

# THE TECHNIQUES OF ECSTASY: WRITING THE END OF THE CENTURY

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*Andrew Blake*

Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Serpent's Tail, London 1999, 368pp; £14.99 paperback. Kodwu Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Quartet, London 1998, 222pp; £10 paperback. Jeremy Gilbert and Ewen Pearson, *Discographies: Dance/Music/Culture and the Politics of Sound*, Routledge, London 1999, 195pp; £12.99 paperback. Ben Malbon, *Clubbing. Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality*, Routledge, London 1999, 256pp; £55 cloth, £17.99 paperback. Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, Picador, London 1998, 512pp; £12.99 paperback. David Toop, *Exotica: Fabricated Soundscapes in a Real World*, Serpent's Tail, London 1999, 304pp; £12.99 paperback.

Most accounts of dance culture offer some reflection on the quasi-paradoxical production of ecstasy through the high technologies of computerised music and massive PA systems. The rituals of the evening out are, to many participants, precisely that: a sacralised sequence of events and experiences. Erik Davis - in a text devoted to the general state of contemporary technospirituality - moves through many of the spatial, graphic, sonic and power relations of the new technologies focusing, predictably, on the PC and the internet, and producing a book which speaks for a generation almost lost in cyberspace but determined to hang on to structure and value, if not identity as we used to know it. Drawing on a vast range of material which connects science, technology and other forms of thought - from the Masonic insignia still adorning the dollar bill, through the early theorisation of electricity, to the paranoid fictions of Philip K. Dick - Davis reminds us that the spiritual and the technological have always been, and still are, intertwined, and insists that if we are to continue to glean meaning from information, they'd better remain so. We have to learn not just to surf, but precisely to thresh and glean, from the vast amounts of information available. To underline the point, Davis makes one of a number of striking musical analogies. 'We must learn to think like DJs, sampling texts and voices from a vast cornucopia of records while staying true to the organic demands of the dance' (p332).

Kodwu Eshun would doubtless agree. *More Brilliant than the Sun* is an incandescent evocation, its polished filigree work reflecting, and reflecting on, swathes of post-war Black music/history. And above all it is an attempt to renew knowledge by writing anew. Starting with an impassioned

denunciation of lazy and ignorant (white British) music journalism, too ready to confine rhythm to the mysterious, the natural, and by implication, the jungle, Eshun insists on the science in his sonic fictions, the learned performance and learned technological manipulation in sounds from the free jazz of the 1960s through hip-hop to techno's mutations through to Hackney's jungle. Blackness here becomes performativity, not directly related to parenthood or skin colour; likewise, machines are made to perform Blackness. To express this adequately Eshun kicks hard against the poststructuralist fantasies that would inhibit language by denying its relationship with the real (including that lazy music journalism he detests). Neologising and reordering, he generates new grammars, inscribes new meanings: 'But Nirvana's never enough. The End of the Century Dancefloor is a series of paradoxical psychedelias that introduce immersive inversions and fleeting reversions. The phuture is a series of synthetic sensations, artificial emotions, tense presents' (p99).

David Toop tries to do something similar, sampling from his encyclopaedic knowledge of music and musicians to offer a new set of connections, and alongside, sampling from various genres to produce a text which is by turns analytical, descriptive, confessional, fictional, and a tripped-out mix of all the above. The book explores a central conceit, the paradoxical place of the 'Exotic' in a globalising world in which there is, increasingly, no 'there' there, but only touristic simulacra, the remains of a colonial relationship which had simultaneously defined the exotic and destroyed it. He focuses on the middle of the road exotica albums of the prolific Les Baxter (almost all made in LA recording studios by people who had not visited the places depicted), and surrounds his discussion with a wealth of explorations of jazz, avantgarde, blues and country musics. Like much of Toop's previous work, *Exotica* simultaneously impresses in breadth of knowledge, while short of breath in argument. Reprinted interviews, some of them scarcely relevant, give the text the well-padded feel of the Victorian novel, while the excursions into Conradian quasi-fiction (highlight: a dialogue with a very rational Lassie) prompt the usual injunction: don't give up the day job.

London. The Heart of Darkness. Clubland, thriving, makes the centre as alive at four on a Sunday morning as at four on a Saturday afternoon. Ben Malbon now works in advertising, but did an ethnography of 'clubbing' as a PhD project, and here it is (it's worth mentioning that there's a sad story about contemporary academia here). Like Sarah Thornton's account, this is a brisk bop through the clubber's experience, rather than the delirious hypertheorised trancedance offered by Kodwu Eshun, Simon Reynolds, or indeed the majority of academic and journalistic commentators on contemporary music/culture. Malbon worked with a number of clubbers who discuss how they feel, what they do and occasionally accompany him on nights out. Unlike Thornton, Malbon makes no bones about being a participant observer, but he presents a cool

look at his and their experiences - including their views on 'cool', which reinforce Thornton's conclusions that clubbing is an élitist practice stratified by the fear of an imagined mainstream 'other' to the authentic experience. Malbon updates a few Cultural Studies assumptions - insisting that even the most élitist metropolitan clubbing experience can be read as 'resistant' to certain social norms, he enthusiastically, evangelistically represents the energy and vitality of the experience - and he says more about music and dancing than most other club culture books have done. But he does not say enough, partly because his discussion is resolutely rooted in the present, and is too insistent that pleasure should not be written off as mere hedonism, despite a text framed by images of queues, bouncers, pickers and other apparatuses of social control.

Jeremy Gilbert and Ewen Pearson provide the ideal companion to Malbon's ethnography in *Discographies*. Structured by deep knowledge of history, theory, and actual musical practice (like Toop, Pearson is a musician), their account delves more deeply into the political darkside of the dance music force than any previous sympathetic account. This is partly because Gilbert and Pearson are concerned to establish a critical popular-musicology which goes beyond the spotterish list or the fanzinesque flourish, and in order to do so they have to deal with profound legal and political structures. Their discussions of drugs and music technology are necessarily backed up with the legacy of Puritanism, and while they confirm Malbon's claim for clubbing as resistant, the metropolitan experience is set in a far broader spatial and historical context. They end by tying in the politics of Britpop to the rise of the New Lad, that implicitly white anti-clubber of the retro-present, and by contrasting the positive place of club cultures against that demonised identity.

Which is of course one aspect of a patriarchal continuum. When Acid House took off in the late 1980s the British music press remained resolutely 'rockist', supporting the white-boy guitar bands who were to emerge in the Britpop era. But one of its more intelligent writers changed the terms of rock criticism from self-righteous analysis to self-dissolving appreciation, grasping remembered moments of epiphany which reflect those celebrated by Malbon, Gilbert and Pearson; since then, he has come to echo them exactly. Simon Reynolds insisted in *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock* that rock bestows a lack of control, enabling the listener to escape from the socially constructed repressions of everyday subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> He responded coldly to acid house. There followed a reversal, worked out in two further books. First, with Joy Press, Reynolds wrote a sustained, theorised analysis of rock which cuts savagely across *Blissed Out*. *The Sex Revolts* offered a Freudian fix on rock's gender relations. Fascism, misogyny, cyborgism, and the escape from relational 'commitment' of life on the road, are critiqued in their catch-almost-all category of male 'rebel rock'.<sup>2</sup> Having dissed most rock, in *Energy Flash* Reynolds reverts to the adoration found in *Blissed Out*, but with dance

1. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock*, Serpent's Tail, London 1990.

2. Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'Roll*, Serpent's Tail, London 1995.

music as the new object of desire. The preface locates the moment of epiphany through which the author was converted:

The last place I'd expected to find a Dionysian tumult was in the cool-crippled context of dance music. But that's what I saw in 1991 at Progeny, one of a series of DJ-and-live-band extravaganzas organized by The Shamen. They were pretty good, and Orbital's live-improvisation around their spine-tingling classic 'Chime' was thrilling. But what really blew my mind were the DJs whipping up a Sturm und Drang with the Carmina-Burana-gone-Cubist bombast of hardcore techno, the light-beams intersecting to conjure frescoes in the air, and, above all, the crowd ... This was the Dionysian paroxysm programmed and looped for eternity (pxvi).

*Energy Flash* appeared in association with Reynolds's internet website (<http://members.aol.com/blissout>), which straddles the commercial/informational potential of the internet, presenting information culled from the book with much of Reynolds's published journalism, alongside hyperlinks to online booksellers and interviews with a predictable litany of British rave-culture peripherals: novelist Irvine Welsh; cybertheorist Sadie Plant; her erstwhile partner Nick Land and his Cybernetic Culture Research Unit; and Kodwu Eshun - each of whom are visited with Reynolds's approval. (He also reviewed *TechGnosis*, positively, for the *Guardian*). This lineup of wannabe weirdside intellectuals might lead one to expect from *Energy Flash* an exploration of rave as the new Counter-Culture. Far from it. The argument running throughout is that the more basic and repetitive the music, and the more it confers on dance participants that state of release from routine mental operations Reynolds dignifies with the term 'bliss', the better. This is consistent with his *Blissed Out* apotheosis of noisy rock, but not with the criticisms of rock masculinities offered in *The Sex Revolts*, nor with Land's numerate cybermysticism. So for example the homosocialities of hardcore techno, gabber and so on are not dismissed as yet more protofascist escapism, but praised because of their bestowal of irrational mass response, while less populist forms such as 'intelligent techno' are dismissed as a 'reversion to older ideas of musicality'(pxvii).

In assembling these connections to form another matrix of physical-musical response, Reynolds is implicitly acknowledging the first wave of academic readings of club cultures. Steve Redhead, Hillegonda Rietveld and Antonio Melechi, among others, explored the ecstasies of dance through theoretical models which used British subcultural studies and French cultural theory alike, as do Gilbert and Pearson and Eshun.<sup>3</sup> All these accounts prefigure Reynolds's concern with the disappearance of the individual will during the dance event. The ecstasy of disappearance, in the utopian moments of these accounts, is related to the first disappearance of an Ecstasy tablet down the throat of the participant. There follows the epiphanic

3. See Steve Redhead (ed), *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*, Avebury Press, Aldershot 1993; Steve Redhead (ed), *The Clubcultures Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 1997; Hillegonda C. Rietveld, *This is Our House*, Ashgate Press, Aldershot 1998.

experience in which 'the Dionysian paroxysm' seems to the willing participant as if it has been both achieved and 'programmed and looped for eternity'.

Of course it wasn't, and isn't. The world continues to turn, even when those who are up for it are up. As Ben Malbon admits, dance events, even festivals, come to an end, the lights come on, and most of the participants - however much they have achieved a state of amorphousness on the dancefloor - remember who they are, resolve into individual human beings once more, return to school, University, or the office, and continue to play their parts in the current system of production, distribution, exchange and consumption - of which the production, distribution, exchange and consumption of dance music and Ecstasy are component parts. Matthew Collin, in the most careful of the late-1990s journalistic accounts of the dance decade, notes that economic forecasters The Henley Centre claimed in 1993 that the dance scene in Britain was worth £1.8 billion annually, about the same as book publishing; in 1996 the British Tourist Board's attempts to recruit younger visitors to Britain focused on the provision of clubs and rock music;<sup>4</sup> the new Leicester Square 'superclub' Home is one result. Even in the techno which Reynolds fetishises as the ultimate music of 'resistance', as in the wider frame - the clubbing experience recounted by and to Malbon, or indeed the tranche of technospiritualities recounted by Davis - there is no necessary or sufficient connection to the end of that, commodity-capitalist, world as we know it.

4. Matthew Collin with John Godfrey, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House*, Serpent's Tail, London 1997, pp267-271.

## MAKING SENSE

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*Alan Durant*

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, Language, Discourse, Society series, Macmillan, London 1999, 251pp; £45 cloth, £16.99 paperback.

As Jean-Jacques Lecercle reminds readers on page one of this thought-provoking book, the word 'representation' (in this respect like 'interpretation', 'reading', and even 'analysis') has both a practice and also a result, or product, sense. Arguably in cultural and literary studies these days, less interest is typically shown in investigating the practice or mechanisms of representation and interpretation than in what you can say, within a cultural argument, by advancing a particular 'product' interpretation of a discourse. Many valuable insights are undoubtedly produced along with this relative emphasis on generating readings, rather than examining what the evidence for supporting them (and so their degree of legitimacy) might be. In a polemical aside in *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, however (an aside which echoes arguments acknowledged from Umberto Eco's *The Limits of Interpretation*, 1990), Lecercle goes so far as to suggest that much interpretation in literary and cultural theory today is not 'interpretation' at all according to his own definitions; rather it is a variety of other kinds of use of texts, informally triggered by whichever text is being discussed.

As regards explanation of how meanings are produced, two major traditions within recent cultural analysis might be distinguished, with significant differences - as well as fairly uneasy relations - between them, especially in terms of the notions of subjectivity and cognition they assume. The first may be associated with Anglo-American linguistics (especially pragmatics), and is underpinned by analytic and so-called 'ordinary language' traditions in the philosophy of language. In terms of the everyday practice of interpretation, such work is reflected most directly in linguistic stylistics and discourse analysis, as well as in psychological work on discourse comprehension. The other major tradition you might associate with continental, especially post-structuralist, theory. Eminent in this tradition are Michel Pêcheux's Althusserian accounts of discourse meaning and interpellation in the 1970s; other, cognate paradigms include Lacanian understandings of meaning production and aspects of the work of Bakhtin, as well as more general derivations from Saussure, often via Barthes. Lecercle suggests that, as a result of developments since the 1970s, these two broad traditions have become more accessible to each other, and that Judith Butler's highly innovative work, on the 'politics of the performative' (especially in *Excitable Speech*, 1997) brings together the best of each. However you view this specific assessment, there is little doubt that significant discrepancies between the two traditions remain.

One reason *Interpretation as Pragmatics* is as interesting as it is, accordingly, derives from its efforts to cut across the intellectual divide. The book energetically critiques what it characterises as the 'tin-opener' version of interpretation (open the tin, find the sardines of meaning laid out for you), as well as the conduit metaphor for communication on which that tin-opener model relies (ideas are objects; linguistic expressions are containers; communication is sending). Instead, Lecerclé develops an alternative account of interpretation as a public practice of construction: ascribing meaning involves intervening; successive interpretations constitute a chain of such interventions or social moves, with each fresh interpretation reworking the interpreted discourse in a variant form. As well as emphasising interpretation as a social practice, the reader's act of translating discourse into ever new - always selective - versions, rather than notionally restating the same thing, shifts responsibility for meaning from the speaker (as origin of the text) onto work carried out by the reader. What nevertheless prevents this line of argument slipping into the interpretive relativism implicit in much contemporary audience ethnography is Lecerclé's close attention to questions of precisely how interpretations are derived from specific discourse features and styles.

In order to explain how meanings are constructed, rather than merely recognised, Lecerclé develops a model consisting of four (conceptually distinct, if temporally merged) interpretive procedures: glossing (of clichés and tropes, as well as of words and idioms); solution and disclosure (involving inferences of varying kinds); translation or re-description ('into a theoretical language of our own choice'); and intervention (taking part in ongoing social action, for some given purpose, in some specific set of circumstances). Together, these procedures contribute to a more general account, which Lecerclé calls his ALTER model of communication (the ALTER acronym follows from respective slots in the communication structure: A = author; L = language; T = text; E = encyclopaedia; R = reader). ALTER is broadly based on the communication model presented by Roman Jakobson in his celebrated 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' (delivered 1958, published 1960), but has been modified in the light of ideas from Greimas and the Swiss logician J.B. Grize.

Chapters Four to Seven of *Interpretation as Pragmatics* develop the overall account by discussing individual positions in the ALTER model (though not in ALTER sequence): reader (imposture), author (intention), language (interpellation), and encyclopaedia ('pragmatics of literature').

Lecerclé's account of authorship and intention, to take perhaps the strongest chapter, draws on a critique earlier in the book of E.D. Hirsch's view of intention. But shifting the ground of debate - and loosely following Pêcheux's critique of Jakobson - Lecerclé emphasises a need to distinguish between people, as actors within any act of representation and interpretation, and the subject positions these people come to occupy. Because utterances have given grammatical forms and vocabulary, Lecerclé insists, they carry

an already-specified potential for generating some meanings and not others. Even so, whatever meaning an utterance takes on in a given context depends on a process of realisation which involves, among other things, the interpellation of people into author and reader slots within the overall communication structure: 'The reader is interpellated by the representation she constructs in the place of the author; the author is interpellated by the representation of the readers she fantasises' (p75). Authorial intention in this framework is a necessary illusion: a place for ascriptions of meaning to ascribe meaning to, rather than the content of a unified and directing consciousness or identity.

According to Lecerle, insisting on slots or positions in this way is not necessarily inconsistent with how we intuitively think of communication occurring, if we posit a continuous process of adjustment of representations exchanged between the interpellated slots. Such adjustment is geared towards maximising intersection between the inevitably differing models which authors and readers bring to any given utterance of the language in question (which varies between regions, social groups, and periods) and of background cultural assumptions (what Lecerle, taking a term popularised by Eco, calls an 'encyclopaedia' of background knowledge and presupposition).

Perhaps surprisingly, given the interest of the 'author' chapter, the account offered of the reader position is rather less persuasive. Lecerle proposes a notion of necessary 'imposture', based on the idea established earlier in the book that interpretation involves risk-taking rather than mere recognition or reconstruction of meaning. From this fairly uncontroversial view, however, he then extrapolates the further notion that, in some sense based on subjection, all reading is misappropriation. Whatever the inherent strengths of this view, Lecerle's description of such 'imposture' is confused by a long and apologetic account of Louis Althusser's reported impostures (as related in his autobiography), prefaced by Lecerle's own admission of 'pious as well as theoretical aims' in the chapter (p95). The precise relationship between interpellation and imposture remains, to my mind, the least satisfactorily presented step in the book's overall argument.

Striking insights into the social circulation of interpretations do nevertheless follow from Lecerle's ALTER model. These include his sharpening of a central paradox of communication: 'We must invent a meaning for the text in the hope that this invention will be archaeological rather than merely imaginative' (p5). Lecerle's ALTER model also prompts four provocative, more general claims about meaning: all interpretations are possible; no interpretation is true; some interpretations are just; and some interpretations are false. These claims regarding the status of interpretations gain extra urgency when publicly contested interpretations are at stake, in that, as Lecerle puts it (alluding to Lyotard), 'True interpretation is at best an innocuous fantasy entertained by a glib and gullible interpreter; at worst a terroristic claim in an interpretive dispute, or differend' (p12).



Lecerle's interest in the social consequences of publicly contested interpretation is evident throughout. His description of the Derek Bentley case, for instance ('Let him have it, Chris') is mostly compelling; and his emphasis on the importance of relating construction from a text back to the text is enthusiastically linked to the legal concept of intentional rather than intended meaning - ascriptions of meaning that might reasonably be made, rather than whatever meaning was actually held in mind at the time of utterance. Lecerle's exploration of this distinction leads into further discussion of differences between textual meaning, use and effect, and an assessment of how confusion between these different forms of response to texts can undermine efforts to adjudicate between controversial readings. (Lecerle takes as his main case studies for this section the *Satanic Verses* fatwa and Charles Manson's claimed interpretations of Beatles songs as explanation for the murder of Sharon Tate).

As I have described it so far, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* is a challenging work. Erudite and allusive, its readings of individual texts (of a classroom Graham Greene story, glossolalia in John Barth, and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, all in Chapter One; of oracles and traditions of midrashic reading; of Edward Lear, Willoughby's letter in *Pride and Prejudice*, or Joseph Wright of Derby's vacuum pump painting) are impressive and memorable. Nevertheless, I'm not fully convinced by the overall 'theory' advanced. While the ALTER model certainly offers persuasive description, there is at the same time a tendency, more characteristic of deconstructive philosophical arguments than of model-building ones, to short-circuit argument from marginal or perverse cases onto all cases (hence Lecerle's special interest in glossolalia, malapropisms, nonsense verse and slips of the tongue). Equally problematic, the book's use of diagrams is accompanied by suggestions of visual metaphor and heuristic which obscure exactly what kinds of force, procedure or cause the various arrows are supposed to represent. Despite use of the word 'pragmatics' in the title, too, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* hardly engages with contemporary debates in any of the major versions of that field. And, finally, it is puzzling how apparently uninterested the author is, despite explicitly expressed loyalty to Althusser, in pursuing questions of the relationship between the encyclopaedia of background knowledge which language users draw on in interpretation (how - in a more hermeneutic vocabulary - people 'live in' their language) and issues of ideology.

All in all, it is tempting to say that, despite these limitations, *Interpretation as Pragmatics* remains a serious work to engage with. It is. To some extent, though, the book's allusive one-liners, register-mixing, and local pastiche - all highly entertaining - make such a comment slightly inappropriate; occasionally these features tend to destabilise the book's more serious theoretical ambitions.

## TYPISTS AND OTHERS

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*Tim Youngs*

Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*, Twayne, New York 1997, 148pp; £22.95 cloth. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1998, 261pp; £24.95 cloth.

Of these two additions to the fast-growing number of books on travel writing, Blanton's is the least satisfactory. This is due not so much to its several grammatical mistakes and typographical errors, annoying though these are, as to the format of the series in which it belongs: Twayne's 'Studies in Literary Themes and Genres'. It would be difficult enough to do justice to the history of travel writing, as a theme and genre in a single volume, but to succeed in fewer than 150 pages is impossible. Rather like modern travel writers, Blanton struggles against the limitations of her chosen form.

Restricted as her space is, Blanton attempts to trace the evolution of the genre and identifies exemplary individual works. Her first chapter provides an historical overview of self and other in travel writing from the ancient Greeks to the present. Although she is properly wary of generalisations and of tracing an uninterrupted pattern of evolution, she detects a gradual but fundamental change away from object-bound accounts of those who travelled with a purpose or for a cause to the 'more explicitly autobiographical travel books' of today (p4). A great problem with her formulation, however, is that it tends, wrongly, to consign political motivation to the past and to assume that the more subject-oriented narratives of recent years engage less with the external world.

Blanton follows her survey chapter with one on James Boswell and his 1760s Grand Tour journals. These, according to her, mark the beginning of the modern travel book, whose features include: 'a narrator/traveller who travels for the sake of travel; a narrative organization that owes much to fiction; a commitment to both a literary language and a personal voice; and thematic concerns of great moral and philosophic import' (p30).

A chapter on Mary Kingsley as an exemplar of Victorian women travellers follows. Interestingly, Blanton finds Kingsley's self-effacing humour, often claimed by critics to be a sign of her gendered oppression at home, 'rather tedious' (p54). She notices Kingsley's opposition to women's suffrage and asserts that Kingsley was free neither from Eurocentrism nor from racism. Blanton joins feminist critics of Kingsley in finding in her work a duality between authority and submissiveness but she departs from some in thinking it dangerous to insist on essential differences between women's and men's texts; rather, she urges, we should

1. Barbara Greene, *Too Late to Turn Back: Barbara and Graham Greene in Liberia*, Settle and Bendall, London 1981; Penguin, Harmondsworth 1990.

see them both as 'part of the conversation that is travel writing' (p58).

Chapter Four, on the modern psychological journey and Graham Greene's *Journey Without Maps*, is notable for two failings. The first is Blanton's reading of the text entirely in terms of Greene's own psychology. She ignores the many criticisms Greene makes of English society for its suppression of the instincts and of the fears he finds reawakened in Liberia. Second, while Greene hardly mentions the existence of his cousin Barbara, who accompanied him on the trip, Blanton refers to her even less. Coming straight after a chapter on the subordination of women, this reticence is baffling. Had she dealt with Barbara Greene's narrative, *Land Benighted*, 1938, in its reissued form, *Too Late to Turn Back*, she would also have been able to consider its introduction by Paul Theroux, who is a subject of her final chapter.<sup>1</sup>

In a refreshing, if perhaps critically generous chapter on Peter Matthiessen and the travel writing of nature, Blanton regards *The Snow Leopard* as being raised to another level by its author's spiritual and emotional quest: his efforts, as a Zen Buddhist, to accept suffering. The Zen perspective has the book reversing the 'traditional naturalist-explorer's monarch-of-all-I-survey position' (p77). Matthiessen gains 'an entire new way of seeing and of thinking' (p78).

Chapter Six looks at V.S. Naipaul, of whom Blanton is a good deal more tolerant than many critics, pointing out that his voice is consistently that of an outsider. She concedes that Naipaul may sometimes be unlikeable but argues that his travel books reveal him exploring the self in 'painful and explicitly autobiographical ways ... It is as though Naipaul can find a place for himself only if he resolves the problem of difference, only if he can understand where and how others differ from him' (p83). Naipaul is a critical figure in Blanton's sketch of travel writing, representing the 'elegant writing' and 'deep introspection' of its heyday and suggesting its future, 'toward paradox, inscrutability, and openness' (p94).

The chapter on Bruce Chatwin is more predictable. Blanton follows those admirers who deny that Chatwin romanticises the nomad and who claim that he has taken the genre perhaps as far as it can go. More dubious judgements on Chatwin haunt the final chapter, which is concerned mainly with place and displacement in Paul Theroux and Roland Barthes. Incredibly, Blanton insists that 'Chatwin maintains an ongoing dialogue with the world's citizens about the nature of human restlessness', that he has an ability to be decentred or displaced, and that he is able to leave his 'very British life' at home (p107). It might be truer to say that his dialogue is with himself, that he is a ventriloquist, and that his cultural and ideological baggage identify him wherever he is. Otherwise there would hardly be a sense of a very British life to be left at home. Yet there is a tension in this final chapter. Blanton reiterates her conviction that there has been in travel writing a growth of concern with the problems of representing the other. However, she now admits to major exceptions and

points to Paul Theroux as a prominent example of a writer who remains centred in a conventional way. Her plea that we should constantly negotiate the entangled space between us, and her suggestion that it is our task to treat travel texts as culturally biased, do seem to qualify some of her earlier, more confident pronouncements on the status of travel writing now. Suddenly we have a sense of contemporary travel writing as in process and not as a summation; and that is how it should be.

Blanton is sparing in her use of endnotes but more than twenty pages at the end of her book are devoted to a useful bibliographical essay and to a selective but wide-ranging annotated list of travel titles to send interested readers on their way.

Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan modestly describe their book as 'an introductory critical survey' (px). It is much more than that. True, their study is about twice the length of Blanton's, they do not have to conform to the format of a series, and their focus is solely on contemporary travel writing, but their sharper critical edge is apparent from the start: Their thesis is that 'travel writing frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to "other" cultures, peoples, and places' (pviii). Aware of the defamiliarising strategies adopted by travel writing as it attempts to keep up with new ideas about the representation of the other, they are less sanguine than Blanton about the successes that have been achieved. They exempt neither general readers nor theorists from their scrutiny, seeing readers of travel writing as 'eager consumers of exotic - culturally "othered" - goods' (pviii) and regarding the 'ubiquitousness of "traveling theory"' as indicating 'a utopian impulse that is arguably the product, not of the world itself but of a "worldly" intellectual elite' (pix). More than Blanton, also, Holland and Huggan note the 'wider structure of representation' of which travel writing is a part (pviii). In particular, they point to the economic context of travel and travel writing, often undercutting the narratives' nostalgia and spiritualism by uncovering the material conditions that make travel possible and by reminding us of the economic arena into which the texts enter.

If '[t]ravel narratives strive to express the unfamiliar, but also to contain it' (p24), the tension inherent in this dual function seems especially intense in this "postimperial" age (p23) and is perhaps responsible for the air of cultivated eccentricity and disownable self-irony that *Tourists with Typewriters* notes so well. The affected individuality of contemporary travellers is in fact the mark of their conformism, Holland and Huggan suggest. The play on the myth of the English gentleman abroad, together with a pervasive nostalgia, helps create a 'regressive cultural nationalism [that] has sinister implications, yet these are side-stepped by recourse to parody and pre-emptive self-critique' (p23). Redmond O'Hanlon and Eric Newby are the targets here. Discussion of them leads to an original consideration of camp in travel writing, including a suggestive angle on Bruce Chatwin as dandy, whose 'hyperconscious posturing is a useful rhetorical strategy:

grants him performative license and a dilettante's range of ideas and opinions; it also gives him a freedom to assimilate his personal experience to aesthetic whim' (p38). Perhaps, as Holland and Huggan claim, Chatwin's awareness of his voyeurism and consumption of the exotic leads to the self-parody of *The Songlines*, but they are probably right when they complain that 'Parody notwithstanding, Chatwin's work is unashamedly romantic; and with that romanticism comes a certain tendency to cultivated naïveté: a propensity to homogenize different peoples and cultures; to discover psychic or instinctual similarities rather than accounting for social or historic differences; and, at worst, to reduce an infinitely complex world into a random display of beautiful collector's items' (p39).

An admirable feature of Holland and Huggan's writing is its independence of thought. Its ambivalence towards postcolonial theory and practice generates a welcome unpredictability. Praising, as they should, the contribution of postcolonialism to uncovering the complicity of travel writing with imperialism and to encouraging narrative strategies of resistance to earlier models, they are nevertheless suspicious of 'the totalizing, ironically dehistoricized vocabulary it often deploys in order to talk about irreconcilably different cultures and cultural issues' (pp47-48), and of the 'increasing - mostly academic - commodification of the postcolonial' (p48). They are thinking of academics, not just of travel writers, when they observe that '[i]n a postcolonial era', "otherness" is a profitable business' (p65).

Contemporary travel writing can, like much in this age of postcoloniality, be both conservative and questioning. A carefully-argued section on Caryl Phillips, Jamaica Kincaid, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, and Pico Iyer reveals this. In Holland and Huggan's eyes, postcolonial travel writers are caught in a double-bind. They perpetuate the exotic, views about which they might wish to change; and the genre in which they work has a legacy at odds with what they want it to do. Cultural otherness is still produced for consumption.

On gender Holland and Huggan's approach is similar to Blanton's. Like her, they warn that certain anthologies risk essentialising women's travel writing and believe that not all women's writing is emancipatory in its politics. Two contemporary women travellers they especially admire are Robyn Davidson, for resisting the mythicisation of Australian Aborigines and of herself, and for exposing travel writing to internal critique; and Sara Suleri, whose *Meatless Days* 'interrogates the kind of national (travel) narrative that it associates with ethnocentric vision and a patriarchal view of place' (p129).

In the final chapter (though there is a postscript after it), *Tourists with Typewriters* asks how innovative travel writing can ever be. Some find an answer in eco-travel, New Age and nature writing but Holland and Huggan are critical of these 'commodified expressions of environmental angst' (p178) and of the 'postmodern commercialization of narratives of

-disappearance' (p179).

*Tourists with Typewriters* is one of the very best books on travel writing and the best I have read on contemporary travel literature. It is impressive in its range of references and perceptive in its readings. In showing how travel writing has flourished through late-capitalist hyper-commodification it avoids the pseudo-radicalism of criticism that looks only at the rhetoric and tropes of texts. And in admitting its own role in the market whose flow it seeks to disrupt, it should give pause to all of us who make a living this way.

## BOOKNOTES

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Fred Botting, *Sex, Machines and Navels: Fiction, Fantasy and History in the Future Present*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1999, 240pp; £40 cloth, £13.99 paperback.

Fred Botting begins his book by self-consciously navel-gazing. He stares hard at that button on the belly, perhaps even his own, 'collecting fluff', and transforms it, like many have before him, into metaphor. And of course when it comes to metaphor, the navel is a literary theorist's dream. It is a scar, a hole, a knot, a node. It is a somatic memory of separation, of the lost maternal, of the confused boundaries between self and not-self. As Botting argues, the navel in the title is not merely a quirky addition to the suitably fashionable terms 'sex' and 'machines', it 'becomes strangely central to their articulation.' Or at least it does here.

The Introduction comprises a survey of celebrity navels: from the theological puzzle of Adam and Eve to Madonna, *Star Trek*, and the 'appropriate hyperrealism' of the Teletubbies. The following chapters then consider various epistemological navels: the navel of psychoanalysis, the navel of history and the navel of cyberspace. The first of these chapters sets the tone, as later arguments and literary analysis draw heavily on Lacan. (It seems rather odd that whilst this book has a title packed with reference-friendly terms, the word 'psychoanalysis', which strikes me as central to its thesis and its readership, is missing.) The final chapters provide extended readings of classic, if somewhat dated, SF texts and films (*Bladerunner* and *Neuromancer*), alongside more recent works (Rucker's *Wetware* and Gibson's *Idoru*).

Botting's readings of, and through, his metaphorical navel are provocative and often entertaining. After all, navel gazing can be fun. But only for so long. In the end, those multiplying metaphors can overwhelm us, masking the point like so much fluff. And then it's time to look up.

*Amanda Boulter*

Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, Sage, London 1999, 172pp; £12.99 paperback.

Rex Butler is the first to think Baudrillard's work is a 'defence of the real.' To sustain the thesis he suggests first that Baudrillard does not really understand himself (for example: fourth order simulacra - there is no such thing); and second, one must draw conclusions from Baudrillard's analyses that are quite different from his own.

If there are three phases of Baudrillard's work - the first explores limits

of scientific reason, the second examines the consequence of these limits for his own work, the third examines language and thought as the fundamental limits by their 'power to affect and create the real' - there is here no attempt however to show any evolution in his thought. The discussion in the three main chapters (entitled Simulation, Seduction, and Doubling) moves back and forward across writings of the 1960s to 1990s as though there were perfect continuity. Thus simulation is 'not finally distinguishable from ... seduction.'

Butler's reading is caught in a delirium. Baudrillard 'repeats the same essential paradox throughout his work' so in Butler's own book 'there can finally be no sequence to it or logic to the separation of its chapters.' Baudrillard is concerned throughout with 'a real that is the limit to all systems, a real that no system could ever entirely capture or explain' and this 'real upon which the system cannot reflect ... is only the sign itself'. This clarifies things. Butler is 'reading against' Baudrillard's concept. He admits at the end of the book that his purpose has been to 'produce an unrecognizable Baudrillard', a metaphysics of semiosis strangely closer to that which Baudrillard once identified as the game of hide-and-seek with the real to be found in the thought of Lacan.

*Mike Gene*

Hazel Carby, *Race Men*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1998, 228pp; £14.95 cloth.

Hazel Carby has been at the cutting edge of African American studies ever since her landmark 1980 essay on early black women writers and the blues helped many died-in-the-wool literary critics see the importance of the vernacular in black culture. *Race Men*, her intelligent and timely study of black public figures from W.E.B. Du Bois to Danny Glover, is often rightly acerbic especially when describing the machismo underpinning the work of Miles Davis, the disturbing racial implications of the *Lethal Weapon* series, or the stuffed-shirted public position of Cornel West (literally as he prescribes a dress code for black intellectuals).

There are problems in her analysis, however; not least her attack on Du Bois for using a debilitating gendered discourse which she feels undermines his critique of American materialism and its most famous African American proponent Booker T. Washington. Yet Du Bois's startlingly effective critique is now nearly a century old and to judge it mainly by the standards of our time does a grave disservice to his difficult position as a relatively new and isolated intellectual figure in America having to bludgeon himself into a debate where few prisoners were being taken.

In comparison, in Carby's treatment of her heroes, C.L.R. James and Paul Robeson, gendered language is not interrogated nearly so closely or given what amounts to an ahistorical frame. The work on both is really



dynamic with the close critique of the depiction of Robeson's body and the performance of Robeson's singing of spirituals particularly astute. Moreover, her understanding of cricket in the section on James is particularly welcome, showing how the 'history of cricket as a political biography of colonial manhood' literally can define James's project. However, Robeson's naive relationship to Soviet Russia and the Communist Party in America and the effect this might have on his abilities to function as a 'Race Man' are not problematised at all. In fact Carby seems happy to offer his film *Proud Valley* as exemplar of a growth to an independent moment after the tribulations of Modernism even though its syrupy sentimentalism and one-dimensional propogandist tone surely undermines any claims it might have to being taken as seriously as Carby wants us to. It seems that Robeson's siding with an international proletariat forgives him errors of male hubris which could and should have been traced to make the book more even-handed.

*Race Men* reveals many insights in its groundbreaking investigation of the usually unspoken symbiosis of race and masculinity, but it is only the opening salvo in a discussion which will run and run.

*Alan Rice*