

# EDITORIAL

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## I

The institutionalization of intellectual debate, coupled with the generational deep-freeze on academic jobs, leaves us with departmentalized, introspective and, frequently, dull intellectual discourse within academia, and little at all outside of it.<sup>1</sup>

1. Thanks to Patrick Wright for discussion of this point.

*New Formations*, always willfully resistant to categorization, attempts to confront this situation by providing a forum for debates about contemporary cultural issues, in all their diversity, which are multi-disciplinary and forward looking. We seek to reflect and engender new formations of thought.

It is in this context that our 'maverick' journal has found a new 'home'; a home with a publisher not located purely within academic publishing, but nonetheless at the forefront of intellectual debate.

'Competing Glances', our first issue with Lawrence & Wishart, captures this multi-disciplinary critical focus. Articles on 'erotic' photography, rap music, silent movies, postmodern dance, German literature and Japanese culture ... a gloriously diverse agenda drawn together by a shared desire to explore aesthetic ambivalence, strategies of transgression and culturally disruptive forms of resistance.

## II

There is nothing wrong with provocative art. I hope to do something that will shock even myself.'

Andreas Serrano<sup>2</sup>

2. Sarah Kent, 'Mike Bildo, Manuel Ocampo, Andreas Serrano', Saatchi Gallery Catalogue 1992.

When it was declared in US Senate that Serrano's 'Piss Christ' was a 'deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity' and the catalogue of the exhibition torn up to add weight to the rhetoric, the censorship row had just begun. Twenty-five senators signed a letter protesting the funding of the show by the National Endowment of the Arts and the Robert Mapplethorpe retrospective, about to be shown at the Corcoran Gallery, Washington, was cancelled. That summer Jesse Helms, Senator for North Carolina, steered through legislation prohibiting the National Endowment from funding 'obscene or indecent' material. It is in this context that the first two contributors, Kobena Mercer and Jane Gaines, address the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and ask how we are to view these images.

Kobena Mercer addresses the aesthetic ambivalence in visual representation of the black male nude. An ambivalence which exists not inside the text but across the relations between authors, texts and readers. Do photographs like

'Man in a Polyester Suit' reinscribe the fixed beliefs of racist ideology or do they problematize them by foregrounding the intersections of sexuality? Mercer asks this question only to show that an unequivocal answer is impossible. The ambivalent positioning of the reader/viewer coupled with the possibility for contradictory readings derived from the text/image mean that all answers to such a question will be contextual. The photographs are open to a range of contradictory readings whose political character depends on the social identity that different audiences bring to bear on them.

Read contextually, argues Mercer – seen within the realities of contemporary urban gay culture – Mapplethorpe's work can be understood as a 'subversive recoding of the normative aesthetic ideal'. Thus, in the face of the postmodern assertion of the 'death of the author' Mercer claims that it really does matter who is speaking; and it matters because this is itself indicative of where power lies.

Jane Gaines also addresses the issues of whether these photographs are racist and echoes Mercer's argument in asserting that racism (and all other '-isms') lie not in the image, but in the offending social relations which form the interpretive context of the image. Transgression lies not in the image/the act/the text but in its reception. (For further discussion of what it is to transgress see Elizabeth Wilson's review of Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence*.)

In which context I refer to a recent article from the *TLS* entitled 'Viz: A Qualified Defence'. Arguing for the importance of normality and sanity Robert Grant finds time to be supportive of *Viz*, but states that Gilbert and George, Andreas Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe (unlike *Viz*) 'are not only utterly humourless, but also purely and gratuitously offensive. They have been defended, moreover, applauded even, by the "progressive" establishment ... Which is worse, the occasional outrageous holiday from good taste, or the self-righteous pomposities which mask a sinister, sustained assault on all taste, all decency and all value?'<sup>3</sup>

What for one person is a sustained assault on all taste, all decency, all value is for another an anti-canonical, counter-hegemonic form of resistance. Mapplethorpe's representation of taboo couplings, argues Gaines, act as an evocation of a triple transgression (of class, gender and race) and are therefore not surprisingly read as an assault on taste, decency and value for those who locate these within existing white male culture.

Couze Venn, unlike Robert Grant, finds evidence of no such 'sinister, sustained assault' on dominant cultural values. Indeed, he notes that strategies for action and resistance have become as disorganized as capitalism is argued to be. Yet, he argues, in the face of a deep-seated discursive alliance between logocentrism, phallocentrism and ethnocentrism, the need for the production of a 'counter-discourse' is strong. The problem for analysis, argues Venn, is not the existence of texts of oppression, but the development and diffusion of insurgent ways of reading them. This, then, is the claim of Jane Gaines reversed. Just as oppressive relations lie not in the image but in the reading of them, so radical readings can threaten to make any image culturally disruptive.

The desire for the development of 'counter-discourses' articulated within

3. Robert Grant, 'Viz: A Qualified Defence', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 February 1992.

Venn's piece, is further explored by Gregory Stephens in the context of rap music. Stephens' project is to reveal the extent to which rap music challenges traditional definitions of racial representation; in attempting to define racial boundaries, it simultaneously transgresses them. 'Conscious rap', an artform rooted in the discourse of 'black liberation', is nonetheless being adapted by increasingly multi-ethnic subcultures in order to develop 'imagined communities' that transcend racial and national boundaries. This is not an assimilationist stance but a celebration of hybridity. 'Call-and-response' rap may be a distinctly African American form of discourse but, claims Stephens, it is also well suited to the vernacular culture of an experimental democratic society.

Culturally disruptive forms of resistance need not of course be verbal, as the images of Mapplethorpe reveal so clearly. The next two pieces, by Jean-Jacques Lecerclé and Sandra Kemp (the latter originally given at a conference entitled 'Against the Word'), specifically focus on the non-verbal, on non-articulate communication: the silent movie and postmodern dance.

Jean-Jacques Lecerclé opens his piece with Walter Benjamin's assertion of the revolutionary primacy of silent movies and dismay at contamination of non-verbal arts by language. Whilst this statement might have appeared, throughout the 1960s and 70s, as simply a nostalgic longing for a past era, the current crisis of logocentrism, claims Lecerclé, means that the time has come to think again of the cinema outside linguistic models. So, lest we think that language has conquered the cinema for good, note the recent claim of David Mamet, director of *House of Games* and *Homicide*, that 'the perfect movie does not have any dialogue.'<sup>4</sup>

4. David Mamet, 'Cut to the Bone', in *The Guardian*, 13 February 1992.

This is of relevance to our concern with culturally disruptive forms of resistance in that the silence of silent movies is, according to Lecerclé, a locus for the deployment of instinctual drives, and hence likely to generate reactions which are uncontrollable (and, claims Benjamin, revolutionary). There are, argues Lecerclé, two levels of language – articulate and general. Silence is the medium of the general language; the script is the intermediacy of articulate language. The way out of logocentrism in the nonverbal arts is to concentrate not on verbal or articulate language, but on the language of the image.

This conclusion left me wondering how one might relate Lecerclé's thesis to Stephens' discussion of the radical potential of rap, and drew me to a consideration not of the language of rap, but its rhythm; not the lyrics, but the sounds. Which takes us back to Lecerclé and his claim that the 'language of the image, the language of silence ... is ecstatic but static. Articulate language, on the other hand, is garrulous but dynamic, an active process of translation, language bursting into song.' If articulate language represses, as Lecerclé claims, rhythmic language, maybe rap allows its expression.

1 Which moves us onto a discussion of dance and 'expressive arts' which are the focus of Sandra Kemp's piece. As with Lecerclé's silent movie one is, Kemp claims, less in control when watching or listening than when turning the pages of a book, which you can do in your own time. Dance, then, is a celebration of

'general language' over 'articulate language'; of the 'polymorphous pleasure of the body' over 'the adult pleasure of the analysis of the text'. Thus Emma Goldmann's celebrated assertion that 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution' takes on, in this context, a new meaning.

In Kemp's piece is also to be found a pursuit of, and celebration of, the 'competing glances' discussed by Gaines. 'As the narrative proceeds,' she says of the dance *Shelf Life*, 'we are forced to relinquish the relative security of a single vision, the desire to see it all.' For Kemp these competing glances are a democratization of the stage-space, just as, for Stephens, the competing voices of rap are the beginnings of a democratic discourse. 'We're talking here about a different kind of viewing, listening or reading, in terms of overlaps and discontinuities – the random aspects of the viewing process, the flickering of attention spans.' (Kemp)

### III

If the difficulty of composing a coherent individual identity, given the proliferation of images and versions of the self available, is a common one, it was particularly acute for T.E. Lawrence. Graham Dawson discusses the relationship between the Lawrence of Arabia Legend and the 'real' T.E. Lawrence. The more we read, the more the fantasy hero 'disintegrates into a multiplicity of competing identifications'. His attempt to attain a new identity quitted him of his English self; he dropped one form but could not successfully take on another. This, Lawrence himself recognized, 'let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes'.

Looking at the West and its conventions with new eyes can, however, be a product not just of individual angst, but also of societal change. A case in point is the re-evaluation of the work of Christa Wolf in particular, and German literary aesthetics in general, in the light of the demise of the communist regime of East Germany. This is the focus of Daglind Sonolet's contribution. Sonolet recounts the controversy over Wolf's work with a view to revealing the deep unease over standards of literary value. For, throughout the entire controversy, Sonolet shows, there has been an evident unwillingness to deal with Wolf's actual writing, to differentiate between personal morality and literary value.

This aesthetic ambivalence takes us back to Mercer's opening discussion of Mapplethorpe. For Sonolet argues that the great insecurity concerning standards of aesthetic judgment can be partially resolved by recognizing that 'literature cannot be reduced either to the varying associations made by the reading public, or to authorial intention, though both aspects are part of its essence. Literature is language, a social instrument of communication, and as such saturated with evaluation.' The novel, she claims, echoing previous arguments, makes this social aspect of language evident, 'where diverse social "voices" confront each other in unresolved dialogue.'

Finally, the West and its conventions are put into renewed focus by Kevin

Robins and Dave Morley in their exploration of Japan, and the ambiguity of its image in the West. For Japan, they argue, is calling Western modernity into question. Japan has come to exist within the Western political and cultural unconscious as a figure of danger, and it has done so because it has destabilized the neat correlation between West/East and modern/premodern. In short, Japan has successfully called into question the supposed centrality of the West as a cultural and geographical locus for the project of modernity. 'The postmodern era,' then, according to Robins and Morley, 'will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity.'

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