

EDITORIAL

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Every epoch not only dreams the next, but while dreaming impels
it towards wakefulness.

Walter Benjamin

Although no single theme unites the essays collected in this issue of *new formations*, they usefully bring together a series of reflections on the role of contemporary critical theory, its limits and its possibilities. Engaging with the idiosyncrasies of individual texts and practices - including the analysis of daydreams, the culture of sun tanning, and the tourist's gaze - the authors identify some of the key points of difficulty in current theory formation: the compromising tropes that activate theory, the conflation of Otherness and Difference, or the commodification of blackness - all the way through to what Simon Wortham calls the 'dead metaphors' that continue to haunt the horizons of criticism, calling the work of theory into question. On one side there are dreams, on the other phantasms, and beyond these ethereal domains the struggle for new beginnings, or, at least, provisional positions.

Dreams have often provided the originary moment of critical theory, an imaginary summons to clarification or self-understanding. So, in his early journalism, Marx (1844) insisted that the true impetus for political criticism lay in 'the fact that one makes the world aware of its consciousness, that one awakens the world out of its own dream, that one *explains* to the world its own acts'.¹ And, in somewhat similar vein, Walter Benjamin claimed at the close of his classic study of 'Paris - the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1935) that 'the utilization of dream-elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thought', the interpretative model for future social and cultural developments, the royal road out of the political unconscious.² By contrast, the dreams under scrutiny in this volume - whether dreams of theory or dreams of empire, the dream-texts of cinema or the theory of dreams - do not appear to yield the hope of a simple reawakening, but gesture rather to the unease which the practice and responsibility of criticism seem increasingly to invoke.

For a demonstration of the dissonances that theorists ignore at their peril, consider Freud's *Traumdeutung*. Rachel Bowlby shows how Freud's rhetorical blurring together of darkness and dreams is at the same time closely articulated with a strict separation between day and night to produce a hermeneutics of depth whose imagery effectively pervades and structures the entire psychoanalytic *oeuvre*. Moreover, these precarious distinctions are implicated in and supported by a wider cultural poetics, contrasting the sublime mystery of Greek tragedy with the insipid daydreams of everyday life, as reproduced in the modern novel. Yet, as Wendy Wheeler suggests in her discussion of

1. Karl Marx, 'An Exchange of Letters', in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (eds), Doubleday, New York 1967, p214.

2. Walter Benjamin, 'Paris - Capital of the Nineteenth Century' in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, Verso, London 1976, p176.

Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, the novel's engagement with the indignities and deprivations endured within ordinary lives provides a necessary antidote to the hidden psychoses of late modernity, especially where these find their expression in the symbolic overvaluation of the father, a political and ideological tendency whose final form may be fascism.

The relationship between critical theory and common culture receives a different treatment in Michael Pickering and Keith Negus's essay on the aesthetics of popular music. In the first extended discussion of Simon Frith's *Performing Rites*, Pickering and Negus argue that what is most distinctive about this latest work, namely its sustained focus on the question of cultural value, ultimately produces the least satisfactory arguments. Popular aesthetics are rendered opaque, suspended uncertainly 'between the subjective and the social', the collective and the imaginary. In his reply Frith defends a more exploratory use of theory, privileging 'imagination' over 'understanding', and argues that 'to describe culture properly is to make it more mysterious (not less)'. At stake here is not just a disagreement concerning the appropriate scope of theory, but also about the nature of the connections that govern the interdisciplinary traffic between different possible paradigms. How contemporary theory might survive, let alone flourish, under these turbulent conditions, is the central topic of Simon Wortham's discussion of the implications of Derrida's recent work for interdisciplinarity.

The remaining essays focus upon imperial and post-imperial matters. Laura Chrisman provides a critical evaluation of recent accounts of imperial culture by three of our foremost theorists - Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, and Gayatri Spivak - looking particularly at the way in which their deployment of spatial categories impacts upon the discussion of 'imperial structures of feeling and aesthetics'. In a complementary essay, Benita Parry turns to H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* (1909) - perhaps his finest, yet also his most problematic text - and dissects the novel's extraordinary cultural panorama: from a boy's eye view in the servant's quarters of a great English country house to the 'steamy fogs' and 'vegetable decay' of Africa, the story of a self-made millionaire and of radioactive earth, ending in 'formless' thoughts plagued by 'doubts and dreams that have no words', a kind of imperial haunting.³ Nicholas Daly's study of Neil Jordan's films restores a much-overlooked context to the director's work, that of 'the intimate colonial encounter' whose roots can be traced back to eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish romance. Reading *The Crying Game* against the background of Jordan's other recent films, Daly explores the effects of transposing these national-political narratives into the voyeuristic and fetishistic medium of cinema. Maureen Moynagh's essay also deals with neo-colonial encounters in her retrospective on the writing and photography of Nancy Cunard, looking at the occluded relationship between blackness and whiteness in her work, lending 'a genuine ambivalence' to the records of her tourist gaze - an ambivalence that was later turned back upon her by the quizzical title of Henry Crowder, her black lover's memoir of their association. *As Wonderful As All That?*⁴ Finally, Sara Ahmed brings the resources of

3. H.G.Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, Bryan Cheyette (ed), Oxford University Press, New York 1997, pp349, 420.

4. Henry Crowder, *As Wonderful As All That? Henry Crowder's Memoir of his Affair with Nancy Cunard 1928-1935*, Wild Trees Press, Navarro CA 1987. My thanks to Paul Gilroy for this reference.

deconstruction to bear upon the theory of the body arguing that, far from being the seal of certainty in relations of difference, the skin needs to be understood as the unstable site of identificatory practices, of phantasy and even dreams.