Cartesian philosophers to cope with this ambiguity. Kant, for example, is seen in his transcendental idealism as seeking to unify the two meanings by treating Nature, at least for us, as something constructed out of our representations. But that of course leaves nature-in-itself as something distinct and unknown. This led Schelling to see nature as 'barbaric', as something which appears as if it could be teleologically understood, but in fact is rationally unintelligible, governed by a 'blind mechanism'. In the twentieth century, Bergson followed Schelling by seeing nature as a 'primordial lost non-dividedness',

but governed by an *élan vital* which was neither mechanical nor strictly teleological.

In addition to developments in modern physics, Merleau-Ponty was also impressed by some aspects of modern biology, in particular the new interest in animal *behaviour*, represented by such figures as Konrad Lorenz and Wolfgang Koehler. Even to talk about the things which animals do as 'behaviour' is to regard them as more than a passive response to an external stimulus, governed by mechanical laws (a view which implies that biology is reducible to physics). It is to see them as having a *meaning* for the animal itself, and so as admitting of 'understanding' rather than simply of causal explanation. The 'active/passive' distinction is transcended: animals are actively involved with their surrounding world (*Umwelt*, as the biologist Uexkull called it), but are also 'passive' in the sense that the meaning they can find in the *Umwelt* is constrained by what is actually there, and by their own physiological structures and biological needs. In this way, the scope of intentionality is extended from the conscious activities and cognition of human beings to include the unconscious and non-cognitive relations of animals (and indeed of human beings themselves).

The principal thing that is different about human behaviour, from this point of view, is that human beings have an articulated language, which enables them to formulate more complex and individual purposes for acting. But this does not imply that human beings, unlike other animals, are essentially disembodied. Rather it implies, as Merleau-Ponty already saw in *Phenomenology of Perception*, that the human body is not, as in the Cartesian conception, a mere object in the 'external world' like any other, governed by mechanical laws alone. Human beings as subjects are essentially embodied, so that their being is in-the-world. The human body is a part of nature, but a very special part because of the human possession of speech (*logos*). In this sense, it is the intersection of nature and logos. This notion of human subjectivity as embodied is, as was said, extensively developed in Merleau-Ponty's earlier thought: in his latest period it is radicalized into the concept of 'the flesh', characterized by Merleau-Ponty in *Nature* as 'that-is-openness to things, with participation on their part'. This radicalization effectively abolishes the whole subject-object distinction, making nature part of ourselves, as we are also part of nature. Merleau-Ponty identifies with Whitehead's view that 'There is a sort of reciprocity between Nature and me as a sensing being.'

An embodied being is thus necessarily actively involved with, and inseparable from, its surrounding

world. Indeed, it can be said, in virtue of its purposes as an organism, to ‘sketch out’ its surrounding world. In the higher animals, including human beings, ‘The world is possessed by the animal.’ That is, as Merleau-Ponty goes on to explain, the more complex the nervous system, the more differentiated its responses to the surrounding world can be, and so the more complex the world that the animal can ‘possess’. Physiology has to be understood, on this view, not as an account of a set of passive responses to the external world, but as a means of active engagement with that world. Biology becomes not simply a derivative of physics, but a science which involves the interpretation of the meaning of actions performed by living beings. This is not a return to ‘vitalism’, the idea that there is a life force independent of matter which directs the operations of living organisms – that is simply another form of causal explanation. What Merleau-Ponty seems to be saying rather is that a completely different form of explanation needs to be used, not only of the actions of human beings, but of the neurological processes which lie behind those overt actions.

Merleau-Ponty explicitly says in *Nature* that no new force is involved – that ‘The living being works only with physicochemical elements’. The difference in his view from that of classical mechanistic science is the idea that the animal itself *regulates* the way in which the ‘physicochemical elements’ operate. In turn, the *Umwelt* comes to be characterized in terms of the meaning which objects in it have for the animal. This is most obviously true, for the reasons already stated, of the human animal. Our own bodies are no longer seen as objects, but as relations to the surrounding world, which in turn is defined by its relation to ourselves as embodied and active beings. In his earlier thought, this was expressed in the doctrine that it is our bodies themselves which are the subjects of experience. But in the more radicalized version of his later thought, Merleau-Ponty seeks to escape from the subject–object distinction altogether by means of a concept already mentioned, that of the ‘flesh’. According to this conception, my body is ‘in a circuit with the world, an *Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies’.

The last three words in that quotation are important. To abolish the distinction between ourselves as subjects and the world of which we are conscious, to see our being as an engagement with the world, is also to abolish any ultimate distinction between ourselves and other human beings (or even, as in the quotation, other animals). Since other human beings are, like ourselves, essentially embodied, our relation to them

is ‘with other bodies’. This enables Merleau-Ponty to incorporate into his thinking the insights of Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on an all-pervasive sexuality in our relations to the world and to other people. The *Einfühlung*, or empathy, which we as embodied beings have with other embodied beings is identified with the Freudian notion of *libido*, or desire. Our being for others is rooted in this way in the natural libidinal structures of our bodies.

In this way, the conception of human being as being-in-the-world, which had been present in Merleau-Ponty’s thought from the beginning, is given a more radical interpretation. There is no room any longer for a notion of the ‘subject’, for a distinction between the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-itself’. Merleau-Ponty’s position is thus sharply differentiated from that of Sartre. Although Sartre too speaks of human being as ‘being-in-the-world’, the distinction between ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ is crucial for his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty criticizes this element of Sartre’s thought in *Nature*. Sartre’s view, he argues, leads to the conception of the ‘for-itself’ as a ‘nothingness’, which has to be overcome in order to be in the world, an impassable subjectivity set over against both the world and other, equally impassable, subjectivities. (Hence his view that conflict is the essence of our being-for-others, and the dramatic descriptions in *Being and Nothingness* of sadism and masochism as the only possible ways in which we can relate to others, both equally doomed to failure.) We ought rather, Merleau-Ponty argues, to conceive of ‘the true nothingness’ as ‘an *Etwas* [something] always on the horizon’. This in turn implies at least the possibility of relations with other human beings which are not simply sado-masochistic.

But human embodiment is essentially ambiguous. The human body is, as said earlier, at the intersection of nature and logos: the possession of language, and thus of the possibility of articulating subtly differentiated purposes and meanings, makes a significant difference. In particular, it makes it possible to see human existence as not just biological but historical. There cannot be a history of life as such, he argues, because we cannot say what life ‘wants’. We can, on the other hand, say what human beings want, so that for them history is possible.

It should be said, however, that the passage just cited is full of textual uncertainties and editorial queries, so that it is impossible to know whether one has read Merleau-Ponty’s thinking correctly. This illustrates a general point made earlier about this book. What we have in it is not Merleau-Ponty’s own worked-out expression of his thinking, but either a

student's attempts to understand what was said in the lectures or else Merleau-Ponty's very sketchy notes. But we all know both how easy it is for students to get hold of the wrong end of the stick and how little can be contained in a lecturer's outline notes, which are often more of an *aide-memoire* than anything else. If we had the full transcript of the lectures, much more reliance could be placed on them as a source for the later thought. But we don't, and so we have to rely on our interpretations of the fragmentary evidence we have. One might wonder whether there is any real value in publishing such an unreliable text. It certainly gives the reader some of the intellectual exercise and fun of a detective story or an archaeological dig, but it would be unwise to place too much reliance on what emerged from that exercise.

Effects

If (and it is a big 'if') one accepts the reading of these lectures I have given here, some general philosophical worries arise about the direction Merleau-Ponty's thinking was taking in the last years of his life, which was at least in line with, and possibly influential on, the philosophical developments that took place in France in the generation of thinkers who succeeded him. Can we really, for instance, abolish altogether the subject-object distinction? Even to say that they have a reciprocal relation is to accept that they are to some extent distinguishable. And it seems inescapable that different human beings are distinct subjects: to say that we communicate with each other, or are involved with each other, is in itself to imply that we are separate individuals. The paradox of our humanity is that we are distinct from each other and yet essentially related to other subjects. We can reject 'humanism' by rejecting one half of that paradox, but in so doing we would be rejecting something which seems plainly true. It may be true, as the editors of the *Cambridge Companion* say in their Introduction, that 'What might be gained by a return to Merleau-Ponty now ... is a turn away from the antihumanist radicalization of ontology and the cultivation of new ways of exploring the ontological correlation of human beings and the world.' But this falls short of the much more radical ontological claims which seem to be implied by the later work.

The interpretation presented above is also the reading of Merleau-Ponty's later phase found in Mauro Carbone's book, a collection of papers originally delivered to various audiences of Merleau-Ponty specialists. (Carbone, Professor of Aesthetics at the State University of Milan, is a leading scholar of

phenomenology and post-phenomenology, in particular of the work of Merleau-Ponty.) Carbone speaks of Merleau-Ponty's quest for a 'new ontology', emphasizing the notion of 'chiasm' found in a working note of *The Visible and the Invisible*. According to this notion, 'every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken'. Merleau-Ponty sees this as the essence of the change in the relation of humanity to Being which characterizes our age, expressed both in quantum physics and in modern art, literature and music. It means, as Carbone interprets it, that what used to be called subjectivity is not confronted by the world as an object, but is rather a 'resonance chamber for our encounter with the *flesh* of the world'. Merleau-Ponty uses an image derived from Proust to clarify this idea: 'the body is suspended in what it sings, the melody incarnates itself and finds in the body a type of servant'. The world, in other words, expresses itself in the human body.

This reference to Proust is but one illustration of the importance of the novelist to Merleau-Ponty, which is extensively discussed by Carbone. Already in *Phenomenology of Perception* there are references to Proust in connection with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of time. Subjectivity is there identified with temporality, in line with the Proustian tendency to personify time, in which past, present and future flow into each other. This Proustian conception, with which Merleau-Ponty sympathizes, describes a life, in the latter's words, 'without interiority', which Merleau-Ponty intends to restore by his philosophy, just as Proust had sought to do in his novel. In effect, Carbone argues, both show that very disintegration of the idea of the subject which is the essence of the new ontology. In a striking anticipation of the next generation of philosophers, Merleau-Ponty even speaks in *The Visible and the Invisible* of language as 'having us' rather than of our 'having language': 'it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being'. Being is always already there before us; it 'overflows' us and we are 'caught up in it', rather than constituting it.

This implies something about the nature of philosophy itself. Philosophy cannot be, as it was classically conceived, a rational reconstruction of reality as experienced, but must seek to make a close connection with the actual experience of existing human beings. Merleau-Ponty saw the classical philosophical tradition as having undergone a steadily deepening crisis after Hegel, to be seen in the work of Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger. It has moved steadily towards becoming a 'non-philosophy', meaning not the rejection of philosophical reflection, but what Carbone calls

‘a-philosophy’, a negative approach to Being. Non-philosophy is not centred on a ‘theory of knowledge’, an account of the ways in which rational subjects can have access to the truth from the outside: we are already in the truth, in the absolute. In that sense, the common opinion or natural attitude is the necessary beginning of knowledge, and phenomenology becomes the making manifest of what is involved in that common experience, which is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘not an effect of the absolute, but the absolute itself’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Notes des cours au Collège de France 1958–1959 et 1960–1961*, Gallimard, Paris, 1996, p. 282; trans. as ‘Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel’, in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Merleau-Ponty*, Routledge, London, 1988, p. 15).

In this respect, Merleau-Ponty shows the influence of the structuralist thinking of his friend Claude Lévi-Strauss. But, in their Introduction to the *Cambridge Companion*, Carman and Hansen argue, following Vincent Descombes, that ‘Merleau-Ponty’s interpretations underestimate the extent of the structuralist break with the philosophy of the subject’. On this view, Merleau-Ponty remained too much of the ‘humanist’, with some slight modifications, to take on board fully the implications of that crisis in philosophy of which he himself spoke. Carbone’s reading, on the other hand, both of the lectures on *Nature* and of *The Visible and the Invisible*, makes the late Merleau-Ponty into as much of an anti-humanist as any structuralist.

The *Cambridge Companion* ranges widely, with no single unifying theme. Charles Taylor’s characteristically illuminating paper on ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture’ presents Merleau-Ponty’s view of experience as a form of holism different from, for instance, the Quine–Davidson version. What is distinctive about it, according to Taylor, is that the whole is necessary to give sense to the elements of experience, providing a ‘locus of shared understanding’ based not on theoretical information, but on a shared practical ‘ability to cope’. In the same vein, Hubert Dreyfus, in his contribution, explores the differences between the emphasis of recent cognitive science on representations as the basis for intelligent behaviour and Merleau-Ponty’s account of skilful coping, without representations, as the most basic type of intelligent behaviour.

This emphasis on active involvement and the resulting meaningfulness of our environment is found again in Mark Wrathall’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s account of the explanation of human action in terms of reasons rather than causes. This account means,

according to Wrathall, that the human lived body is neither completely determined nor completely free. Wrathall sees Merleau-Ponty’s account of motivation as following in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology. Similarly, Renaud Barbaras sees Merleau-Ponty as completing the Husserlian project by developing a ‘phenomenology of life’, which aims to give sense to Husserl’s concept of the ‘lifeworld’. In his discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought, by contrast, Mark Hansen sees a move away from the Husserlian phenomenology of *Phenomenology of Perception*. I would question, however, Hansen’s claim that Merleau-Ponty in that earlier work ‘took for granted’ a dichotomy between mind and body on the one hand and world on the other. The emphasis in the earlier work on embodiment and being-in-the-world seems to me to be already a move away from transcendental phenomenology, if not from the Husserl of the *Crisis* volume. Hansen makes too sharp a distinction between the earlier and later Merleau-Ponty. Apart from anything else, this is inconsistent with the remarks, cited earlier, in the editorial Introduction he wrote jointly with Carman.

Other papers in the collection consider aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy that are not directly connected with ontology or metaphysics, though even in these cases there are indirect links the papers bring out. Joseph Rouse, for example, has many interesting things to say about Merleau-Ponty’s conception of science, including comparisons with Kuhn and Lakatos. He emphasizes Merleau-Ponty’s critique of realism. Jonathan Gilmore discusses the relationship Merleau-Ponty saw between painting and philosophy. Any theory of painting, in Merleau-Ponty’s view, must consider the relation of the artist to the world, and so must imply a metaphysics, ‘a conception of how the self, body, mind, and world interrelate’. Finally, the papers by Lydia Goehr and Claude Lefort explore aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s political thought, in particular his differences with Sartre over the relation between philosophical engagement and political commitment. Goehr makes connections between Merleau-Ponty’s account of the arts and his political thinking, arguing that ‘a philosophical text, a novel, or a film can be engaged by having “political bearing” even if it has no explicit political content’. Lefort sees Merleau-Ponty’s idea of a politics of indeterminacy, committed to debate, as ‘not alien to the spirit of Marxism’. Marx, he argues, in his account of the proletariat, can be seen as ‘calling into question, in the very movement of history, man’s relation to being’. Even in politics, in short, ontology is inescapable.

'The man hit the woman'

Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Denise Riley, *The Force of Language*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2004. vii + 186 pp., £50.00 hb., 1 4039 4248 X.

Carol Sanders, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004. xii + 303 pp., £45.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 0521 80051 X hb., 0521 80486 8 pb.

The Force of Language is a Napoleonic book, short and ambitious. In the very first pages Lecercle promises us a new philosophy of language, and he reminds us throughout of both his promise and the fact that its fulfilment will be 'utterly unpalatable to mainstream linguistics and current philosophies of language'. As if that weren't enough to accomplish in 170 pages, once you begin reading you realize that this new thinking about language implies a new style of writing about it as well. Lecercle thinks Chomsky's notorious 'the man hit the ball' is a terrible place to start when theorizing about language: the slogan and the literary work, not the simple declarative sentence, are far more typical and useful as paradigms. It is therefore apt that slogans and poetic writing are the authors' chosen instruments as well as their chosen objects.

Actually, this is not clear when you begin reading; it only gradually dawns on you. Lecercle's Introduction is straightforward enough, calling our attention to the kind of linguistic phenomena – jokes, expressions of affect, poetry – that are beyond the ken of Noam and Ferdinand. But after that we are launched (and launched, as we are talking of affect, is exactly how it feels) into Part I, written by Riley alone, an evocative, densely metaphorical, 'literary' discussion of inner speech and 'bad words' (i.e. insulting, injurious speech). A characteristic discussion of the colonization of inner speech gives you the flavour of it:

For inner speech is no limpid stream of consciousness, crystalline from its uncontaminated source in Mind, but a sludgy thing, thickened with reiterated quotation, choked with the rubble of the overheard, the strenuously sifted and hoarded, the periodically dusted down then crammed with slogans and jingles, with mutterings of remembered accusations, irrepressible puns, insistent spirits of ancient exchanges, monotonous citation, the embarrassing detritus of advertising, archaic injunctions from hymns, and the pastel snatches of old song lyrics.

These sixty pages are full of interesting ideas, but the evidence for Riley's theory of inner speech is largely introspective, and the writing mixes conceptual

argument with – shrewdly judged – rhetorical gestures and metaphorical excursions.

We need a bit of help figuring out where inner speech fits into the grand plan and what we should be taking away from Riley's compelling prose. And help is promptly at hand: Part II, written by Lecercle alone, begins by quoting passages from Riley and proceeding to a critical explication of what Riley has laid out in her own elegant terms, including a *post hoc* explanation of why her chosen topics are critical to the new philosophy of language. 'Bad words' are apparently the best place to start such a philosophy, and much, much better than men hitting balls, because they have force, because they wound, and because they reveal the essentially agonistic nature of language.

Even better than bad words are the writings of literary madmen, a few of whose ravings Lecercle then discusses in order to draw out their useful 'intuitions about how language works and the way literature is constituted'. A brief critique of Chomsky, who is appointed chief representative of the 'mainstream' philosophy of language (the term 'mainstream' does an awful lot of work in this book), leads us finally to Lecercle's sketch for a new philosophy of language, now made more concrete as a 'Marxist form of pragmatics'.

Yet we don't really get a new philosophy of language, unless you think that attaching a few predicates to the concept of language amounts to a philosophy. Lecercle first characterizes his view of language by simply laying out six properties ascribed to language by Chomsky and Co. (immanence, functionality, transparency, ideality, systematicity and synchrony) and insisting on six counter-principles, which the reader can probably figure out for him- or herself. Obviously an alternative account of language has to be more than the bare negation of what you disagree with, and the final chapter is accordingly devoted to the 'concept of language we need'. But this concept turns out to be four theses that essentially condense the earlier six: language, it turns out, is historical, social, material and political.

To be fair, Lecercle makes some effort to flesh out these claims. Language is historical in the sense that it can only be understood as the 'sedimented aggregate of past and present political struggles'; social in the sense that it is the bearer of ideology and the instrument of our interpellation; material in its imbrication with the labouring body; political in that it is a vehicle of imperialism and class struggle. Nevertheless, Lecercle does not transcend the polemical starting point of his argument: in the end we are left with a set of 'slogans' no less abstract than the suppositions they're meant to counter. It's not just that these slogans are never woven together into a theory of language capable of explaining and describing the force and meaning of utterances (or whatever other unit of analysis is deemed relevant). The big problem is that Lecercle writes as if insisting that language is political, social and the rest of it in and of itself created a Marxist philosophy of language. It is, however, perfectly possible for a non-Marxist to make the same claims, and many non-Marxist linguists do so all the time. One would be hard-pressed, in fact, to find a linguist (Chomsky aside) who disagreed with the central contention that language is a social practice: Saussure spent a good part of his lectures on general linguistics insisting on this very point.

The difference should surely be that a Marxist account of language explains the force and significance of language in terms of the history and structure of capitalist societies, in terms of the particular institutional complexity that characterizes those societies and the political force-field that distends them. Just saying societies are agonistic and that language is embedded in institutions isn't enough. (Lecercle is uncomfortably aware that the agonistic conception of politics he adheres to finds its ultimate expression in Carl Schmitt, not Karl Marx.) Furthermore, as a practice or institution itself, language might have a developmental history of its own, just like labour and politics; maybe the force of language itself is transformed, in a manner we can evaluate as well as describe. Ironically, it's probably Habermas, one of the Bad, Abstract Guys in Lecercle's universe, who has come closest to this kind of theory. While there is a great deal to disagree with in the substance of Habermas's theory of communicative action, methodologically it does what a Marxist theory of discourse ought to do: it situates the order of discourse within the recent history of capitalist society, and attends in particular to the way in which the formal structures of discourse themselves have had to change and develop. By contrast, what Lecercle offers is less a Marxist pragmatics than a philosophical anthropology of language, which sketches out the

structures of linguistic praxis that make possible its historical development, what Honneth and Joas once described as 'the unchanging preconditions of human changeableness'.

Yet if the book doesn't deliver on a promise it might have been rash to make, it nevertheless delivers. What really inspires and intrigues the authors is Althusser's foray into anthropology, the theory of interpellation. Lecercle's suggested elaboration of the theory, albeit drawn from an earlier book, is useful. But the most striking innovation is found in Riley's opening chapters, which, perhaps not surprisingly, fit somewhat awkwardly into the book's grand scheme. She cleverly shows that inner speech can be the lever for a general revision of both the concept of interpellation and the mechanics of insult and injury. Inner speech, as she has described it in the paragraph quoted above, is the mechanism whereby the subject performs an 'autoventriloquy', speaking to itself 'spontaneously' in a language brought into it from beyond. Her analysis of bad words builds on this idea, using defence against insult and hate speech as a test case for the exercise of resistance to interpellation. It's the power of this kind of speech that theorists like Habermas are unable to account for, and Riley deftly uses the opportunity to illustrate the weaknesses of any pragmatics too dependent on a utopian concept of intersubjectivity. Although the ideas she hazards need further testing and explication, she has nonetheless made an original and bold effort to take insults and hate speech seriously as language, rather than as its deformation, and to think through the theoretical consequences.

The polemical abstraction of Lecercle's argument makes you wonder whether anyone actually holds the views he ascribes to the notorious mainstream philosophy of language. If the *Cambridge Companion to Saussure* is anything to go by, even the father of all that is structuralist did not. Even more interestingly, it turns out that the father of structuralism is not its real father at all, but more a benign uncle who has been blamed for all the mischief caused by his would-be progeny. This correction of the received intellectual genealogy is just one of the virtues of the *Cambridge Companion to Saussure*. Publishers' catalogues these days are like matchmakers: all they seem to want to do is sell you a 'companion'. But this *Cambridge Companion* does exactly what it says on the tin: it's just what you need to have to hand on those lonely nights you spend ploughing through the *Course in General Linguistics*. First, because so many of the people who read and discuss the *Course* (like the author of this review) have no professional training

in linguistics. Second, because the *Course* itself, like Saussure's career, is a strange, composite thing, a work put together by two colleagues from Saussure's occasional written notes and the extensive notes taken by students of his lectures on general linguistics between 1907 and 1911.

The various sections of the *Companion* provide, respectively, an account of the intellectual context in which Saussure developed, analysis of the editorial practice that produced the course and of how certain key issues are dealt with within it, a series of studies on the dissemination and influence of the text in the decades following its publication, and a careful thinking through of the consequences Saussure's work has for the further development of linguistics, semiotics and the philosophy of science. Nearly all the contributions display just the right mix of philological thoroughness and theoretical rigour. What's particularly useful for the reader of Saussure is the care taken to interpret the mosaic of the *Course* through the prism of both the now-published notes to the lectures on general linguistics and the recently published *Écrits de linguistique générale* (Gallimard, 2002), which includes a long manuscript on the 'double essence of language' from 1894 (and if the mixed metaphor of a mosaic seen through a prism makes your head spin, that is my point).

One after the other, contributors draw attention to the unresolved ambiguities of the *Course*, sedimented in the conceptual pairs (*langue/parole*, synchrony/diachrony, arbitrary/motivated, and so on) for which the *Course* is best known. As is so often the case, Saussure's brilliance lay less in the ready-to-wear usefulness of his concepts than in their determinate fuzziness, the way in which their ambiguities continually focus our attention on the key questions facing the modern philosophy and empirical study of language. Principal of these is his concept of language itself, or rather that aspect of language that should be the object of linguistics, the language structure or *la langue*; the concept of the sign itself, arbitrary or relatively motivated, runs a close second. The epistemological and ontological issues raised by the former crop up in virtually every contribution, but they receive particular, sustained attention in articles on the philosophy of

science by Christopher Norris, on the *langue/parole* dichotomy by W. Terrence Gordon, on Saussure's genuine interest in the study of discourse by Simon Bouquet, and on value and arbitrariness by Claude Normand. John Joseph's excellent discussion of the theory of the sign is complemented by Geoffrey Benington's model explication, perfectly lucid and subtle, of Derrida's critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology*. In all these discussions the issue isn't whether language is social or historical, but what that amounts to and what consequences it has for linguistics.

Naturally, these complexities become yet more evident and awkward in the use made of Saussure's



writings by those who come after him. Julia Falk's article on American linguistics points out that Saussure had very little influence on the American scene until Jakobson forced him onto it in the early 1940s, at which point American linguists decided they were structuralists rather than descriptivists. Jakobson also occupies centre stage in Stephen Hutchings's account of the Russian reception of Saussure, far too much of the stage in fact, in so far as Hutchings doesn't discuss the efforts of a number of important, left-wing Russian linguists to adapt Saussure to Soviet cultural politics in the 1920s, efforts that have been the object of much interesting work in the last few years. Two contributions on European interpretations of Saussure by linguists (Christian Puech's chapter) and 'structuralists' (Stephen Ungar's chapter) point up how easy it was for this composite theory to be rerouted in so many different directions.

The lesson here is not that Saussure remains the horizon within which even Marxist linguists must work. It is that 'the class struggle in theory' may not be the best rallying call or model for intellectuals

of the Left. It encourages a sloganeering concept of theory-building, and an abstract relationship with what used to be called 'bourgeois' science. Saussure put the conventionalism of language centre stage, with all the problems that idea entailed. If his notion of the social character of language was consensual yet authoritarian, and his account of its history unpersuasive, it had less to do with his misunderstanding of language than with his misunderstanding of European history and society. Getting past or beyond him demands a new history of language as much as a new concept of it.

Ken Hirschkop

The Hegel to come

Catherine Malabou, *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, Dialectic*, trans. Lisabeth During, with Preface by Jacques Derrida, trans. Joseph D. Cohen, Routledge, London and New York: 2005. xlix + 240 pp., £60.00 hb., 18.99 pb., 0 415 28720 0 hb., 0 415 28721 9 pb.

This translation of Malabou's book (originally published in French in 1996) is extremely welcome. It will be of interest not only to anglophone Hegel scholars but also to a broader post-Heideggerian philosophical community concerned with questions about time, history and future(s). The book is also of note because it is 'prefaced' by Jacques Derrida, who provides a thoughtful, typically provocative commentary on its themes, perhaps best read after reading Malabou herself, rather than before. Malabou's argument concerns the dual question of whether Hegel offers a way of thinking the future, that is to say 'to see what is coming' (*voir venir*), and whether there is any future in reading Hegel. Her answer to both of these questions is 'yes'.

Malabou begins with an explicit statement of how she will read Hegel and ends with a return to the question of reading. In truly Hegelian fashion, what is introduced abstractly and dogmatically in the introductory remarks is elaborated and demonstrated in the course of the argument itself to produce a systematic interpretation. The key to the interpretation is the concept of *plasticity*, which Malabou defines as the simultaneous capacity to give and to receive form. Malabou does not suggest that the concept of plasticity is a major focus of Hegel's philosophical work, though she points to the ways in which it appears and is defined within his texts. Nevertheless, she claims that Hegel's concept of plasticity provides a key insight into his accounts of nature, spirit and thought:

Elevated into its speculative truth, the relation between subject and predicates is characterized by 'plasticity'. Within the process of self-determination, the universal (the substance) and particular (the accidents as something independent) give form to each other through a dynamic like that at play in the 'plastic individualities'. The process of self-determination is the unfolding of the substance-subject.

This quotation exemplifies the way in which Malabou reads Hegel throughout her text. Unusually for much contemporary Hegel scholarship, Malabou takes Hegel at his word and reads the *Encyclopaedia* texts as the summative statement of his system, although her argument does sometimes draw on other texts, including *Faith and Knowledge*, the *Science of Logic* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. She goes on to elaborate on the idea of plasticity as the key to Hegel's future in an engagement with three stages of Hegel's argument in the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Spirit*, which form the tripartite structure of her book.

In Part I, 'Hegel on Man: Fashioning a Second Nature', Malabou interprets Hegel's anthropology via his interpretation of Aristotle, and argues for the crucial role of habit in the self-fashioning of spirit in, through and from nature into 'man'. In this Greek schematization, plasticity is read teleologically as the movement from accidents to substance, a movement exemplified in the Greek art of sculpture. In Part II, 'Hegel on God: The Turn of Double Nature', Malabou contests the theologians' reading of his account of the death of God in Hegel's discussion of 'Revealed Religion', which, they argue, necessitates a foreclosure of the future that undermines the meaning of God's infinite promise. Instead, she puts forward the argument that Hegel's discussion of 'Revealed Religion' explores the different future of plasticity to be found both in the God of Protestant Christianity and in the Kantian transcendental subject. Here teleological time gives way to linear time, the mode of synthesis of the transcendental imagination.

The Greek concept of 'form-creation' ... assumes that self-determination is to be thought in terms of becoming essential of the accident which finds representation in the 'exemplary individual'. On the other hand, the modern concept of plasticity seems to join itself with a concept of self-determination conceived as the becoming accidental of essence, the very development in which the fundamental significance of the Incarnation is expressed.

In Part III, 'Hegel on the Philosopher or, Two Forms of the Fall', Malabou interprets Hegel's notion of 'Absolute Knowledge' as bringing together the insights

offered by Greece and modernity (in its Christian and Kantian forms). This is the meaning of speculative philosophy, which, rather than schematizing experience from a Greek or transcendental temporality, schematizes from the crossroads of teleological and linear time, a time in which plasticity is understood in terms of the impossibility of privileging the 'accidental' or the 'essential' in the ongoing self-fashioning of thought, spirit and nature. The concluding sections of the book demonstrate how seriously Malabou takes Hegel's notion of the speculative proposition as a matter of dynamic reading, in which the universal, particular and singular elements of the syllogism are perpetually reordered as the reader opens him or herself to the 'plasticity' of language and therefore also of doing and being.

Within all three parts of the text, Malabou offers highly sophisticated analysis of Hegel's work, engages with critics of Hegel and, as Derrida notes in his Preface, develops her own (highly expressive) rhetorical idiom as a specific, contestable, rendering of Hegel's future. I found myself very much in agreement with large parts of Malabou's argument, and was particularly impressed by her reading of the anthropological sections in the *Philosophy of Spirit*, which is illuminating about how to grasp the connection between nature and spirit in Hegel's work. Her exposition of the role of habit in both human and non-human animal life makes clear how spirit is necessarily inter-implicated with nature even as it breaks with it. This is a case in which the metaphor of plasticity and Malabou's repeated insistence on its capacity to mean both the solidification and rupture of form seem particularly apposite. However, Malabou's analysis is one which is very much oriented towards contesting readings of Hegel's philosophy in which the 'end of history' entails the meaninglessness of the concept of 'future'. In particular Malabou's analysis is one which has Heidegger's dismissal of Hegel's 'levelling out of time' in its sights. This particular anticipatory structure (*voir venir*) has distinct implications for the readers of the book, some of whom will have read Hegel through either Heidegger or later poststructuralist critics, but many of whom won't. I want to go on to suggest that these different readerships are likely to identify rather different strengths and weaknesses in the book.

Malabou is fond of pointing out that plasticity as a term may refer both to solidity and rupture, and she draws the reader's attention to the meaning of plastic as, among other possibilities, *explosive*. This metaphor is deployed against readings of Hegel which claim that the future as difference is unthinkable in terms of

Hegel's system. However, it is clear that even explosions 'emerge'; they do not come out of nowhere. As Malabou herself puts it:

Plasticity designates the future understood as future within closure, the possibility of a structural transformation: a transformation of structure within structure, a mutation 'right at the level of the form'.

I have no quarrel with this understanding of the future as open in its closure within Hegel's thought, but it is hard to see how this argument genuinely responds to Heidegger's critique of Hegel, which looks to a different understanding of time, and which would be likely to see Malabou as reiterating Hegel's historicist error in her account of speculative thought as the synthesis of Greek and modern temporality. In addition, I share Derrida's doubts, expressed in his Preface, that Malabou's reading of Hegel permits an understanding of the accidental in terms of that which may or may not be foreseen or explained. As Malabou herself shows, Hegel's conception of time is a time which changes, but it is a time which changes in the inter-implication of thought, spirit and nature, and which in effect conditions its own intelligibility in retrospect, even if the future comes as a surprise. From a Derridean point of view, this way of thinking about time and thought is too holistic in its grasp, it holds too much of the future already to fit with an anticipatory structure in which, as Derrida puts it, the death of God could have been genuinely accidental. Here Derrida's reading of Malabou incisively demonstrates the difficulty of accommodating Hegel's argument to any ways of thinking in which a trace of transcendence (that which cannot be thought) remains.

From the point of view of readers of Malabou such as myself, who come to the text already persuaded by 'open' interpretations of Hegel, her plastic reading will be both acceptable and to some extent familiar. For this readership, Malabou provides rich support for the continuing relevance of Hegel's work to questions of time and change. And her use of the concept of plasticity provides a very helpful way of thinking about the substance-subject in Hegel's thought. The problem with Malabou's account for this audience is likely to stem more from its selectivity and abstraction. In taking Hegel's systemic version of his philosophy in the *Encyclopaedia* as her starting point, and concentrating on three specific moments within the *Philosophy of Spirit*, Malabou's interpretation gains in clarity, but risks a certain dogmatism. In particular, this seemed to me to be a problem with her reading of 'Revealed Religion', which stated her interpretation as

the inverse of the Aristotelian anthropological dynamic rather than demonstrating it in detail. This abstractness paradoxically results in a rather impoverished account of what it might mean to think the future in Hegelian terms in the closing passages of the book. In her conclusion, Malabou speaks of the economy of the future in terms of the possibility of new events, but can say very little, because she hasn't explicitly thematized how and why the dynamic of plasticity changes, even though we know that the change has to be understood

as self-change. To describe this change in terms of self-change is surely right in Hegelian terms, but it does not exhaust what may be said about the complex relative identities of thought, nature and spirit as plastic. Having said this, it is perhaps unreasonable to expect Malabou to accomplish more than she has done, which is to provide a fresh and compelling reiteration of the case for Hegel's future.

Kimberley Hutchings

A reduction short of the truth

Jean-Pierre Changeux, *The Physiology of Truth: Neuroscience and Human Knowledge*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise, Cambridge MA and London: Belknap–Harvard, 2004. 336 pp., £29.95 hb., 0 674 01283 6.

There is something comical about the spectacle of philosophers – oblivious to the lessons of history in this regard – expending vast resources of time and energy trying to tell science what it cannot do. So it is amusing to observe just how many contemporary philosophers feel duty bound to draw a line in the sand where the status of consciousness is concerned, as if to tell science: this far and no farther. This is a move as hopeless now as it was some 150 years ago when it was made with regard to the idea of 'life'. But while philosophers busy themselves contriving ever more sophisticated proofs of why science will never be able to explain human sentience, neuroscience continues its implacable advance toward the citadel of consciousness. Despite the superstitious braying of assorted anti-reductionist witch doctors, 'consciousness' – like 'life' before it – will succumb to science, and sooner rather than later if the work of the neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux is anything to go by. Director of the Pasteur Institute's Laboratory of Molecular Neurobiology (a discipline of which he is widely acknowledged to be the founder), and a self-proclaimed adept of Bachelard's *materialisme instruit* ('learned materialism'), Changeux is a serene and unrepentant exponent of scientific reductionism calmly engaged in vivisectioning consciousness so as to expose the mechanisms of sentience.

Changeux's scientific reputation rests principally on several important discoveries concerning molecular and cellular receptor mechanisms in the nervous system. These have provided the basis for a neurobiological model of the epigenesis of neural networks operating through the selective stabilization of synapses; a model which extends the selectionist schema to higher brain

functions and marks a significant advance in the explanation of consciousness. At the centre of Changeux's current research lies the 'neuronal workspace hypothesis', which proposes a model of the unitary integration of distributed neural processing and may well turn out to be the first detailed neural network architecture capable of carrying out conscious tasks. Yet Changeux remains commendably circumspect about its import vis-à-vis any so-called 'science of consciousness'. Thus the neuronal workspace hypothesis 'does not aim at solving the problem of consciousness ... or pretend to account for all of [its] experimentally identified characteristics'. But, despite these diplomatic caveats, Changeux's underlying confidence resurfaces a few pages later when he unabashedly observes that 'the day when the autonomy of consciousness can be given a neuronal explanation may not be as far off as is generally supposed'.

If we set aside those philosophers who simply ignore science altogether, there are basically two philosophical strategies available to those who would dismiss Changeux's neurobiological programme: the 'explanatory gap' strategy and the functionalist strategy. The 'explanatory gap' strategy claims that no neurophysiological facts about the brain can be relevant when it comes to explaining 'what it is like to be' (Nagel) conscious. The data of first-person phenomenological experience cannot possibly be accounted for by facts about neurological processes. No amount of information about the latter can suffice to explain the former. This well-worn strategy, recently revitalized by David Chalmers and his followers (for instance, David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, Oxford University Press,

Oxford, 1996), relies on letting the putative subject of conscious experience define the constitutive characteristics of the phenomenon called 'consciousness'. These characteristics are then deemed to provide the phenomenal data to which neuroscience is accountable. Once this move has been allowed, there is nothing to prevent the stubborn anti-reductionist from perpetually refining the 'essentially constitutive' features of conscious experience in such a way as to ensure that there will always be a mysterious residuum forever eluding neuroscientific grasp. The only sure way of circumventing this potentially interminable shifting of the goal posts is simply to refuse the initial premiss: there is no reason to accept the claim that the subject of conscious experience (the 'conscious self') enjoys incorrigible epistemic authority when it comes to characterizing the salient features of his or her own 'consciousness' – particularly if, as Thomas Metzinger has persuasively argued, there are no such things as 'selves' in the first place (Thomas Metzinger, *Being No-One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2004). It may well be that there is no single unitary phenomenon corresponding to what pre-theoretical common sense calls 'consciousness'; no real feature of the world underlying the variety of different ways in which the word is used. On this view, it is simply a mistake to assume that the use of a word provides a reliable index of a real phenomenon. Thus neuroscience is not obliged to let phenomenological common sense stipulate the defining features of all those phenomena which we perhaps erroneously group together under the single heading of 'consciousness'. One of the most valuable aspects of the work of philosophers like Dennett, the Churchlands and Metzinger, is its exposure and critique of the pernicious assumptions underlying the explanatory gap strategy.

Functionalism, although a good deal less reverential about 'consciousness', and considerably less defensive in its attitude towards reductionism, is nevertheless also liable to be dismissive of Changeux's neurobiological agenda. Jerry Fodor, for instance, has argued that neurological data have no real bearing on the problem of understanding sapience: on this view, *where* things happen in the brain is irrelevant until you understand what they're for (Jerry Fodor, 'Let Your Brain Alone', *London Review of Books*, vol. 21, no. 19, 30 September 1999; available at www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n19/fodo01_.html). Knowing where a carburettor is located will not illuminate your understanding of how an engine works unless you know what an engine is for and how its subcomponents are functionally related to one another.

Thus functionalists insist that cognitive architecture is non-isomorphic with neural architecture, and can be investigated independently of the latter. The thesis of substrate independence, which implies that cognitive functions can be understood independently of their neural vehicles, follows from a computational idealization of cognition and licenses the functionalist's disregard for neurological details about how the brain actually processes information. Changeux's work, insisting as it does on the 'fundamental relationship between anatomy and function', challenges this stance. Knowing the location of the carburettor may not be enough on its own when it comes to understanding how an engine works; but knowing it is connected to an inlet port will surely have some bearing on our understanding of its contribution to the overall functioning. Neurobiologically accurate accounts of modular functioning can be used to build up a realistic model of integrated global functioning; models which may challenge computational idealizations. Changeux points to the visual system: it exemplifies a model of functional organization in which horizontally distributed ('bottom-up') parallel networks are integrated with vertically nested ('top-down') hierarchical structures in a way that stymies the facile distinction between physical hardware and cognitive software, and by implication (though Changeux does not say so) not only straightforward functionalism but also Dennett's claim (in *Consciousness Explained*) that the brain's connectionist architecture merely provides a vehicle for the mind's serial computational software. Changeux's book is replete with this kind of empirical detail, which can be daunting for the lay reader, but also profoundly instructive, as when he lays waste to Steven Pinker's simplistic genetic determinism about linguistic capacity by explaining how the relationship between individual genes and their role in cognitive functioning is mediated by non-linear neurological mechanisms, which may either dampen or amplify the gene's expressive relevance depending on a complex array of variables. Here, as elsewhere, Changeux is at his most instructive when simply detailing the intricate neurobiological mechanisms which make of the brain an 'open, motivated, and self-organizing system'.

Yet, despite Changeux's impressive roll-call of philosophical references (the list includes Empedocles, Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Hume, Diderot, d'Alembert, Condorcet, Kant, Mill, Russell, Bergson, Peirce, Freud, Samuel Alexander, Popper, Wittgenstein, Piaget, Lévi-Strauss, Chomsky, Davidson, Searle, Nagel, Fodor, Dennett, Simondon, Bouveresse, Ricoeur), the book

is vitiated by a fundamental philosophical naivety. Indeed, Changeux's ostensible philosophical erudition seems to render him incapable of distinguishing neurobiology's materialist friends from its idealist foes. Most egregiously for a book about neuroscience that seems to advertise its philosophical literacy, Changeux makes no reference whatsoever to the philosophical work that is surely most sympathetic to his neurobiological agenda – specifically, the neurophilosophy of Paul and Patricia Churchland. As a result, despite his avowed intent not to compromise on the methodological ideals of reductionist science, Changeux ends up conceding far too much to the most obfuscatory variety of anti-reductionist philosopher. Although he quietly but decisively undermines the functionalist strategy, he fails to see the necessity of mounting an equally robust attack on the explanatory gap strategy. On the contrary, he even seems to endorse Searle's nefarious suggestion that the scientific problem consists in explaining 'how neurobiological processes in the brain cause consciousness'. This is a dangerous concession; a serious misstating of the problem (denounced by Dennett and Paul Churchland among others) which harbours a welter of confusions and leaves the door wide open for the 'explanatory gap'. For anyone bound by the constraints of reductionist explanation, neurophysiological processes can no more be the 'biological cause' of consciousness than H₂O can be the 'physical cause' of water. They must be the same thing.

Changeux's philosophical insouciance becomes even more problematic when he ups the ante and proposes a neurobiological appropriation of the correspondence theory of truth. According to Changeux, 'correspondence' can be cashed out in terms of a relation of congruence between one part of the physical world – a representation neurologically encoded in the brain – and another – the organism's physical environment. This physical correspondence is underwritten by the vicissitudes of the organism's (and social group's) evolutionary history. Evolution guarantees the selection of 'true' (i.e. adaptive) representations and the elimination of 'false' (i.e. maladaptive) ones. Thus 'the conceptual development of science resembles to some extent the biological evolution of species by natural selection'. This is the weakest aspect of Changeux's book. Not only does he disregard the correspondence theory's fractious philosophical history and assume an implausible continuity between the mechanics of biological and cultural evolution; he unwittingly dissolves truth-as-correspondence altogether. What he actually offers is a Darwinian recoding of philosophical pragmatism in the guise of a correspondence theory. But, as wily anti-naturalists know full well, this kind of neurobiological pragmatism about truth is open to a speedy *reductio*: if there is no more to true representations than adaptational success, and if all extant representations are equally adaptive simply in so far as they have avoided evolutionary elimination, then



what privileges this neurobiological account of representation over rival, non-neurobiological accounts? By trying to turn representational truth into a function of evolutionary adaptation, science threatens to undercut its own epistemic privilege as the most authoritative representation of the world. For if correspondence is simply a matter of adaptation, what distinguishes the scientific representation of representation from its spiritualist or idealist rivals? Changeux remains oblivious to the possibility that his neurobiological reductionism about truth may be unwittingly eliminating the latter altogether and hence undermining science's own epistemic authority. Hence the force of the Fodorian gambit that truth as representational adequation can only be secured by insisting on the functional autonomy of representation as a domain which, in the absence of psychophysical covering laws, must remain provisionally irreducible to the neurobiological realm. Alternately, perhaps 'truth' is precisely the kind of 'folk philosophical' concept that needs to be supplanted by a neurophilosophically enriched account of why certain representations should be granted an explanatory privilege over certain others. Either option entails a non-eliminative reduction of truth. Changeux's book fails to deliver on the promise of its admirably provocative title precisely in so far as it remains blind to these philosophical complexities.

Ray Brassier

Essais

Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2005. x + 431 pp., £22.95 hb., 0 520 24272 6 hb.

Martin Jay's book sets itself both a limited and an expansive task. The limited task consists in relating the history of the idea of experience as a multifarious grouping of different 'songs of experience', without attempting to construct or defend one particular tradition or idea of experience. However, this involves a massive trawl through the history of Western philosophy to narrate the 'universal theme' of experience as it is played out through different philosophical traditions and historical periods. Jay's methodology is both chronological and thematic. There is a broad commitment to a chronological narrative, in that the book begins with Ancient Greek philosophy and culminates

in a discussion of the project of 'experience without a subject' in writers such as Bataille, Foucault and Barthes. However, this chronology is freely interrupted when the thematic of the different chapter headings demands it. Therefore Chapter 5 blends together a discussion of Burke, Oakeshott and the English Marxists in relation to a consideration of politics and experience. This can cause repetition, particularly in relation to the work of William James that is outlined in both the chapters on religious experience and the chapter on American pragmatism.

The difficulty of such a historical project is that there are bound to be glaring omissions, as otherwise, the project would take three volumes. This is appropriate and understandable. Therefore Jay's starting point historically is the idea of experience as it appears in Montaigne's essays. Although there is a rapid perusal of the concept of experience prior to the mid-sixteenth century, it is Montaigne who serves as both a starting point and a moral anchor for the narrative. Montaigne's expounding of a concept of experience as uncertain, open to failure and bounded by death continually returns as the thematic of experience that Jay wants to uphold and maintain, and it is a concept of experience that he sees return in the work of Dewey and Adorno. Opposed to this idea of experience is the concept of empiricism, which, in its many guises, elevates an idea of positivist and certain knowledge, achieved through experience as experiment. The brief trawl through Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant's first critique does not allow enough time for the subtleties and contradictions involved within the concept of experience as empiricism. The contradiction between experiment and certainty, which is central to the empiricist project, results in concepts of experience that are far more open than Jay allows. For example, to conclude that Hume ultimately relied too much on a method of reasoning rather than experiment and observation nevertheless ignores the importance of concepts such as habit and the foregrounding of the passions and the imagination in Hume's work, which challenge positivist concepts of experience from within. Similarly, the unproblematic acceptance of Montaigne's concept of open experience downplays its reliance on traditional concepts of authority and wisdom which can operate as closing down routes for experience politically, as well as legitimating certain experiences on the grounds of political or economic power. There is a similar problem in Giorgio Agamben's parallel attempt to use Montaigne's authority of experience as a starting point for a historical narrative of a fall

from grace, which can be traced from this point, and this uncritical acceptance of a concept of a fulfilled, yet open, experience finds its way into the work of Critical Theory, particularly in parts of both Benjamin's and Adorno's work.

However, despite this problematic beginning, there are superb chapters at the core of this book. The chapter on religious experience sets out the central dialectic of experience which develops in Western philosophy from the nineteenth century onwards, the dialectic between *Erfahrung* (the coherent narrative experience, that has a more public and collective character) and *Erlebnis* (the experience that is more individual, prior to subject-object divisions, and transgressive of normal notions of temporality and narrative). The innovation of this chapter is precisely to read this division as a formulation of religious experience, which reveals the many different political and cultural connotations of *Erlebnisse* and *Erfahrungen*. The discussion of Martin Buber's move from a philosophy of *Erlebnis* – which politically informed a glorification of the experience of fighting in the First World War, alongside other figures such as Ernst Junger – to the dialogical philosophy of 'I-Thou', which informed Buber's later work, shows both the uncomfortable political ambiguities of a philosophy of pure experience alongside the modes in which a concept of *Erlebnis* returns, even in Buber's later work. In this later work there is an attempt to outline a more authoritative concept of experience, but this concept of the event of experience ontologizes *Erlebnis*. This chapter also sets the background to the hostile reception of the concept of *Erlebnis* by writers such as Walter Benjamin, who saw clearly the political implications of such a concept of pure experience.

This dialectic between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* runs through the remaining chapters of the book, with illuminating discussions of Dewey's attempt to relate aesthetic experience to wider communal and societal processes, and the debate in English Marxism around the attempt to construct a concept of experience by writers such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, an experience that would both have a link (as *Erfahrung*) with a wider working class and oppositional culture, and (as *Erlebnis*) would provide means of moving beyond reified culture through the common historical and contemporary experience of struggle. The critique of such a concept of experience as irredeemably idealistic and complicit with a capitulation to structures of power – the "lived experience" of ideology', as Althusser named it – inaugurates the final problematic of the book in what Jay terms the concept of 'experience without a subject'.

This experience exists in the realization of a loss of traditional *Erfahrung*, and the overwhelming of modern life as a pure stimulus response to fleeting and irrecoverable *Erlebnisse*. The concept of *Erlebnis* loses all its force as an oppositional concept to positivist forms of rationality, and becomes another word for the deadened and fleeting experiences of a modernity cut adrift from any relation to tradition. The problem becomes how to turn these *Erlebnisse* into *Erfahrungen*, and Jay traces this project in a number of different keys. Although to term this 'experience without subject' is questionable given the strong commitment to forms of subjectivity in Adorno or even in Bataille and Foucault, where the transgression or dissolution of the subject only occurs there through a heightened or sovereign subjective experience. What occurs despite this narrowed definition of *Erlebnis*, is that some form of *Erlebnis* continually returns in the attempt to move beyond subject/object divisions or beyond the reified 'damaged life' of modernity. This form of *Erlebnis*, as a concept that is transgressive of normal forms of temporality and experience, takes many different forms, from Bataille's sovereign experience to Adorno's more sober aesthetic experience, but it opens up the question about whether we remain within this dialectic of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, or dispense with a concept of experience altogether. Jay does outline clearly and persuasively why a concept of experience still matters in philosophies as diverse as those of Barthes and Derrida (there is an excellent discussion of Barthes here); however, the opposition to a concept of experience at play here is only configured through forms of structuralism, and Jay doesn't grapple with the ontological dissolution of subjective experience implicit in Deleuze and Guattari's work, or the post-human or anti-human philosophies which trace their lineage from Nietzsche. Apart from a brief discussion of Lyotard, there is thus little consideration of the problem of whether a philosophy could completely rid itself of the concept of experience.

The glaring omissions in the book concern the lack of a dedicated chapter to phenomenology, surely the tradition within modern Western philosophy that has most privileged a concept of experience. There is also a lack of concerted consideration of Hegel's concept of experience, other than through its reception in Critical Theory, or in English neo-Hegelianism (Oakeshott and F.H. Bradley). However, this is inevitable given the constraints of such a large project. Martin Jay has provided an invaluable resource for philosophers researching and writing on aspects of experience in modern philosophy, through a thorough and illuminating

exploration of the different thematics of experience in numerous philosophical traditions. If the reader is left with a frustration that there is no definitive proposal of a certain concept of experience, it is a frustration that encourages further research in the spirit of a concept of experience as *essai*, in the terms that Montaigne outlines, an attempt, always open, always uncertain, to articulate and formulate the radically new.

Alastair Morgan

Don't forget to forget...

Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004. 92 pp., £40.00 hb., £9.86 pb., 0 8166 3566 8 hb., 0 8166 3567 6 pb.

This small book's focus is not directly aimed at oblivion and forgetting; rather it is concerned with living and memory seen from the perspective of forgetting and oblivion. Oblivion provides the oblique angle that allows Augé to sketch a poetics and taxonomy of memory that recognize the formative work that forgetting does. In an analogy that suggests a psychoanalytic penchant, he writes: 'memory and oblivion in some way have the same relationship as life and death'. In a more geological vein, he writes: 'memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea'. Such a perspective allows for a more nuanced sense of the range of forms that memory and remembering take. Remembering a dream, for instance, is a very different proposition than remembering a number sequence. On waking, when that dreamworld, with all its delicious and sometimes deadly intrigues, is just slipping from view, we know that the worst thing in the world we can do, if we hope to retain some trace of this dreamworld, is actively to search it out. That hard, slightly panicky, concentration dissolves dreams into a puff of nothingness: much better to give into the lure of forgetfulness and sink into the half-light of the snooze. The remembered dream, then, is the product of an ability to let oblivion do its share of the memory work. Other examples that Augé catalogues are 'memories worked over by oblivion': these are memories unmoored from any sense of time (though not very often from a sense of place); they seem to come from childhood, but can be fashioned at any

point in your life. These are memories that press in on you like some recurrent, ungraspable insight, and their energy seems to be connected to their lack of temporality.

Yet Augé isn't just concerned with the personal world of reminiscence: his is, ultimately, an account of social memory, or more crucially an account of the social uses of time. In this way memory doesn't have to be the possession of individuals at all. Places, even the most unlikely of places, can simultaneously 'remember' and 'forget' previous spatial arrangements: 'beyond their sadness and desolation, what is fascinating about the shapeless scenery of the most developed urban life (airports, parking lots, cement-covered squares where anonymous silhouettes pass each other without stopping) is their unconscious resemblance to the almost abstract, barely outlined spaces of courtly romance'.

No socio-cultural account of memory and forgetting is going to be able to ignore the enormity of the Holocaust, and Augé recognizes how such recent traumas pull on our obligation to remember. Yet while horrific memories would obviously be part of the survivor's world, what makes a survivor survive is an ability not to be laid low by memory, not to be completely undone by reminiscence. Memory and oblivion coexist and they do so because living in the present demands it. Because we live in what Andreas Huyssen has called a 'culture of amnesia', it might seem odd to come across a book that argues for the importance of forgetting as an aid to remembering. In various ways *Oblivion* reminds me of Chris Marker's wonderfully sprawling ethno-documentary film *Sunless* (*San soleil*, 1982). In *Sunless*, which is also a treatise on the use of time in various societies, mention is made of a science fiction film that the filmmaker was going to make about a man who had 'forgotten to forget' and consequently can't really understand the work of the past as it exists in the present. Total recall is in the end total exile from the present. *Oblivion*, then, isn't courting a culture of amnesia, but nor is it wedded to indiscriminate reclamation of the past. In the end, to stake the importance of forgetting is to continually launch an inquiry into the value of memory, history and reminiscences. In other words, foregrounding forgetting makes us continually ask what, how and why should we remember.

Marc Augé is first and foremost an anthropologist who has conducted extensive fieldwork in a number of African societies (Ghana and Nigeria, for instance), as well as fieldwork in Paris (in the métro, at football games, walking around Paris, and so on). What

Augé practises is a kind of comparative ethnology, and he practises it with the full knowledge that this occupation has more often than not been emphatically ethnocentric. As Johannes Fabian in *Time and the Other* (mistakenly referenced in this book as *Time and the Others*) demonstrates, comparative ethnology has classically set comparisons between the west and 'the rest' on a timeline, where difference from the West was translated into a different temporality that always claimed that 'other' cultures were behind: less developed, less complex and historically much earlier. Anthropology in this classic, colonial form was seen as a branch of archaeology whereby scientists could study earlier evolutions of man as they existed as residual cultures in the present. A neo-liberal version of comparative ethnology can be found in forms of culturalism whereby equivalence across cultures is suggested by framing each culture as a relatively complex arrangement of representations (usually narrative in form) all more or less adequate to the business of making culture. Where ethnocentrism is evident in this formulation is in the unquestioned assumption that the scientific perspective of the ethnologist is the one 'culture' that is *not* open to the disruption of radical relativism.

Augé's method is an attempt to counter ethnocentrism, not by refusing comparative ethnology, but by practising it as a form of what Georges Devereux called 'disorientation testing', whereby any cross-cultural comparison works to place all cultural truth in jeopardy (including, most importantly, the unexamined truisms of the scrutinizing culture). Thus, for Augé, 'others help me to become aware of the narrative dimension of every existence, mine as well as theirs, and that this awareness definitively prevents me from assigning them to a time ("mythical" or "magical") that is fundamentally different from mine.' But while this might seem to slide towards culturalism, Augé, taking his cue from Georges Bataille, claims that 'the relativization of one culture by another (changing the "frame of reference") is basically an exercise in anticulturalism that in every culture respects above all the power it has to destabilize the others'. The Mojave Indians' culture of dreaming offers another idea of the unconscious, one that reveals the paucity (for a fully fledged socio-cultural understanding of the unconscious) of Freudian psychoanalysis. Yet Freudianism is also able to disrupt the lexical stability of Mojavian dream interpretation. However, the fact that dreaming exists across all cultures alerts us to the base materialism of our 'species-being', and should work to refigure comparative ethnology as a radically

materialist enterprise, one that connects cultures at this level.

In the end it is easy to like a book that is this erudite, that skips so easily from discussions of Stendhal and Dumas, to Evans-Pritchard, Ricoeur, Devereux, and Pontalis, to Augé's own fieldwork experiences in Togo and Benin. It is even easier to like a book, written by an anthropologist, that is oblivious to the usual practices of granting epistemological superiority to the work of the social scientist over the novelist or the Mojavian dreamer. Perhaps he just forgot.

Ben Highmore

Extravagance

Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture*, Continuum, New York and London, 2004. 168 pp., £65.00 hb., 0 8264 6648 6 hb.

The title of this book might lead one to expect the answers to a series of questions. What is the baroque and what is it for this baroque to return? Has it really been away? And what about the space it returns into – modern culture: how do we characterize this, or, better, how do we characterize 'culture' and 'the modern'? The title also suggests a Freudian motif: the implied identity of 'repressed' and 'baroque' is strong to overwhelming. As it turns out, Lambert, though aware of all these questions – and at times seemingly committed to psychoanalysis as at least a powerful analogy for some of the processes he documents – is not in the business of answering them in any straightforward way.

Rather, confessedly dug out of the drawer in which it had languished for over a decade, the book circles around these themes and many more in the form of a series of essays on a number of different writers from the 'Continental' philosophical tradition, Spanish letters and historiography and Latin American literature. These are bookended by an introduction and epilogue, which repeat a number of propositions on the relation of the name 'baroque' to historical periodization, temporality, aesthetic form and content, and, more dilutedly, historical and social change. Perhaps a strong thesis on the appropriateness of the characterization of our current (post)modernity as baroque emerges from the swirling philosophemes. However, the danger flagged by an epigraph from Walter Benjamin – 'It is quite characteristic of baroque style that anyone who stops thinking rigorously while

studying it immediately slips into a hysterical imitation of it' – is all too blithely courted. The 'baroque' in its sheer indefiniteness acts as an absent centre, unifying what is in effect a quite heterogeneous set of readings (themselves internally heteroclit and excessive) – in tradition, style and purpose – whose retrospective connectedness and importance always threaten to dissipate as the spectator/reader refuses the task of completing the work. To contrive another self-referential trope, they only meet in the non-place of this book, and the encounter is vertiginous.

One could see the book as itself anachronistic and belated, features that Lambert will use to characterize the baroque. As the author acknowledges, the concept of the 'baroque' was the substance of an extensive debate in the 1980s in Europe – with Buci-Glucksmann and Omar Calabrese, both names cited but not extensively discussed, staking out claims for its relevance to the postmodern. In the same period, in Latin America there was a renewed concern with the content and expression of modernity on the periphery, and the question and status of the baroque and the possibility of the neo-baroque became central, critical themes in cultural criticism in the light of the failure of state-led modernization projects and the aftermath of dictatorship. Lambert's book clearly belongs to this period and it might be usefully read as a fragmented response to these debates.

The book is divided into four sections. The first deals with definitions and addresses the derivation of the baroque in art history and its critical mobilization in the work of the Spanish writers José Maravall and Eugenio d'Ors. The baroque here has a specificity as a moment of European art history: articulated against classicism and Mannerism, it is located within a history of production of forms and tied to a set of ideological and political struggles around the Counter-Reformation and the drive to absolutism. The characteristics of the baroque as form – its engagement with temporality as novelty, the features of multiplicity and variety, the loss of central focus, the involvement of the spectator as a crucial anchor of the work and the heightened sense of affect within and through the work – allow Lambert to use the notion as a historical marker and as the placeholder for a set of more general philosophical disputes – on the term, on ornament, on the sublime – that emerge in the work of Deleuze, Derrida and others. The discussion of Maravall's notion of the 'baroque mechanism' engages with the baroque as a periodization of political technology: the emergent urban *populus*, crowd or masses of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are the target for

a certain cultural work – their integration and demobilization through spectacle. On the other hand, d'Ors deploys the notion of the 'baroque eon' as a critical term against Enlightenment philosophy of history, postulating it as an immutable form perduring within history, against history as linearity.

The second part of the book deals with conceptions of the modern in Octavio Paz, Paul de Man and Walter Benjamin. The comparative work here illuminates a common sense of modernity as the repetition of rupture, self-origination and forgetting, paradoxically conjoined with a sense of the expanding accumulation of perpetually present pasts. For Paz, according to Lambert, the baroque is a belated and alternative Latin American romanticism, whose (re)discovery allows for a post-avant-garde poetry. The baroque is the moment of the irruption of eternity into the instant – the place of the poetic – a vision of the suspension of history close to Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*. Lambert ascribes a different notion of the baroque to de Man: it is the synthesis of those themes that take modernity as their object.

The third part of the book is an engagement with the Foucault of *The Order of Things* and the representation of representation in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, Genette's literary criticism, the baroque emblem in Yuri Lotman and Derrida's panoramagram. Here the central trope of *mise en abîme*, the text within the text, is traced through a now defined modern anxiety over resemblance and isomorphism.

Finally, there are three chapters devoted to the baroque in Borges, and the Cuban writers Severo Sarduy and Alejo Carpentier. Borges's notion of the baroque as the tendential exhaustion of a form, which becomes parodic, is explored in the role of repetition in his fiction. Sarduy's inflection of the baroque through Lacan and *Tel Quel's* poetics is read in his novel *Cobra*. Carpentier's investigation of origins in his novel *Concierto barroco* makes the status of representations of the 'New World' deeply problematic: fabulation, spectacle and the end(s) of history are all complexly linked.

Already, we can see the problems. The conceptual investigation and its articulation across history constantly overreach themselves. There is too much detail, too much ornament and too many questions: the space for exegesis is exiguous so that arguments are condensed to the point of gnomic ciphers. This excess produces an intolerable demand on the reader to provide the material that confirms or contests the argument, or to succumb to theoretical overload. The conceptual work is tenuously grounded histori-

cally. There is no space, for example, devoted to the long debate on the accuracy of Maravall's picture of baroque Spain. There is little attempt to date material either biographically or historically. Single works stand in for complex oeuvres. And, perhaps most crucially, historical explanation is repeatedly promised but never presented with any depth or fullness. Indeed, a certain bathos haunts Lambert's historical asides: for instance he cites the impact of mass movements and migrations on the genesis of the baroque, and notes that much of this dislocation was due to the 'Thirty Years War, which raged through the European continent between the years 1618 and 1648', an explanandum that does no work at all. Or again, in discussing the roots of 'complexity and ornamentation' with spectatorial responses of 'awe', he notes 'an event inseparable from the history of baroque sensibility and logic of culture: the European colonial adventure that followed the discovery of the New World' and then lists the history of the early European maritime discoveries and certain cultural products like St Peter's in Rome or the publication of *Orlando Furioso*. The complete failure to develop any historical mediations leaves the connections merely cosmetic. And there is an odd reliance on a psychoanalysis of the dream-work which is never developed. The overcompression of argument and underpresentation of historical material tend to vitiate the work *ab initio*.

This is perhaps best seen in the treatment of Latin American themes, the inclusion of which is unusual within texts on general cultural history published in the Anglo-American academy. For this, at least, Lambert should be applauded. However, his contextualization of the works is thin, at times seemingly indebted to a single text of literary criticism, Roberto González Echevarría's 1993 study *Celestina's Brood*. The treatment of Sarduy's baroque is probably the most accomplished, seeing it as articulating the displacement of European culture in a process of grafting and cultural translation organized through writing which covers over the lack of origin. These reflections on the relation of periphery to metropole, and the refraction and

dislocation of cultural forms in their translation, could usefully engage with the debates on transculturation stimulated by Angel Rama and continued by John Kraniauskas among others. (A similar need is obvious in the essays on Borges and Carpentier.) However, the post-structural hybridization of Sarduy's baroque is only outlined, never problematized, and moments of the discussion of Lacan and Althusser seem faulty (*objet a* plays little role in Althusser's theory of ideology!). Certain claims about the Latin American literary tradition – 'the central problem of separating history and culture from the defiles of its imaginary projections by the West and from its own specific "Orientalism"', for example – seem tendentious or vacuous when so baldly asserted. The essay on Borges shows no evidence of the enormous body of criticism on his self-understanding as Argentine and his relation to 'world culture'. The essay on Carpentier subordinates joy to



baroque melancholy in a reading of a text that is but one moment of a contradictory oeuvre. The relation of all three writers to the historical and contemporary debates on the Latin American baroque is only cursorily examined: a couple of lines on Lezama Lima – the great theorist of the American baroque – and José Martí, speculatively assimilating him to a tradition of the baroque, are insufficient.

In the end, the book is strangely reluctant to address its central conjunction: the baroque and (post)modernity. We wait till the closing pages, unsure as to the answers to our opening questions, only to find that our author is similarly dubious. The unity of the central concept dissolves into its fictionality ('one or many baroques?' Lambert wonders) and the connection with modernity becomes clear but question-begging: "the baroque" occup[ies] the exact *middle* of modernity, in the sense that it ... recur[s] historically precisely in the moments when one tradition of modernity exhausts its own possibilities and transitions into another, and even as the symptomatic principle of this exhaustion'. But this flies in the face of the discussion of the Latin American baroque, and poses unanswered questions about 'traditions' of modernity and their exhaustion and renewal. And if

the return of baroque is 'the last sign of our fading modernity', it behoves Lambert to be a little clearer about who 'we' are.

In short, this is a deeply frustrating book, which is also marred by appalling copy-editing. Heideggerian terms of art are misspelled in the German so that they become meaningless (*Vorhandeln*, *Zuhandeln*...); the German naturalist and geographer of South America, Alexander von Humboldt, changes sex; Robinson Crusoe becomes Latinized; there is a confusion between epoch and *epoché*, the latter misspelled, and so on. It might have been better for this text to have been left in the drawer and the questions addressed afresh.

Philip Derbyshire

Don't look at me

Guy Debord, *Panegyric, Volumes 1 and 2*, trans. James Brook and John McHale, Verso, London and New York, 2004. 182 pp., £16.99 hb., 1 85984 665 3.

Debord's notorious autobiography is presented here for the first time in its entirety in translation. The third volume referred to in the text, along with the succeeding ones, which were still at the manuscript stage, were burned during the night of 30 November 1994, following his suicide, as Debord had instructed. What we find turns on its head any Greek ideal of a panegyric. Debord's philosophy bore no relation to the revolutionary Hellenic asceticism of a Che Guevara, for instance. His understanding of Marx grew out of the less orthodox Marx very much at one with the history of philosophy, specifically the history of materialist philosophy, and drew him to despise the transcendently founded values of the ascetic ideal. This was a Marx germinating out of Schelling and in symbiosis with Nietzsche. In this historical approach Debord owed much to his once great friend Henri Lefebvre in his famous espousal, against Althusser, of the early humanist Marx. He also shared with Lefebvre a Socratic concern for the inseparability of philosophy and life, but, unlike Lefebvre, Debord always maintained a dogged refusal to compromise with the technocracy. Indeed, this book is essential for evaluating his claims for having realized the becoming worldly of philosophy more than his contemporaries, through a revolution of everyday life, through the *détournement* of abstract images, beyond

our creation, to which we are enslaved. 'Directive No. 2', documented here, demonstrates this imperative with the daubed command: 'réalisation de la philosophie'. Debord also quotes Chateaubriand: 'Of the modern French authors of my time, I am almost the only one whose life resembles his works.'

Panegyric, where philosophy becomes poetic, is the necessarily unfettered companion of Debord's magnum opus *The Society of the Spectacle*. After establishing his critique, he can assume its foundations by entering the subjective realm of poetic reverie, returning to the elemental and primordial, akin to his literary idol Lautréamont. In so doing, his images return to nature and non-formal creation: 'an image that has not been deliberately separated from its meaning adds great precision and certainty to knowledge'. Much of Volume 2 comprises images like this, such as that of 'The Author's Hand', which lies alongside images which have the quality of historical documents of Debord's revolutionary praxis, – iconic images, maps, cartoons, the *Kriegspiel*.

Debord was so keen that the meaning of his text be unfixed and constantly shifting for the reader that he provides an appendix, 'On the Difficulties of Translating Panégyrique'. Here, not unusually, he cultivates for himself the image of genius, setting a new course whilst unaware of its telos, a course which is impossible to repeat: 'The end of the book is projected outside itself.' Hence, also not unusually, Debord's prose is at times intoxicating, vital and earthy, and at times quite unashamedly pompous. But it is when these natures combine that Debord is at his most effective, demonstrating the aristocratic indifference of the autodidact to standards and codes that insidiously trap one within the capitalist spirit, within the ordeal of *ressentiment*.

In many ways Debord sees his infamy and resulting malediction in a philosophical sense, as arising not out of his imagined role in the May 1968 revolt, but out of his original conception of the unconscious possibilities to be realized once 'the external husk of life' is cast off to reveal 'the severe commandments within'. As he sees it, it was actually his 1952 call for an art that would create situations rather than reproducing already existing situations that was disliked for so long. That was also the year of his full-length film containing no images, *Howls for Sade*. However, for Debord, the artistic entering of the real in order to 'change life', needed to confront the fact 'that there could be no more poetry or art'. Indeed, he saw, as Nietzsche had before him, that art must not quench the affirmative potential energized in confrontation with the real.

Resignationism was not the order of the day. For Debord sublimity, it seems, must be 'real': 'Just once, at night, I saw lightning strike near me outside: you could not even see where it had struck; the whole landscape was equally illuminated for one startling instant. Nothing in art has ever given me this impression of an irrevocable brilliance' – except, that is, for the prose of Lautréamont, father of the surrealists' unconscious and excessive reality, shocking the intellect from its habitually veiled, repetitious, unreality. Art has given way to revolution as philosophy's indistinguishable organ. Many felt Debord treated his comrades largely as dispensable tools, to be discarded when threatening the cohesion of the art or the 'game of war' – *Kriegspiel*. Debord quotes General Westermann: 'pity is not revolutionary'.

Many readers undoubtedly turn to this work, not just as the autobiography of a dynamic, some would say dangerous, individual, but also for its account of his profligate drinking and its essential role within his philosophy. Indeed Debord's alcoholism has often been the easy critical refuge of those instinctively disgusted by his influence. One is once again inclined to notice a superficial influence of Schelling or Nietzsche here, as he quotes Machiavelli: 'And even if someone judges this way of life shameful, I find it praiseworthy, for we imitate nature, which is changeable.' Also often cited by sympathetic readers is Debord's account of drink giving him 'the true taste of the passage of time', a sense of becoming without the subject's natural tendency towards *homo faber*. A philosophy incorporating a profound sense of both the layers and concentrations of historical and revolutionary time was essential to Debord. 'All revolutions run into history, yet history is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers of revolution come, thither they return again.'

In his reverie, Debord takes the opportunity to mourn the 'economic re-education of social classes that had long remained independent of large industrial production', so that certain original drinks may retain only their labels, so 'one can photograph them as they used to be – but not drink them'. For Debord this is symptomatic of his wider contention that:

The pleasures of existence have recently been redefined in an authoritarian way – first in their priorities and then in their entire substance. And the authorities who redefined them could just as well decide at any moment, untroubled by any other consideration, which modification might be most lucratively introduced into the techniques of their manufacture, entirely liberated from any need to please.

Drinking, for Debord, served the function of enabling a Dionysian mimesis, but it could never be a means to what he most disdained, a 'general decadence' facilitating 'the empire of servitude' that is a part of the passive commodity fetishism of the spectator.

What separated Debord from many twentieth-century Marxists, especially in France, was that, despite everything, his ideas did to some extent succeed in disrupting 'the general tendency of social domination'. The degree to which this happenstance was not the work of Debord as egoistic prime mover is admitted by him and indeed integral to his philosophy. Any isolation of himself for particular admiration outside of the consciousness of history would be to assume a false and distinctly capitalist perspective. That is why the mischief-maker of *détournement* lives on here in creating, of all things, a panegyric, when forces prior to any principle of individuation are at work. As he cites Orson Welles's Mr Arkadin as saying: "I can't help it", said the scorpion. "It's my character."

Andrew Aitken

Does Derrida do business?

Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Redemption*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2004. xx + 395 pp., £17.95 hb., 0 226 79166 1.

The blurb on Mark C. Taylor's *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Redemption* tantalizes with the prospect of a new age in which Continental philosophers, including Bataille, Baudrillard, Lacan and Derrida are taken seriously by economists. In drawing on all of the above, Taylor receives the highest praise from the kind of notables whose contact with the father of deconstruction one might assume to be limited to the particularly ungenerous obituary published in *The Economist*. Sadly, the brilliance of his book is undermined by the elision of the very philosophies it would purport to deliver over to the stock exchange.

The 'confidence games' of the title refer to the idea that the art of finance is based on the maintenance of a certain 'economy of faith'. Recent history shows financial markets continuing to rise so long as consumers continue to believe in them. Crises of confidence lead to surges of selling, causing prices and whole markets

to plummet in value. The problem becomes one of how to sustain confidence in the economy while living under the burden of the 'death of God' – that is, in the absence of an underlying truth to which the various forms of capital speculation could bind themselves, and thereby prevent the disastrous crashes to which they periodically succumb.

This lends itself to a Lacanian or Žižekian analysis of the Big Other, the symbolic order of exchange, whose existence is the product of a fantastic longing for just such an ontological ground. Žižek's knight of faith, the silent antihero of the 'vanishing mediator', who sacrifices himself to uphold the fantasy of reality, might find it a tall order to bear the entire edifice of the global economy on his (or her) shoulders. Even were it desirable, how many martyrs would it take to save capitalism? On occasion Taylor alludes to Lacan: the first section of the final chapter, entitled 'The Return of the Repressed', discusses the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in terms which do not quite map religion onto the Lacanian fantasy – the author is too earnestly politically correct for that. Rather than a return to Freud, he embarks on a return to Hegel: 'By recasting his speculative philosophy, I develop a dialectic without synthesis in which religion, art and economics progressively displace but do not replace one another. Religion gives way to art, which then is displaced by economics.'

This non-dialectical synthesis, I suspect, owes far more to Derrida than to Hegel, though it perhaps comes closest of all to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, of which Taylor makes no mention, but whose theoretical proximity to 'complex theory' would surely have taken his argument to another level. Taylor's most fertile insight reiterates the post-structuralist claim that money is a type of deconstruction, a deterritorializing *différance* that simultaneously conditions and resists every restricted economy of exchange:

Medium, liminal, surplus, supplement, fluid, irrational, excessive, polymorphous, polyvalent, perverse: money appears to be dangerous; ... it cannot be captured or contained in the clear and precise binary oppositions of closed systems that seem to pattern thought and organize experience. Uncategorizable and uncontrollable, excess can be identified with the lowest as well as the highest.

In a reworking of Hegel's theory of history (which, again, more closely resembles Deleuze and Guattari than Hegel), closed systems of religion are broken down by the excessive proliferations of capital. We begin with a fascinating section on the history of

markets as sacred liminal spaces beyond the *oikoi* of identity. Taylor subsequently analyses the ambiguous treatment of money in Christianity, Smith, Kant and the sublime autonomy of the omnipotent market-as-God, before culminating with an analysis of the death of God and the emergence of aestheticized 'godless markets', where one nevertheless achieves Hegel's 'recognition by and through the other' through one's Internet connection to the rest of the virtual world. Increasing amounts of space are devoted to recent economic history and the emergence of network society, on whose details Taylor writes with impressive authority, albeit at the expense of the theoretical insights that characterize the rest of the book. Chapter 5, on 'Specters of Capital', makes the most cursory of glances towards Derrida, never seriously engaging with his writings on the subject.

At no point does Taylor ask whether the three spheres of religion, art and economics share anything that could explain their intertwining evolution, for example a relation to desire, as forms of repressed desire. They could equally be three forms of progressively more sophisticated technological 'en-framing', in the Heideggerian/Derridean sense, though to venture this would risk a stronger challenge to the prevailing order. Subsuming Derrida under Hegel conveniently takes the edge off his politics. Derrida, like many of his contemporaries, haunts the book. But can the promise of what is to come sit so comfortably with the markets?

Gerald Moore

Sex with strangers

Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought*, Duke University Press, Durham NC and London, 2004. 352 pp., £69.00 hb., £17.50 pb., 0 822 33303 1 hb., 0 822 33315 5 pb.

Towards the end of her book, Alys Eve Weinbaum tells an instructive anecdote: 'Some years ago, a white mother who utilized in vitro fertilization involving donated sperm gave birth to twins, one of whom was black. She sued the fertility clinic for damages she explained had resulted from the duress of her wayward birth and the racist taunting that her child had had to confront as a result.' The anecdote concludes an exploration into what Weinbaum refers as the 'race/

reproduction bind' – that is, the 'inextricability of the connection between race and reproduction'. Rereading feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytical and other texts, she explores how race is reproduced, and reproduction is here understood as both an operation within the discursive field and biological reproduction.

The connections between race, nation and genealogy have already been investigated by feminist and post-colonial scholars. What Weinbaum adds to these works is her interest in the ways in which reproduction is thought by writers and thinkers of the Euro-American world. Race, she demonstrates, remains a determinant factor regardless of scientific discoveries that have proven its biological inexistence. There is no gene for race and yet race exists and remains bound up with reproduction. Not even new genomic knowledges and biotechnologies have been able to transcend essentialist ideas about race and reproduction: what strategies, what discourses and representation will succeed in unbinding race and reproduction? Weinbaum asks how 'wayward reproductions' – those that do not obey the rules dictated by theories of nationalism claiming to be 'race-neutral' – question biologically and racially determined discourse?

Weinbaum starts with an analysis of Kate Chopin's novel *Désirée's Baby* as an introduction to a rereading of Benedict Anderson's and Ernest Gellner's classic texts on nationalism. Her critical reading of these authors seeks to uncover the anxieties produced by the difficulties of securing the 'racial purity' of the nation. However, it is a genealogical impossibility that writers such as Chopin or theorists such as Anderson and Gellner want to hide. Weinbaum's cogent argument about the 'role of the maternal body in transmitting racial property across time' is illuminating. She turns to Étienne Balibar for a theory that acknowledges the 'historical reciprocity' of nation and race. However, the racialization of reproduction must be thought in relation to sexism. 'Racism and sexism converge within the concept of reproduction', she argues. Race and reproduction are not 'biological entities but articulated ideological structures'. Foucault's methodology of genealogy is, of course, called upon by Weinbaum. The racialized foundations of reproductive politics upon which nations are built are denounced for what they are: not aberrations, but constitutive of the nation. (These remarks could be extended to an analysis of US policies on reproduction: with the government withdrawal of funds to prenatal and postnatal care, and support for abstinence, decisions are made about who deserves to live and who does not, whose life matters and whose does not.)

In her next chapter, Weinbaum points to Charlotte Gilman's racial nationalism, a dimension too often neglected by feminist scholars. Weinbaum continues her reading of the race/reproduction bind with a revision of the post-Marxist and poststructuralist feminist critique of Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. She wants to restore *Origin* as a 'central text for antiracist feminists committed to Marxism'. Leading figures of materialist feminism, such as Michèle Barrett or Rosemary Hennessy, discovered through poststructuralist discourse analysis (whose debt to anti-colonial struggle should always be recognized) the role of racial difference and argued consequently against the ethnocentrism of Marxism. Weinbaum thinks, however, that *Origin* must not be read for its accuracy or as a plan for women's emancipation, but rather as a text providing an 'understanding of the articulation of the gendered, raced, and classed modalities of thinking'. Engels's story of the origin of family, private property and the state illustrates in fact the race/nation/reproduction bind that Weinbaum explores. Weinbaum's chapter on Freud is another exercise in reading against the grain: Freudian psychoanalysis 'resigned anti-Semitic discourse about wayward reproductivity' by 'casting Jewishness as a constitutive function of wayward reproduction'. In Du Bois, Weinbaum finds a genealogical counter-narrative. She shares the criticism of the essentialist conclusion of *Dark Princess*, but she shows how Du Bois finally turned to anti-imperialistic alliances and racial kinship built upon the interconnection among the 'darker peoples of the world', the oppressed peoples of the world not connected by blood and the womb, but by the will to fight for social justice.

Though Weinbaum does not fully provide an answer to the challenge of elaborating anti-racial politics beyond the race/reproduction bind, she has written an eloquent and convincing argument on a binding process that has shaped and is shaping our world. One minor but telling remark: the term 'transatlantic' refers to the 'strong and continuous flow of ideas and cultural products back and forth across the Atlantic and across national borders'. Why call a Euro-American world 'transatlantic', thereby erasing the African and South American continents? Why this Euro-Americanization of the Atlantic? Being from the so-called 'South', I am always surprised at the tendency, even in critical work like Weinbaum's, to name a space geographically with the goal of showing hidden cultural contacts, while, with this operation, hiding other spaces of signification.

Françoise Vergès

Art in the age of its political reproduction

Populism, Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, 8 April–4 June 2005; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, 15 April–2 September 2005; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 29 April–28 August 2005; Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main, 10 May–4 September 2005, www.poppulism2005.com

START KAPITAL, STANDARD (OSLO), 14 April–22 May 2005, www.standardart.no

Be What You Want But Stay Where You Are, Witte de Witte, Rotterdam, 28 April–19 June 2005, www.wdw.nl/dieregierung.uni-lueneburg.de

The recent proliferation of exhibitions organized around various Left political ‘isms’ could be interpreted as a sign of the art world’s bad conscience. Or perhaps projects such as *Communism* at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin (20 January–12 March 2005) and *Regarding Terror: The RAF Exhibition* at Kunst Werke in Berlin (30 January–16 May 2005) are simply nostalgia for the cultural climate of the 1960s and 1970s and the legacy of conceptualism. There is certainly a growing tendency for curators to look back to those times in an effort to frame some present-day understanding of ‘the political’ in art. It is as if the institutional critique that was once dominated by issues of the production and distribution of art in relation to the white cube has suddenly been transformed into a critique and contestation of state power, at a global level, leaving few exhibitions free from being evaluated in terms of their political commitment. This approach involves reciting the aesthetic regime of conceptualism in the visual language of a once-upon-a-time real political radicalism. Yet in these aspirations for political enlightenment, something essential has been neglected. Many of these exhibitions fail, in Adorno’s phrase, ‘to let nothing inherited go unchallenged’. This is not to say that there is an absence of works that claim to be new. But the failure of curators to look far into the complexity of works – in particular, in making visible processes of production – creates a sense that we are simply walking on the spot.

Historically, *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1970, serves as a seminal example of how a curator focused on the presentation of new processes of production can challenge accepted artistic norms in relation to broader aesthetic and political aims. McShine included artists who invested cultural value in things that never previously had that kind of value. By using photocopies, documents, maps, sketches, surveys and instructions as a means of criticizing the built environment, the artists attempted to subvert the function of art objects within an emerging global capitalism. Adopting the logic of negation as an instrument of investigation and criticism of the positivist system of art production of the time, the works reacted against the affirmative nature of art.

Nearly four decades later, *Populism*, curated by Lars Bang Larsen, Cristina Ricupero and Nicolaus Schafhausen, uses the space of art to reflect on community and the idea of the social against the backdrop of vacuous populist agendas in which democratic jargon serves as a smokescreen for national chauvinist aspirations. However, in contrast to McShine’s success in showing how art can serve as political critique, *Populism* remains unclear about how art might dismantle the illusion of political demagoguery. Amar Kanwar, an artist working with themes of conflict and exile in India, Burma and Nepal within the medium of film, had a similar question: ‘Would it not be possible to translate these aspirations for enlightenment not within the context of an international jamboree but to stage our resistance along the way through direct participation?’ Recognizing from the outset the project’s inability to dissipate the injustices it attempts to highlight, why do the curators remain faithful to the ‘reflexive critical potential

of artistic works and their idealistic activist potential?’ In an exploration of the rights, laws and rituals endemic to capitalist democracies in Europe, the curators neither demystify the regimes of populist politics in Europe nor convey a sense of how these political tendencies have been transmitted into art, other than simply by mirroring their agendas.

The curators of *Populism* express an aspiration to illustrate how the ‘affects and desires that characterize populist politics in art are not necessarily separate ones that find expression in the sphere of art’. The curatorial statement reads: ‘one finds dreams of direct democracy through immediacy of collective participation (the big nineteenth- and twentieth-century promise of art: that it could beam its pledge of togetherness across the arts, industry, and science to bring about a new social body).’ Despite the integrity of its intention, the project fails. It fails because it has neglected to understand that art, be it in the form of the literary movements of the nineteenth century or in the more critical works of today, is not about the formation of a new social body, but about the dissolution of the social body and the social bond. Political critique may involve illustrating what we already know, but it reveals the complexities of an apparent surface, and also of its apparent critique. This is best exemplified by an artist like Haroun Farocki, who uses montage and editing techniques to review documentary films in an effort to reveal how media depictions are fictional constructions. It is insufficient to reduce our understanding of a political work to a series of effects or even to ornament – as in the inflatable sign extolling **TERROR** produced by Dutch artist Marc Bijl, whose work was naively included in the exhibition, perhaps to illustrate how popular sovereignty unleashes a host of evils. Would it not be more effective, as someone from Oslo suggested, to screen footage from last summer’s Tour de France in which Lance Armstrong was spat at by hundreds of onlookers as he forged his way ahead through the crowds? In this sense, *Populism* is guilty of what Adorno called ‘premeditatively programmatic’ collectivity.

As an exhibition, *Populism* also succumbs to what Adorno identified as the tendency of all ‘isms’: ‘to emphasize conviction and intention, to expel the element of involuntariness from art’. The curators missed an opportunity to choreograph another kind of exhibition that would have reconfigured accepted cycles of representation. Why is it that Matias Faldbakken was asked to participate with a static wall painting, rather than to engage with his work as an author and satirist? In the critically acclaimed *Scandinavian Misanthropy 1 & 2: The Coca-Hola Company* and *Macht und Rebel*, written under the pen name Abo Rasul, Faldbakken sardonically approaches the culture industry and its modes of production to produce fictional satire



that merges image and text. In *The Coca-Hola Company*, a small pornographic enterprise serves as a base for anti-conformist political activity, and in *Macht und Rebel* a frustrated left-wing radical and an advertising executive share a disdain for countercultural movements and the mediocrity of the mainstream. In these and other written works, Faldbakken creates commonplace characters that cross over from literature into visual art to challenge the re-appearance of 'isms' in present-day cultural production.

For a recent exhibition entitled *START KAPITAL*, which dealt with the theme of bankruptcy in a newly opened commercial gallery – STANDARD (OSLO) – Faldbakken produced a newspaper with the masthead SEE YOU ON THE FRONT PAGE OF THE LAST NEWSPAPER THOSE MOTHERFUCKERS EVER PRINT. Following a logic of contradictions inherent to the existing social, economic and political order, the newspaper contains idiosyncratic articles such as 'Zero Tolerance: A Wave of Conceptual Vandalism', 'Read Between the Lines: In a Modern Way', 'Definition of Self: Microsoft on Microsoft', and 'Social Insects: The Police State/The Anarchic Syndromes of Bee Hives'. Through an interplay of images and signs, Faldbakken reconfigures the perceptual form of the newspaper by fabricating stories that abstract from the state of the world. As such, he enacts Rancière's vision of 'defin[ing] models for connecting the presentation of facts and forms of intelligibility that blur the border between the logic of facts and the logic of fiction'.

If there is one work in *Populism* that illustrates the relationship of populist politics to contemporary art, it is the video documentary by Nicolas Tremblay about a project realized by Thomas Hirschhorn at the Centre Cultural Suisse in Paris. *Swiss Swiss Democracy* is an exhaustive memory of an exhibition as a political statement against the state of affairs in the artist's home country – a protest against the election of Christoph Blocher to the Federal Council of Switzerland. Having refused to participate in any exhibitions in Switzerland, Hirschhorn used the opportunity to pose questions about the state of democracy, transforming the space of the exhibition into a forum mimicking the chaotic format of his previous installations to include a lecture by the philosopher Markus Steinweg and a play by the Gwenael Morin Company, based on William Tell, the mythological founder of Switzerland. The Swiss government, finding the initiative a misuse of state funds, cut approximately a million Swiss francs from the annual budget of Pro Helvetia, the foundation for visual art. At one level, Hirschhorn's project rendered transparent the aims of state funding agencies that support programming that promotes populist agendas. At another level, the documentary *Swiss Swiss Democracy* serves as both artwork and archive documenting how the space of exhibition can be transformed into a sphere of action which criticizes the funding mechanisms that serve to fuel the global tourism industry.

Although not itself a work of art *Be What You Want But Stay Where You Are*, an exhibition curated by Documenta curator Roger Buergel at Witte de Witte, attempts to show how art involves 'a set of actions that acts upon other actions'. It shares *Populism's* concern with government and models of community, but it articulates it more coherently. The works support a collective idea: they are less viable in their own right but function through their relations to one another. Resisting the temptation to make a grand statement about Europe, Buergel concentrates on creating a modest 'group portrait'. The presentation of works is formal and reductive, using strategies central to conceptualism's aesthetic regime. Resisting the formulaic tendency to discount matters of presentation for works that are socially and politically configured, Buergel concentrates on ways to re-engage 'art's capacity to act only through the aesthetic process'. The show departs from a Dutch group portrait from the so-called Golden Age, not just as an egalitarian model of community, but as a recasting of sensible form. Buergel proceeds to convey a 'space of art as a space of action' that is mute but effective in redirecting our attention back to content. A backlit slide projection, *Parallax*, by Andrea Geyer, revolving around themes of city, nationhood and citizenship, is particularly poignant. Like other works in the show, it approaches artistic practice, if not by refocusing on processes of production, then by entering the field of the political through aesthetic possibilities that prompt one to listen, rather than simply to watch.

Marta Kuzma

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