ELECTRIC SHADOWS

Gail Ching-Liang Low

Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, £25 cloth.
Chris Berry (ed), *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, British Film Institute, London, 1991, £10.95 paperback.

When *Yellow Earth* was released to considerable critical acclaim to be followed in quick succession by films such as *The Big Parade, Horse Thief, Red Sorghum, JuDou, The Story of Qiu Ju* and *Farewell My Concubine*, it seemed as if Chinese cinema had appeared out of nowhere to become an overnight sensation on the international art cinema circuit. Even now when directors' names such as Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou trip off the tongue in major cinematic retrospectives, comparatively few academic books have been published in English on Chinese Cinema. Paul Clark's *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949* and Chris Berry's expanded second edition of *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* go a considerable way to provide a much needed guide to the history of Chinese Cinema and the films of what has come to be known as the 'Fifth Generation'.

From the Communist Party's takeover in 1949, film was placed at the centre of the struggle for the remaking of Chinese society. Clark argues that in creating a national cinema, film proffered the chance of creating a 'new, mass, nationwide culture' for a country that was 'riven by divisions between regions, and among ethnic groups, classes, languages, and levels of development.' Given the technological complexity and the relatively high capital expenditure of the medium, film offered a 'standardized cultural artefact' which could be controlled from a centralized source. Where previously film had been more or less restricted to large cities, the creation of a national system for the production, censorship, distribution and projection of films was effected in the mid 1950s. The Central Film Management Bureau was established as a state institution soon after the Communist state came into being; films were circulated through regional film management companies which in turn set up distribution stations and projection teams. The vast network of projection teams sought to increase audiences; some teams served the army, government organs and large enterprises, other mobile crews operated in the countryside. Under the Film Bureau, a national Film Management Company in Beijing purchased films and supplied them to all nationalized cinemas. A licensing system was also set up requiring Film Bureau approval for all films for nationwide distribution, import and export. A Film Guidance Committee which also included filmmakers and figures from a literary and artistic background advised on distribution figures and on ideological and artistic

standards. Nationalization of film production was concluded in 1953 when the last of the privately owned studios was incorporated into the state enterprise. China's film school, the Beijing Film Academy, was formally opened in 1956 to train students in scripting, directing, acting, cinematography and aspects of film production.

Alongside institutional history, Clark locates two competing cultural inheritances: the Yan'an 'socialist' tradition and the May Fourth Shanghai-centred tradition. The former was associated with the 'nativist' worker-peasant-soldier (*gongnongbing*) and the wartime Communist Party headquarters in Yan'an); the latter, resolutely humanist, individualist and modernist in its 'self-conscious' rejection of Chinese elite literary tradition, was associated with an intellectual and cultural 'embracing of reformist, Westernized ideas'. Mao's famous talks in 1942 had initially set the stage for this opposition when he contrasted new socialist art with the May Fourth heritage. Mao stressed art's political function and the need to reach beyond the intellectual and urban middle-classes; 'workers in literature and art' should forge closer links with 'workers, peasants, soldiers, or even their cadres.' While Mao condemned simple political sloganizing, he also distrusted technical and artistic complexity. The appeal for wider audiences seemed to reinforce the need for simplicity and boldness in socialist art; 'insofar as a work is reactionary ... the more artistic it is the more harm it can do to the people and the more it should be rejected.' The Yan'an/May Fourth polarization is invoked again and again in the rhetoric of national cinema debates from 1949 and can be used as a metaphor to describe some of the contradictions and tensions within the industry. In the early years, the Yan'an spirit yielded 'socialist realism' modelled on Soviet cinema in the 1930s and 1940s and featured idealised stories of workers, peasants and soldiers and narratives of 'proletarian nobility'. In the relatively liberal late 1950s and early 1960s when the dependence on Soviet models was questioned, bureaucrats invented a new phrase, 'the combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism', which allegedly united the 'romanticism of native forms' which Mao approved of in Yan'an, with the 'realism' of the May Fourth literary movement. The Yan'an/May Fourth split was again invoked during the Cultural Revolution; film versions of 'revolutionary model performances' on stage passed as the cultural orthodoxy while films of artists, 'particularly with a Shanghai background in the 1930s and 1940s', were 'bourgeois' and labelled 'poisonous weeds'.

But Clark's survey is not only a narrative about uninhibited central control; he also charts the cultural battles over the meaning and function of art, staged by both the Communist Party officials and filmmakers during alternate periods of relative relaxation (the One Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956-7 and the second Hundred Flowers in the late 70s), and those of tightening restrictions (the Anti-Rightist Campaigns of 1957 and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76). Working against what Clark terms the simplistic 'presumption that each group was more monolithic and united than was actually the case', he also depicts the contradictions and resemblances between Party and cultural practitioners. His

re-reading of the maturation and sinification of modern Chinese cinema is at pains to address the negative and positive effects of these different periods. Written before the Tiananmen Massacre, Clark ends on an overly optimistic note with the success of *Yellow Earth*. *Chinese Cinema* is perhaps too ambitious for its brief survey and this may account for its somewhat fragmentary and repetitive impression; but Clark's work is a still a useful guide to the impact of political and cultural changes on filmmaking in Chinese society.

Perspectives on Chinese Cinema's collection of previously published essays provides a more intriguing discussion of textual and institutional practices in film and film historiography. It also provides a more specific focus on the Fifth Generation. Leo Ou-Fan Lee's discussion of the 'golden forties' presents a May Fourth inspired 'generic tradition' of 'critical realism' and an aesthetic legacy born out of the cross-fertilization of film and drama. Tony Rayns examines the rise of the iconoclastic Fifth Generation film directors against a backdrop of what previously passed as 'socialist realism'; Chris Berry looks at the economic pressures facing the Fifth Generation and their respective film studios in a market place where cinema competes with television and other leisure activities, and financial accountability takes over from the traditional rhetoric of art and education.

Berry's collection also offers specific readings of individual films. Yuejin Wang, Esther Yau, Chris Berry and Annette Kuhn address sexual difference in *Yellow Earth, Red Sorghum, Li Shuangshuang, The In-Laws* and *Army Nurse*. The complex and contradictory signifiers of gender in Chinese philosophy and literary traditions provide the context for a psychoanalytically inflected reading of *Red Sorghum*. In an analysis that ironically displaces gender even as it reconstitutes it, Wan argues that Zang Yimou's film 'despite its predominant male presence, articulates an all-embracing female subjectivity', and (in a re-reading of Jameson's national allegory) also 'mirrors what the actual [Chinese] cultural landscape lacks'. Esther Yau's excellent essay is a complex textual and historicist reading of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* which involves the interweaving of three distinct levels of signification: 'a diegetic level (for the construction of an enquiry about cultural and historical meaning), a critical level (for the disowning and fragmentation of the socialist discourses), and a discursive level (for the polyvocal articulations of and about Chinese aesthetics and feudalist patriarchy).' She argues that *Yellow Earth*'s criticism of patriarchal and feudal traditions is informed by the contemporary 'modernising' debates in China; hence, this avant garde text's 'modernist power of critique of Chinese culture and history comes from its subtextual non-critical proposition of capitalist-democracy as an alternative'. Berry's second essay and Kuhn's piece investigate the conflict between individual desire and duty to the state as it is foregrounded in specific films; Kuhn contends that a 'new self-conscious split between an evident but socially forbidden eroticism and romantic love and the subject's interpellation by the state' is manifested in new films by women directors. While Berry's analysis of spectatorial identification in *Li Shuangshuang* and *The In-Laws* yields an 'anti-individualistic aesthetic' where

gender identification only occurs at negative moments signifying crisis and transgression, Kuhn highlights the change in films such as *Army Nurse* and contends that from a Western feminist perspective, these films might come to represent an assertion of a specifically female subjectivity and desire which is previously left out of familial and state ideals. Overall, what is particularly admirable about *Perspectives* is that the problems of cross-cultural analysis and exchange are not glossed over but the collection's negotiations of Chinese film and theory and their western counterparts pay dividends.

HENRY MILLER IN NO-MAN'S LAND: A REVIEW OF RECENT CRITICAL BIOGRAPHIES

Caroline Blinder

Erica Jong, *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller*, Chatto and Windus, London 1993, £16.00 cloth.

Mary V. Dearborn, *The Happiest Man Alive: Henry Miller, A Biography*, Simon and Schuster, New York 1991, $24.95 cloth.

Robert Ferguson, *Henry Miller – A Life*, Hutchinson, London 1991, £18.99 cloth.

> ... this seemingly perpetual décalage between the writer and his work, the man and his product. I can't see why people dwell on this as much as they do, finding disappointment in either the man or his work. In life it seems so obvious, man has a more limited scope to the play of his many-faceted being. (Miller in a letter to Alfred Perles)

Miller himself knew of the possible pitfalls in mixing biographical data with literary analysis. If any one thing connects Miller's fiction, essays, and letters it is the acknowledged difficulty in trying to represent the truth by comparing fiction with real life. Although Miller classified *The Tropics* and *The Rosy Crucifixion*, his major trilogies, as Auto-Novels, it is a phrase which has yet to be unravelled in the cannon of increasingly popularized work on Miller.

The recent biographies, while trying to avoid sensationalism, exemplify in many ways a somewhat muddled outlook on how to deal with a writer whose persona is so intrinsically linked to the narrator of the Auto-Novels. While admitting that the information available through Miller's fiction concerning his personal life cannot always be taken at face value, the three new biographies nevertheless use Miller's fiction as source material. On the one hand, the reader is led to believe that these studies will take into account how the private life and personality of the creator/writer is masked in a conscious and deliberate attempt to create a manipulative and ambiguous authorial voice. On the other hand, the biographers also work from the premise that somewhere in the annals of Miller's own life lies a 'truth', and that the possibility of attaining it will be the key to understanding the ouvre of Henry Miller.

This is not to say that these biographers do not realize the possible pitfalls of their task, namely to show that Miller's work contains an aesthetic and literary value beyond the autobiographical representations. If this awareness were not so blatantly flaunted, their failure to actually shed any light on the enigma of Henry Miller the man and writer would not be obvious. Mary

Dearborn, Robert Ferguson, as well as Erica Jong fail to address the issue of biography as a mode of literary analysis and inevitably end up by either idolizing Miller as a prophet or criticizing him between the lines as male chauvinist writer.

All of these writers are influenced by the texts of Miller criticism: the radical feminist stance as set out by Kate Millett in her polemical and deeply influential text of 1969, *Sexual Politics*, and Norman Mailer's 1971 response *The Prisoner of Sex*. These two texts served to radicalize later attempts at serious critical work on Miller by setting up the dichotomy between the male chauvinist protagonist and his representation of obscenity and gender relations, which are then valued according to their political correctness rather than their literary merit. While one might assume that an author is no longer judged within such a simplistic framework, many American critics appear, at least in Miller's case, to value his literary accomplishment primarily in moral terms. No doubt the recent issue of censorship has radicalized the debate, but nevertheless Miller is not taught and little research on him is done within the walls of established academia.

Indeed, one of the first things Mary Dearborn does in her preface to *The Happiest Man Alive* is pay homage to the star feminist writer of the 1970s, Kate Millett, who among other things thought Jean Genet's homosexuality was an affront to womankind. Dearborn paraphrases Millett's famous conclusion on Miller from *Sexual Politics*: 'Miller does have something highly important to tell us; his virulent sexism is beyond question an honest contribution to social and psychological understanding which we can hardly afford to ignore ... to confuse this neurotic hostility, this frank abuse, with sanity, is pitiable. To confuse it with freedom were vicious, were it not so sad.'[1] Dearborn seems to agree and says: ' "Freedom" is hardly the word to use in conjunction with a world view as sexist as Miller's. In fact as Feminist critics have pointed out, he gave voice to certain male attitudes that reflect the deep sexual neurosis of twentieth-century American culture ' (p13). While both Millett and Dearborn acknowledge that giving voice to certain male anxieties about sexuality can be useful, the underlying sense is one of moral affront over the fact that Miller dared to describe male sexuality with a 'truly obscene ruthlessness toward other human beings'.[2]

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, Ballantyne Books, New York 1978, p412.

2. *Ibid*, p430.

As Dearborn proceeds to chart the life of Henry Miller, it becomes increasingly clear that her 'truth' is based on a highly simplistic Freudian reading of Miller's upbringing. In charting Miller's childhood, Dearborn posits that Miller's subsequent ambiguous relationships with women stem from the torment he suffered under his vicious mother and weak alcoholic father. Dearborn sees this as the major reason for Miller's love/hate relationships with women, embodied poignantly in his second marriage to June Edith Smith, and thus an essential re-enactment of his maternally imposed neurosis. Miller's subsequent strong friendships with other men, as well as his many marriages, fit in neatly with Dearborn's implication that homo-eroticism was a substitute for the frustrated Miller. If Dearborn had used her psycho-analytical reading

as an entry into Miller's mode of writing, perhaps using some of Miller's letters and essays on psychoanalysis, then perhaps her Freudian approach would have achieved a more convincing dimension. As it is, Dearborn appears all too often as the friendly doctor who somewhat patronizingly explains Miller's sexuality as a disease, and then excuses it because he himself was not fully aware of it. Overall, the gist of Dearborn's argument adds an ironic twist to the title of her book, a direct quote from the opening paragraph of *Tropic of Cancer*, which posits that in spite of his deep psychological troubles Miller was indeed 'The Happiest Man Alive'. If Dearborn is being sarcastic it is a point on which she does not elaborate.

The psycho analytical stance would not have been so pointless in Dearborn's case if it were evident that an overriding point lay behind it. However, Dearborn is both reluctant to take a distinctly politicized feminist approach *à la* Millett and also manages to leave the reader unsure of whether she sees Miller's writings as having any redeeming qualities from a literary perspective. This explains perhaps her somewhat lukewarm conclusion that while 'his almost uncanny knack for staying out of step with his own times needs to be acknowledged' ... he stands out primarily 'as a scathing indictment of the way American society treats its iconoclastic artists' (p311). Not only does Mary Dearborn contradict her own preface where she stresses the fact that Miller embodies his own times and voices a contemporary male point of view, but she indirectly describes the very shortcomings of her own thesis. By treating what she calls an iconoclastic artist, without dealing in any detail with his art, she proves her own pessimistic point about America treating artists from a solely biographical viewpoint. By stressing Miller's personal life without connecting it in any literary or historical fashion with the very institutions and existing beliefs which surrounded him, Mary Dearborn in another sense, loses the very perspective which she praised Kate Millett for having.

Robert Ferguson's biography of Henry Miller titled simply *A Life* is less dogmatic in its approach and sets out to chart as accurately as possible his movements and friendships whilst keeping a reverent, although at times somewhat apologetic, outlook on Miller. In both the preface and conclusion to the book, Ferguson seems inclined towards a more critical outlook on the fiction itself, but unfortunately his insights are minimal as he seems fearful of moving out of straight biography. In fact, Ferguson acknowledges from the very beginning that although: 'The investigation of a man who turned himself into a myth might seem to cry out for "psychobiography"; yet there are good reasons for not placing too heavy a reliance on a rigidly methodological approach to Miller's life and personality' (p14). Ferguson's comment shows an awareness of the importance of myth-making as part and parcel of Miller's work, both in his fiction as well as in his more personal correspondence which Ferguson stresses as his main source material. The use of myth as well as self-awareness on the part of the author serves to make the events described by Miller suspect as far as any absolute 'truth' is concerned. Ferguson points to the fact as well, that Miller himself was 'familiar with all the basic ideas put forward by Freud on the role of hidden motivation in human behaviour' (p14).

Sadly, Ferguson's few insights into Miller the writer rather than Miller the man, are not pursued throughout the book but only reappear briefly in his conclusion where a brief overview of the polemical nature of some earlier Miller criticism is given. Ferguson is however careful not to interject his own opinion as to which side of the polemic, if any, he is on. What stands out significantly in Ferguson's book is precisely that he does not dwell on any of Miller's literary influences in particular. In spite of the fact that Ferguson wrote a book on Knut Hamsun, a writer Miller acknowledged as a main influence,[3] Ferguson only points briefly at some of the episodes within Hamsun's *Hunger* (1888) which may have inspired Miller to cast himself in the role of the starving artist in the metropolis. This is a pity, not only because the connection has not been dealt with in any previous studies, but because it seems to show a lack of sensibility to the potential for a deeper contextual look at Miller's writing. Ferguson is thorough in giving the reader information on Miller's reading habits, but refrains from any close textual analysis which may prove fruitful in substantiating connections rather than just claiming that Miller's own writing must have been influenced thematically by what he read, as though this were a necessary given. As Dearborn and Ferguson set out to fulfil their destinies as biographers, they tend to excuse as a necessary evil the need to take some of Miller's personal life as described in his fiction at face value. They do this as though it were the only way in which to close his life, as it were, without having too many unresolved issues and open endings. But, there is another and infinitely more harmful approach which takes the polemics and ideologies presented in Miller's fiction at face value. To a large extent Erica Jong's *The Devil At Large* falls into this category. In *The Devil At Large*, Erica Jong promises to sort out the truth about Henry Miller, much in the same way that Norman Mailer set out to redeem Miller in the 1970s.

3. 'And then there is this curious business about Knut Hamsun. The one writer I started out to write like, to be like.... No one has ever remarked on it, after reading me. How do you explain that?' Miller in a letter to Lawrence Durrell published in *Art and Outrage*, Village Press, London 1973, p27.

Erica Jong's book, although seemingly well-intentioned, manages to set itself firmly within a no-man's and women's land of part apology and idolatry when she uses her own personal experiences as a writer to identify her craft with that of the master – namely Henry Miller. Jong sets out to be brutally honest about the very special relationship she feels that she has with Henry Miller, whom she befriended immediately after her own career was launched with *Fear of Flying* (1973). Her second priority is to write a treatise on the dismal attitude of her contemporaries concerning sexual freedom and their refusal to acknowledge the writer as truth-sayer and prophet. As she herself poetically puts it: 'Henry Miller was a lifegiver, a spiritual teacher, as much as he was a writer, and people turned to him and his books, to be reminded in the prison of their days (as Auden would say) how to be free men and how to praise' (p7). By praising Miller, Jong hopes to convince people that what Miller advocated was sexual freedom, not hate. By calling him in no uncertain terms 'the prophet of a new consciousness' (p39). Jong seems unconcerned with a concession which she, much like Mary Dearborn, feels the necessity to make: 'Millett is out to prove that Miller is not "liberated" but that he is enslaved – and surely she is right in this' (p193).

This crucial contradiction is never resolved by Jong as she then proceeds to claim that the feminists have in fact misunderstood Miller. Jong, much like Mailer, sees Miller rather as a 'true sexual revolutionary'[4] and connects his insistency on the physical and erotic with his later essays on pacifism and transcendence through universal love. The fact that many of these essays were written after the Second World War, nearly ten years after Miller had made his name with *Tropic of Cancer* and *Capricorn* does not prevent Jong from claiming that 'Miller's self-liberation is sexual in the cosmic, not the genital sense' (p229). Perhaps so, but Erica Jong insists upon taking this enormous step on her own, from the purely physical to the cosmic, without using any outside commentary or analysis. The point could perhaps have been made successfully if Jong had been willing to chronicle the step by using specific examples of Miller's work on sexuality. Instead, she insists upon always using her own private view of the world and its hang-ups as the stepping stone towards conclusions which inevitably stress Erica Jong's own redemption through her friendship with Miller, rather than the issue of redemption on a larger scale in Miller's actual work.

4. *The Prisoner of Sex*, Primus, New York 1971, p102.

Indeed the fact that this is something strictly between her and Miller is accentuated throughout the book which spends nearly fifty of its three hundred pages on the letters between her and Miller, consisting primarily of the two priasing each other's work, and on an imaginary dialogue between Jong and the ghost of Miller, where he tells her to, as it were, keep up the good work. Not only do the letters appear almost silly in their attempts at presenting Miller as a benign Santa Claus figure, but they belittle the scope and complexity of Miller's own writing which was filled with moments of anxiety as well as joy. In fact Jong, in what she believes to be true Millerian fashion, nearly claims that only she has truly understood what the great man tried to say. 'And since I believe in the universal law by which circles get completed, I find it not at all odd that it falls in part to me to puzzle out the many contradictions of his posthumous reputation' (p46). If Jong sets out to complete the circle by refuting much of the feminist critique, she fails in solving the puzzle itself by stressing Miller's writings as essentially prophetic rather than artistically complex.

Jong's continued use of assertion rather than analysis and argument completely skirts such issues for example as the use of the obscene on a political as well as historical level. Interestingly, a hint is given by Jong's paraphrasing of Simone de Beauvoir's essay on Marquis De Sade, as she calls one chapter 'Must We Burn Henry Miller?'. Once again, she digs her own hole by asserting at the end of the chapter: 'Shall we burn Miller? Better to emulate him. Better to follow his path from sexual madness to spiritual serenity' (p212). Surely, in reference to De Sade, Jong does not assume that De Beauvoir advocated that we emulate the sadistic practices of *One Hundred And Twenty Days of Sodom*? Perhaps she refers to the banning of obscene books? Jong does critique the advent of censorship in America, but she never defines her own ground-rules as to what constitutes obscenity. Surely she does not see Miller's obscenity as no more than an attempt at radicalizing eroticism? Jong in this context is perhaps

the biographer out of the three who never questions to what extent Miller's personal problems affected his writings psychologically. On the other hand, she spends so much time in adulation of Miller's 'wisdom', that she never gets around to explain exactly why Miller's attitude towards sex is possible and profitable for contemporary women. If Miller indeed advocated sexual freedom, how then does Jong envision we live with it?

With this in mind, the psycho-biographical mode of analysis becomes increasingly suspect, as one realizes the enormous changes in Miller's style and thematic interests from his early to his late work. Once again, Millett and Dearborn must skirt the issue in order for them to claim any consistency in Miller's narrative consciousness. Assuming that Miller is consistently uninterested in understanding women as individuals in their own right, Dearborn and Millett describe Miller's sexual angst as that of a victim of patriarchal ideals, of a machismo which they describe in Freudian terms as though this in itself were not a dubious practice in feminist terms. Such analysis partly relies on a view which posits that within patriarchy men are allowed a puerile and immature attitude towards women as objects to be played with. This somewhat patronizing attitude serves not only to emasculate the male writer but also in a sense lessens the fact that he has achieved some sense of moral obligation towards his craft, by casting him in the role of the disobedient boy who has not (conscious) sense to know better. Problematic in itself, such a notion also conflicts with Jong's focus on Miller's later work, which she implies is somehow more advanced than his early fiction. A sense is given that Miller had to write 'out' his virulent hostility in the early fiction in order to reach the pinnacle of prophetic wisdom in his later years. The fact that most serious critics of Miller consider his early work far better than his later essays is not something that she wishes to comment on.

The underlying distance between Miller's early fiction and later ideology, as posited by Jong, seems to imply that one cannot be responsive to Miller's creative and artistic methods whilst being alienated by his intrinsically masculine ideology. In this respect, Jong's book about Miller deserves to be recognized for having the courage to spell out the incongruity between a feminist desire for liberation from the social conventions of patriarchy i.e. sexual conformity, and their unfailingly prudish attitude which desires a 'clean' and acceptable Miller. Having taken authorial control away from Miller via their insistency on deeper psychological motives as governing his texts, they also want him to be morally and politically correct. Because much of the work on Miller is troubled by the poetic intensity and complexity of his metaphysical introspections when contrasted with the sexual and physical action, it seems a pity that psycho-biography and sloppy analysis is set up to replace both the questions and answers which need to be asked concerning these issues. Now that Miller's two first manuscripts have been published, *Crazy Cock* (1992) and *Moloch* (1992), allegedly uncovered by Dearborn, there is an over-abundance of material which could be used for a more contextual look at why Miller still presents himself as such an enigma. Unfortunately, if the recent biographies

are any indication, as long as the prevailing attitude is stuck between the two binaries of the wise prophet and the psychologically conditioned male chauvinist, there is much work to do.

JUDGE DREAD

Andrew F. Wilson

Andrew Benjamin (ed), *Judging Lyotard*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, £35.00 cloth; £10.99 paperback.

Julian Pefanis, *Heterology and the Postmodern: Bataille, Baudrillard, and Lyotard*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 1991, £28.50 cloth; £13.95 paperback.

Like a long-running soap opera the trials and tribulations of the 'Great Postmodern Debate' continue apace: the stories/discourses grow evermore complex and convoluted; subplots take on a life of their own and develop into spin-off series; its place in the schedules has waxed and waned; and characters come and go. Throughout all of this Jean-François Lyotard has remained an integral figure.

It is now fifteen years since the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*[1] and ten since its English translation; discussion around it continues and Lyotard's oft-quoted remark regarding an incredulity towards metanarratives has become a ubiquitous watchword of many an understanding of postmodernity. So it is that in both books under review here the thought of Lyotard plays a central role (unsurprising, given the prominence of his name in each title).

1. First published in France in 1979, published in English as *The Postmodern Condition*, tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984.

In Julian Pefanis' *Heterology and the Postmodern* he, Lyotard and Baudrillard, are the (post)modern progeny of George Bataille's notion of the heterogenous. Put very simply the heterogeneous is the realm of experience excluded by the homogeneous. The homogeneous being the workaday world in which everything is geared towards production, utility and efficiency; the heterogeneous is thus the zone of nonproduction: the emotions, the sensuous, death, the arts and so on. Bataille, influenced in part by Mauss' theories of societies based on ritual destruction of excess production and Kojève's rereading of Hegel, postulated that the heterogeneous provided a position from which an effective critique of the homogeneous may be commenced. Pefanis suggests that this leaves us in a similar position to that of Nietzsche, investigating reason from a site of unreason: heterology.

It is in this zone that Pefanis aligns the thoughts of Baudrillard and Lyotard; for just as Baudrillard sees Symbolic Exchange as excluded from the relationship between Economic Exchange Value/Use Value and Signifier/Signified, Lyotard sees *les petits différends* as excluded by the rationale of the metanarratives. Pefanis thus sees them both in a similar position to Bataille in that they privilege these terms as he does the heterogeneous, and from the positions offered by these terms seek to contest the hegemony of the

homogeneous (Bataille), the political economy of the sign (Baudrillard), and the terrors of the metanarratives (Lyotard).

It would of course be a mistake to conflate the works of these three and Pefanis does not do so, instead he extrapolates the points at which their thought converges. This he does skilfully and with an intimacy with their work, having co-translated works by both of them.[2] He attempts to draw them together as *agents provocateurs* who endeavour to expose and practice 'an indeterminacy and a disintegration of the certainties and positivities of so-called theoretical thought – radically questioning the function of criticism and the role of writing and art, and the very position of the other in Western thought' (p101).

2. J-F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, tr. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, Power Institute of Fine Arts, Sydney 1986 & Jean Baudrillard, *The Revenge of the Crystal*, tr. J Pefanis and Paul Foss, Pluto, Sydney 1990.

There is a problem, however, in dancing with the heterogeneous, and that is that it threatens to spill out into an open relativism akin to the code of the hashshashin: 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted.' And it is this relativism that seems to inform the central theoretical force behind both books reviewed here. Pefanis seeks to explore this drift towards nihilism in the light of Freud's hypothesis of the death drive, a suggestion I shall return to later. In Benjamin's book the emphasis is on the implications this potentially nihilistic line of thought in Lyotard has for forms of judgement, especially in the light of metanarratival absence – the lack of a firm unified position from which judgement can consistently be called. Judgement has thus become heavily problematized – plurality and indeterminacy pervade, denying any fixed and universal exemplars from which judgement may be readily determined. This suggests a problem for critical theory: how is it to have purchase on a surface which problematizes cohesion, or even interaction? Is it fated to the role of someone caught on an iceflow slowly breaking up, leaping desperately from one fragment to another?

Essentially, this is the problem which informs Andrew Benjamin's choice of essays in the collection *Judging Lyotard*. Each essay is involved with examining the relationship between the work of Lyotard and questions of judgement and, whilst this may at first sound quite a grave proposition, the diversity of the areas covered by the essays makes for an entertaining read.

Whilst Lyotard is central throughout (indeed, an essay of his, 'Sensus Communis', is featured) the tangents offered by his work allows the writers featured to investigate much new ground. The texts discussed in this review are not necessarily representative of the collection as a whole, although themes such as the political and modernity do recur frequently. In addition to those discussed here, essays by Anne Baron, Richard Beardsworth, Geoffrey Bennington and John Keane are included. Both Beardsworth and Keane analyse the political possibilities offered by Lyotard's work. Beardsworth's complex critique of Lyotard's work on judgement focuses on the limits of Lyotard's conception of politics and the ramifications this has for political judgement, whilst Keane's essay offers an attempt to locate Lyotard within the democratic tradition, drawing on the work of Alexis de Tocqueville in particular. Anne Baron's piece has a similar air to it, making an inquiry into the

significance that the différend between Lyotard and John Rawls has for subjectivity. An intricate and ingenious reading of Pierre Corneille's play *Horace* by Geoffrey Bennington in '"Ces Petits Différends": Lyotard and Horace' proposes that within the question of judgement there lies a further question: how is judgement to be judged?

The problem of finding a cohesive position from which judgement can be made which is not implicated in the terror of the metanarratives, as identified by Lyotard, is described succinctly in Bill Readings' chapter 'Pagans, Perverts or Primitives? Experimental Justice in the Empire of Capital.' This examines the problems of justice raised by Werner Herzog's film *Where the Green Ants Dream*. The film focuses on the conflict between an Australian mining company and a group of Aborigines whose land the company wants to mine. The Aboriginal belief system (or their narrative) holds that mining the land the company wishes to excavate will disturb the dreaming of the green ants and hence bring an end to the(ir) universe. After various (failed) attempts by the mining company to entice the aborigines from the land with material 'gains', the dispute is taken to the Supreme Court. It is here – although not exclusively here – that the problem of not only justice, but also communication between incommensurable narratives is most striking.

In court the Aborigines are effectively silenced by the republican declaration of a consensual egalitarian community. That is, this building of community is to be 'established in its suppression of difference and the revelation of our common humanity that underlines our various cultural and racial "clothes"' (p175); any divergence beyond this community, any difference, by Readings' implication, falls outside of 'common humanity' and is not to be tolerated as human. This is the fate of the Aborigines in the Supreme Court, for whilst in its attempt to be 'fair', the court gives the Aboriginal community an opportunity to relate their narrative, they find themselves mute; but not simply through speaking a different language. Their narrative, though announced, is not received as it is too radically different to the narrative of the court and state to be conceptualized within their narratival framework.

The Aborigines thus exist beyond the totality of 'common humanity' that is republican Australia and as such do not exist as humans in its eyes. From this position it becomes easy to see the attraction of Lyotard's call to 'wage a war on totality':[3] the 'totality' being exemplified by the assimilatory urge which simultaneously promotes the 'we' of the total whilst smothering the voices of those without. But the problem I mentioned above remains: how may judgement or communication be possible between one heterogeneous island-language game and another? Without over-arching 'grand theories' to 'unite' us, are there still points at which humanity may enjoy shared experiences.

3. J-F. Lyotard, *op.cit.* (1984), p82.

Thus we find Lyotard engaging with Kant and the search for a *Sensus Communis*. In 'Sensus Communis', Lyotard's essay in the Benjamin collection, we find Lyotard interrogating Kant's 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgement'.

particularly Kant's suggestion that 'taste can with more justice be called a sensus communis that can sound understanding ... [w]e might even define taste as the faculty of estimating what makes our feeling in a given representation *universally communicable* without the mediation of a concept.'[4] That is, following Lyotard's interpretation, the moment of the recognition of beauty (taste) – and it is just momentary, 'synchronic' in Lyotard's words – is a moment of harmony between the faculties, prior to understanding, to being assimilated by concept. This harmony, by dint of its being preconceptualized, Lyotard sees as being all the more communicable: through its disinterestedness any potentially conflicting interests (e.g. political) are sub-navigated. Thus Lyotard is in a position to describe the feeling of taste as natural in that it is the ' "natural" destination of the faculties to subjectivity' (p20) prior to mediation by local concepts. From here Lyotard suggests that taste can be described as universal by dint of its naturalness: to be natural aesthetic pleasure must be potentially shared by everyone, which, before local conceptualization, it necessarily is.

4. I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, tr. J.C. Meredith, Clarendon, Oxford (1928) 1952, p153.

Now, as Lyotard notes, this reflexive judgement of the beautiful, by circumventing the closure threatened by concept offers a position from which resistance and counter-discourses may be mounted. And herein lies the strength that Lyotard sees in Avant-Garde and non-representational art, the representing of there being something unpresentable; unpresentable in that it is 'inexplicable in at least the sense that it cannot be rationally articulated' as he describes it elsewhere.[5] Now, in the construction of this region free of the terrors of assimilation by conceptualizations there is offered the hope of an escape from such totalizing practices; more importantly, there is offered a location from which a critique of the institutions prompted by such practices may be mounted.

5. Willem van Riejan and Dick Veerman, 'An Interview with Jean-François Lyotard', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol.5, no.2-3, June 1985, p285.

David Ingram, in his essay 'The Postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and Lyotard' suggests quite plausibly that problems arise here: given that each aesthetic judgement (the recognition of beauty etc.) is synchronic, then no prescriptive judgement is possible as each new judgement will require a fresh definition of the beautiful; inscribed in this is the suggestion that this indeterminacy, this plurality is 'the rule' for judgement. Secondly, by virtue (!) of its very indeterminacy judgement cannot have recourse to any stable 'truth' from which to judge, as was noted above. Ingram offers responses to both problems; the first he draws from Lyotard's metaphor of justice as a ship constantly sailing between the islands of the archipelago of heterogeneous narratives (in *Le Différend* (1983)), suggesting that judgement does not seek to regulate the differends. Instead it strives to extricate them by heeding the calls of the weaker party (i.e. in Readings' essay, the Aborigines) over the droning roar of the stronger's total strategies (in Readings, the republic). Thus, rather than aspiring to reconcile the disputing parties as might be expected were Lyotard espousing a metanarrative of judgement, what is presented instead is a notion of justice which serves to represent the inadequacy of any prescriptive, regulatory justice and the terror that would be unleashed by such a 'total judgement'. Judgement it is therefore suggested, must become contingent.

Again, the response to the second problem can be espied in this notion of justice, as any recourse to truth would necessarily shift the emphasis of judgement away from 'the weaker party' and onto the stronger narrative from whence 'the truth' emerges.

The notion of a contingent justice also occurs in Emilia Steuerman's essay 'Habermas vs Lyotard: Modernity vs Postmodernity': 'Lyotard stresses the need for the invention of new rules – how, for instance, Aristotle's judge is a good judge precisely because he does not rely on a theory or models. This is, however, not espisteme: it is techne, it is art' (p113). In this way, for Steuerman, postmodernity becomes the radicalization of modernity in its rejection of modernity's epistemes on which preconceived notions of justice were based (the metanarratives). Instead, it provides the scope to deal afresh with each narratival conflict in its contingency. (A point which Lyotard, with whom Steuerman concurs, seems tired of reiterating, 'I have said and will say again that "postmodern" signifies not the end of modernism, but another relation to modernism.'[6]) I say partial because in Steuerman and Lyotard's assertion that the postmodern be seen as a kind of rebirthing of modernity there does appear to be a resurrection of the monotheistic: a Jesus for modernity as God. Of course this runs contra to Lyotard's championing of the plurality implicit in paganism. Where I think such a pessimistic conclusion can be avoided is in the difference between a 'radicalization' and 'another relation to', for where radicalization suggests a renewed fundamentalism (the christ scenario), 'another relation to' implies a shift in emphasis; a change in which modernity can no longer be the dominant but rots down to become the manure heap which feeds the fimicolous plant of postmodernity.

6. Van Riejan and Veerman, *op.cit.*, p277.

However, it is at this point that the problems of an 'anything goes' relativism return once more; are we to uphold every micronarrative no matter what its implications are? In order to transgress the homogeneous must we succumb to the imperative 'Transgress!' Thereby constructing an ordered zone in which the efficiency of the heterogenous becomes a homogenizing norm.

In this light it is instructive to examine Pefanis' employment of the death instinct. His use of the death drive is difficult and, perhaps a little brief (although, as he admits, to address its implications for postmodernity would require another book – a shame he did not make this one a little longer). Whilst he identifies the indeterminacy Lyotard (and Lacan) celebrate in the concurrence of both Eros and Thanatos in 'a drive-machine'[7] he does not utilize the equal indeterminacy to be found in the death drive itself. Whilst acknowledging that Freud sees the stasis of compulsive repetition as a manifestation of the death instinct, he prefers to limit the death drive to an unambiguously destructive role. In this he aligns himself with Baudrillard's (simulated?) embracement of death and destruction, in which Baudrillard quests after the 'smashing not only the objective mirror of political economy but also the inverted psychic mirror of repression, of the unconscious and the libidinal economy',[8] which for Pefanis are 'mirror figures which obscure the truth of the absence of truth' (p114). The problem which arises here

7. J-F. Lyotard, 'The Tensor', tr. S. Hand in Andrew Benjamin (ed), *The Lyotard Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p10.

8. Jean Baudrillard, *L'Echange symbolique et la mort*, Gallimard, Paris 1979, 242. Translated and quoted in Pefanis, *op.cit.*, p114.

results from the absence of 'the other side' of death: the return to a stable state, stasis.

This stasis can be nothing other than a realm of homogeneity, the ultimate levelling of the field. In this case, if the death drive is to be engaged with, then it is as an active process rather than the closure Pefanis' reading entails. By 'keeping the death drive alive' in this way, then the effervescent indeterminacy of its liaison with Eros may be maintained. Thus may it continue to contribute to the energies of the heterogeneous, rather than circling back into homogeneity.

A practical example of the advantages of maintaining such a tension as that between Thanatos and Eros is raised by Paul Crowther's essay in Benjamin's book, '*Les Immatériaux* and the Postmodern Sublime'. He collapses the hullabaloo of incessant technoscientific innovation (the constant cyclic repetition of the death drive) and the contingent reiteration of the unpresentable (the sensual 'now' of Eros) into the same sense of indeterminacy in order to politicize the sphere of art. He maintains that this, whilst antagonistic to Lyotard's differentiation between the two, is consistent with the foregrounding of micronarratives: '[a]re not, for example, feminism, the anti-nuclear movement and Green politics all embodiments of an incredulity towards the patriarchal and alienated grand narratives of superpower politics? Are they not, thus, on Lyotard's own terms, exemplars of postmodernity?' (p199).

By locating these micronarratives beyond the realm of the productive and in that of the heterogeneous, Crowther contends that rather than being forced to compete in the terms of 'superpower politics' – efficiency, the truth of power and so on – they will instead, 'provide an incentive for cultivating and deepening such awareness that might otherwise be lacking' (p203). That Crowther's interpretation of Lyotard's reading of the sublime is not wholly consistent with what Lyotard appears to have in mind should not matter in this case as his (re)interpretation is faithful to Lyotard's logic. Indeed by situating the indeterminacies of technoscience and art in such close association he reiterates the affinity (and I strive to avoid using 'dialectic tension' to describe this affinity in order to evade the metanarratival political position it implies) between the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, the law and its transgression.

But where does this leave us with judgement and, for that matter, with postmodernity? For this question remains: from whence does Lyotard speak in condemnation of Auschwitz as the terror which terminated modernity, or the terrors meted out by the metanarratives? Whilst Lyotard may well refute the claims that modernity was ever capable of delivering the freedom it evoked the name of ('human history as a universal history of emancipation is no longer credible'),[9] he himself invokes, through his condemnations, a concern and demand for freedom. It is not, however, the same freedom for it does not proclaim itself in the name of 'We the people', an 'us' to the exclusion of 'them': a common humanity which nominates its outside as inhuman (as is the fate of the Aborigines in *Where the Green Ants Dream*). This sense of freedom is a

9. J-F. Lyotard, 'Universal History and Cultural Differences', in Benjamin 1989, *op.cit.*, p316.

reworking of the freedom modernity appealed to in that it is, in a way, universal, but a heterogeneous universality rather than homogeneous. From here it is possible to see the new relationship with modernity that postmodernity offers. Lyotard: 'the "post" of "postmodern" does not signify a movement of repetition but a procedure in "ana –": a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an "initial forgetting".'[10] Anamorphosis indeed: the past must be looked back on in order to reshape it into a form more suited to current sensibilities. To break free from it, it has to be interfaced with, its failings understood and learnt from. Only then can we look forward with confidence.

10. J-F. Lyotard, 'Note on the Meaning of "Post-" ' in Thomas Docherty (ed), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead 1993, p50.