

GRAMMATICAL INFANTICIDE

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Serge Leclaire, *A Child is Being Killed: On Primary Narcissism and the Death Drive*, Marie-Claude Hays (trans), Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1998, 89pp.

'When death or harm actually befalls a child, then the power of death at work in analysis is dramatically demonstrated' (p5). This sentence from the opening pages of Serge Leclaire's book shocks not only because it seems to reduce the impact of a child's death to its significance for psychoanalysis, but because of the barefaced way it dares to do something that actually is done rather a lot: it makes the death of a child demonstrate something other than the event itself. We react to the always-untimely deaths of children by turning death into discourse and murder into morals. In a way we always murder our children twice: Isaac stares up at the knife so we can comprehend the power of faith; the infanticide of her child by the desolate 'Wragg' exemplifies the death of culture for Matthew Arnold, capturing the squeamishness of a century both enthralled and disgusted by its industrial achievements; and most recently fuzzy video footage of three small figures, one very small, foretold the end of childhood itself. Even when such murders are not hijacked for cultural moralism, the death of a child can generate a kind of investment that goes beyond disinterested pity. The school photograph in the top right-hand corner of our screen moves us, perhaps, not only because of the child who is now cruelly trapped in her uniform and the uncomfortable smile for perpetuity, but because the astonishing historical timelessness of the genre of the school photo also allows for a glimmer of recognition: just like me and, thankfully, not me (nor, more thankfully still, mine).

When 'a child is being killed' there is always another watching in the wings. The point for Leclaire in this short but intensely haunting monograph is that it is not possible to separate the onlooker from the victim. Everyone has a child to kill, Leclaire declares; beyond Oedipal murder there is a further death we need to deal with. It is not enough to kill the father; more pressing - and much more primal - is the need to kill off the parents' child. This is the child that Freud alluded to famously in 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914); the complete, replete and all-too perfect child whom the parent cannot relinquish from their own childhood narcissism, the ego ideal (or ideal ego), and which they rediscover - or conceive of - in their own child. As tyrannical as she is alluring, as terrible as she is wonderful, it is this child's fate to be adored to bits. Like the eponymous anti-heroine of May Sinclair's psychoanalytically-informed 1922 novel, *The Life and Death*

of *Harriett Freaan*, Leclaire's wondrous child exerts a deathly presence: there can be no life, he says, 'without killing that strange, original image in which everyone's birth is inscribed' (p2). Sinclair's text pursues this link between primary narcissism and the death drive with an especially spiteful clarity. Enraptured by the presentation of herself that exists in Mama and Papa's dotting late Victorian eyes, Harriett's life is a long sort of death - images of fertility convert to those of sterility with an appalling and inexorable rapidity. In Leclaire's terms Harriett has failed to mourn - and thus failed to kill - the child to whom she owes her psychic life but who allowed to thrive suffocates her.

How to kill this child without suffering a fate like Harriett Freaan's is the theme of Leclaire's book. The comparison with a modernist novel is more apposite than it might at first seem. The five 'case histories', if they can be really called that, which make up this volume resemble small modernist novellas in more ways than one. Indeed, as with the modernist novel, it is language, particularly in its lyrical and cryptic forms, that is Leclaire's real subject here. His child is no 'inner child' acting out a drama in the hidden depths of some putative self, but 'a fragile and hieratic figure *representing*, in the secret theatre where destiny is played out, the first (or third-) position from which the unconscious speaks' (p3). Indeed, the originality of Leclaire's writing rests with his effort to let the unconscious speak. This is important, for while this book is a significant contribution to much recent psychoanalytic work that focuses both on the real and the most shadowy, because most primal, limits of psychic experience (this book could profitably be read alongside André Green's classic essay 'The Dead Mother'), Leclaire will not give up on the primacy of language. Above all, his is a thesis about grammatical infanticide. As with Freud's 'child is being beaten', so too with Leclaire's 'a child is being killed' (*on tue un enfant*), the question is what child? Or rather, what position is the unconscious putting me in here?

Being a grown-up subject is no defence against the sort of contradictions that this question produces - as Leclaire demonstrates in each of his five stories. This repeated affirmation of the unconscious is exhilarating to read but also deeply reassuring. Leclaire is committed to sustaining the subject as a site of contradiction; and while that commitment is indebted to a specifically Lacanian version of faith, good and bad - every signifier yearning for the phallus, all unconscious representations stretching towards *jouissance* - his particular form of psychoanalysis is also a form of liberation theology. Killing the child, among other things, is a form of resistance to what Leclaire describes as a 'totalitarian representation capturing the individual in the eyes of others as an apparent, indivisible whole' (p53). Killing off the child, doing in our primary narcissistic representative, then, is a form of protest against cultural identity itself. This is a potentially significant addition to Althusserian theories of interpellation. In Leclaire's version, we are entangled in the 'grand comedy' of assignation right from the very first. Just as inevitable, however, he insists, is our revolt:

like children facing a policeman ... we keep bursting out laughing. It's an old story, and with it, everything begins again and again: a child to kill, our delivery to go through. Always already caught up in a dreamlike third person (he will be a great man, she will marry a prince ...) and in the seduction and bidding of a second person, the story starts only in the first person: no 'I' is not that (p53).

The alternative to Harriett Freen's wretched existence, then, is a firmly Beckettian 'Not-I'.

In May Sinclair's text, it is clear that Victorian ideals about femininity are largely responsible for the grotesque nature of Harriett's narcissism. Leclair takes great care to stress that women, in particular, suffer from an ideology that insists on their indivisible wholeness: being the phallus, in this book, is no fun. Moreover, he is acutely aware of psychoanalysis's own complicity with prevailing ideas about gender: one of the virtues of the book is its author's candid account of his transference relations with his women analysands. It is a woman colleague, moreover who, in a guest appearance in Leclair's book, puts the problem most succinctly. 'Eugenie' (but note, never 'Jacques') points out that psychoanalysis 'has a paradoxical tendency to be the place where fears of sexual difference and of woman conspire most firmly to maintain their hold' (p63). Leclair worries about this. His worry is refreshing, even if his answer is somewhat predictable. Sexual difference remains the absolute bedrock in Leclair's theory and, true to Eugenie's warnings, it becomes more inscribed the more Leclair accounts for it. Insisting that sexual identity is only ever a radical subject position doesn't really get rid of the problem - which may well even be sexual identity itself.

Leclair also insists, understandably enough, on castration, which is why he can also make a distinction between 'women's words' (which, apparently, having an unmediated relation to castration keep their value as unconscious representations) and 'men's discourse' (which, refusing the reality of castration, insists on the primacy of conscious representation). Quite where this gets us - beyond Leclair's own seductive and persuasive lyricism - is hinted at in an unfortunate typographical error in the translation: 'Invited to speak her peace, sooner or later a woman will inevitably express what speaking means of her, namely, that there is *jouissance*' (p63). Leclair's earnest invitation to women to speak - what women want in analysis, he says, is to have their 'women's words' recognised - can indeed be read as an invitation to silence. Not because one does not want to be recognised, but because being asked to speak 'as a woman' is a form of non-recognition in itself (she shall marry a prince, she shall affirm that there is *jouissance*, she shall have her woman's words recognised ...). Not I, one might mutely protest, while sniggering at the policeman.

Are there really not other ways to think about lack? Must we always murder our children? There are, and of course we don't have to: but trying to describe

these things in psychoanalytic terms has an odd way of implying inevitability where there is in fact radical ambiguity. In the end, Leclaire keeps faith with ambiguity. The last chapter, penned by Leclaire's alter ego, 'Nata Minor', returns to the origins of psychoanalysis, to Freud, Vienna and to Freud's odd relation to the writer, Arnold Schnitzler. Predictably perhaps, what links the two is a fascination with the feminine. One only has to have one's eyes wide shut to know just how boring such a fascination can be. Fortunately, Leclaire is no Stanley Kubrick, Schnitzler's most recent interpreter. The feminine here turns out to belong to the father, in fact Freud himself. Far stranger than the celluloid repetition of perfectly constructed breasts in Kubrick's film, it's Freud's stumbling around the indeterminacy of sexuality at the origins of psychoanalysis that fascinates Leclaire. This is a version of psychoanalysis that almost got sacrificed: it is to his credit that Leclaire prompts us to allow what frightens us to live.

THE ENIGMA OF THE MESSAGE

Elizabeth Cowie

Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness*, John Fletcher (ed), Routledge, London 1999, 279pp; £15.99 paperback.

Jean Laplanche is one of the foremost psychoanalysts in France whose work has become widely known and used outside clinical practice as well as within it - along with, for example, Julia Kristeva and André Green, as well as, of course, Jacques Lacan, the magisterial figure of psychoanalysis in France in the second half of the twentieth century. While Laplanche may be most widely known to English-speaking readers as a result of his two collaborations with Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (1967, 1973) and their essay on 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality',¹ his far-reaching philosophical and psychoanalytical studies are now becoming increasingly drawn upon by cultural theorists and critics, and this work is helped enormously by the publication of *Essays on Otherness*, and the comprehensive and illuminating introduction by John Fletcher.

Lacan was Laplanche's analyst as well as his mentor and training supervisor when Laplanche, having received his *agrégation* in 1951 in philosophy, decided to become an analyst himself. Yet Laplanche was also one of the group of early defectors from Lacan, rejecting his account of the unconscious as structured 'like a language'. Moreover it is Laplanche, perhaps, who has most thoroughly 'returned to Freud', in Lacan's famous words, while at the same time radically reconsidering key areas of Freud's theory. This is seen very clearly in his study *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (1979, 1976), where Laplanche carefully re-examines Freud's theories through Freud's own technique of negation and counter-argument to show both the inconsistencies and the consistencies in Freud's conceptualisation of sexuality, narcissism, the origin and vicissitudes of the drives and the theory of death drive, while developing revisions that nevertheless remain within Freud's project as a whole, for example, his conclusion that there is only one 'energy' of the drive, the sexual.²

This approach was also central to Laplanche's *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1987, 1989) - the title marking the ambition and heritage of his project.³ That book was both a culmination of Laplanche's work published in French - the five-volume *Problématiques* - and a review, a summation which was also a summary, but for his readers in English it perhaps prompted as many questions as answers. The ten essays collected in *Essays on Otherness* address many of those questions while presenting a series of meditations on metapsychology and on philosophical debates on the foundations of

1. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1967, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans), The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London 1973; Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, 'Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality', *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 49, (1968), reprinted in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, Routledge, London 1986.

2. Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Jeffrey Mehlman (trans), Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1976.

3. Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1987), David Macey (trans), Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1989.

psychoanalysis. All the essays are from Laplanche's work over the last decade and while some have appeared in English elsewhere, most are new and the translation meticulous.

The collection presents a development of the core aspects in Laplanche's approach, namely the theory of primal or originary seduction. This seduction is the scenario first addressed and then abandoned by Freud as a scene of actual events and actions producing trauma in his women patients, leading him instead to propose fantasy and the repression of fantasy - the unconscious. Freud notoriously thereby turned the little girl from victim to active fantasist, the author of her own desire but which she - falsely now, for Freud's psychoanalysis, that is, as the result of repression - projected onto, for example, her male relatives. Laplanche returned to this hypothesis and drew from it another tale in which passivity is central, a story of a primary seduction by the other, the adult carer or parent, whose actions, gestures, voice (and later, words) and tone penetrate the child as a communication, a message but one which has no signified; it is an enigmatic signifier. The intrusion and consequent excitation arising from this enigmatic signifier Laplanche sees as the origin of the drive. The drive is thus not biological in the sense of an innate instinct, nor is it founded in specific erogenous zones whose inevitable stimulation in the processes of feeding and care Freud had later seen as being the basis of a primary experience of satisfaction which the child then seeks to re-experience. These enigmatic messages are, Laplanche says, sexual, that is, sexual for the adult in that they relate to the drive and desire, but 'pre-sexual' for the child but who is thereby sexualised. The adult is not, however, a 'seducer'; seduction is not an intention on the part of the adult, rather it is produced in the unconscious message of the adult in her or his interaction with the child - the satisfactions of the mother in breastfeeding, for example. What is set going in the child as a result is a process which is at one and the same time traumatic while also instigating a response of translation in the child, of making-sense, and thus it is a process of the child's own theory-making. It is here that two other key elements in these essays emerge - the question of time and the question of interpretation, of hermeneutics. Laplanche argues that *Nachträglichkeit*, translated by James Strachey in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* as 'deferred action', but which Laplanche suggests is better understood in English as 'afterwardsness', is a key term for understanding how the significance or meaning of the past - as events or facts of an individual's history - may change or only emerge subsequently through later events and experiences. Every trauma is in fact two traumas. This process of afterwardsness produces a concept of time in psychoanalysis which is quite different from the time of everyday history. Laplanche writes:

I want to account for this problem of the different directions, to and fro, by arguing that, right at the start, there is something that goes in the direction of the past to the future, from the other to the individual in

question, that is in the direction from the adult to the baby, which I call the implantation of the enigmatic message. This message is then retranslated, following a temporal direction which is, in an alternating fashion, by turns retrogressive and progressive (according to my general model of translation-dettranslation-retranslation) (p265).⁴

4. See also John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (eds), *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, Drives*, ICA, London 1992 and Andrew Benjamin's illuminating essay in that volume, 'The Unconscious: Structuring as a Translation'.

5. Laplanche argues that his theory of seduction 'affirms the priority of the other in the constitution of the human being and of its sexuality. Not the Lacanian Other, but the concrete other: the adult facing the child. A perverse adult? Yes, one must say; but intrinsically perverse because his [or her] messages are "compromised" by his own unconscious' (p212).

For Laplanche it is the enigmatic message which intrudes or penetrates - 'seducing' - the child, which produces trauma. Laplanche reintroduces sexuality into the understanding of trauma which Freud had discarded when he abandoned the seduction theory but not - as in Freud - as an organised meaning, the Oedipal complex.⁵ Rather it is a seduction without meaning, and it is in this very senselessness that trauma inheres. For this is not a message which fails to be read, it is not a miscommunication, since the 'sender' may not know the meaning either, indeed may not know that he or she has communicated any such message. Thus the issue for the subject, and for the analyst in the process of transference, is not the truth of the message, not the uncovering of a lost or never-received meaning, but the consequences of the enigma of the signifier and its failure of meaning. What we have instead is a process of becoming understood, a translation, in the words of Laplanche, and I would suggest, a narrativisation.

Translation is never complete, however. Something is left out, something which is at one and the same time registered or recognised as message and ignored or omitted in the subject's making-sense of the message. This remainder, the residue or fallout from the translation process in relation to the enigmatic messages of the other, is, Laplanche argues, the repressed. The 'enigmatic message' of the adult is not only, however, unavailable to the child, it may also be unconscious for the adult. Nor is psychoanalysis here the project of interpretation, of making known to the child the 'real' meaning of the message, of solving the enigma. No doubt we are each thrust upon such a path of enquiry but equally no solution can properly address the enigmaticness of that message.

In these essays Laplanche affirms the centrality of passivity and its corollary, masochism, for the subject and he thus also affirms the subject as decentred. For film theory, and more widely for cultural studies, the full implications of such an emphasis have yet to be explored but Laplanche undoubtedly challenges the debates on spectatorship which have been dominated by the perceived problem of passivity and the demand and desire for active audio-viewing. But for Laplanche the subject is not simply subject to the other, to the desire of the other. The radical nature of Laplanche's position here lies in his refusal to find a subject of the enigmatic message, of the other as author and source of the impossible but imposing and thus penetrating and perhaps persecuting message. Instead he emphasises simply the enigma of the message which itself makes it other to the child. It is in the anti-hermeneutics of Laplanche's work that cultural theory and criticism may be able to complete its own unfinished Copernican revolution of decentring the subject.

RESCUING THE FUTURE

David Cunningham

Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 2000, 368pp; £30.95 cloth.

The American theorist Susan Buck-Morss is best known for her studies of Adorno and Benjamin, which were among the first substantial commentaries upon these two seminal figures of philosophical modernity to appear in English. It is not surprising then that it is from Walter Benjamin's fragmentary oeuvre that her new and more ambitious book takes its theoretical and critical impetus.

In fact, as she is happy to acknowledge, the two 'keywords' of her title - 'dreamworld' and 'catastrophe' - both have their origins in Benjamin's singular reworkings of the concepts of history, utopia and the political in his texts of the 1920s and 1930s. While, for Benjamin himself, these concepts were to be developed and set to work through the study of nineteenth-century culture planned in the unfinished *Passagenwerk*, Buck-Morss's focus at the beginning of a new millennium is turned upon our own immediate past in the ruined dreamworlds of the twentieth century. The Benjaminian basis for this project is made clear in the short 'notes on method' which introduce each of her four sections and in the general definition of methodology to be found in the preface where, effectively paraphrasing the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', the book's remarkable juxtaposition of word and image is described as one which 'rescues ... data within new constellations that may be useful in thinking critically about the present' (pxv). If the explicitly theological language of Benjamin's last work is absent from *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, it is very evident nonetheless that it is his brand of 'Messianic' historical materialism that provides the guiding light for Buck-Morss's desire to 'blast holes in established interpretations of the twentieth century, liberating new lines of sight that allow for critical reappropriations of its legacy' (p97).

Although, therefore, Buck-Morss amasses a formidable range of facts and figures about the social and political history of twentieth-century Europe that are exhaustive enough to satisfy even the most traditional of historians, doing 'history' here is, as in Benjamin, not ultimately concerned with any re-presentation of 'the way it really was'. Rather, in the attempt to 'challenge the accepted version of the twentieth century and reopen the case', the rescuing of 'the past in fragments' (p41) is directed towards the opening up of future possibility *at the present* in the blasting apart of the homogenous

continuum of historical narrative constructed by history's 'victors'. For our time, of course, the context in which such a reworking of the present as a site of possibility must take place is that of a dominant writing of twentieth-century history as the triumphal procession towards 'global capitalist hegemony' and the cynicism and melancholia which characterises the 'postmodern' response to this 'victory' among much of the contemporary 'left'. As such, it is in its refusal of such effacement of the futural dimension of the cultural present - what Buck-Morss terms the 'complacency of our times, when "history" is said by its victors to have successfully completed its course' (p68-9) - that the primary importance of this extraordinary work lies.

Thinking of the world of the nineteenth-century Paris Arcades, Benjamin, as cited by Buck-Morss, writes: 'Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream sleep fell over Europe, and with it a reactivation of mythic powers' (p208). For Benjamin the task of the critic had then to become one of provoking an interruptive awakening from this 'dream sleep' which incorporated the collective into the phantasmagorical world of the spectacle. Yet Benjamin never intended this search for a 'constellation of awakening' to be taken as an attack upon the revolutionary possibility of the utopian dream or 'wish-image' itself, the traces of which, he argued, were to be found retained in a multiplicity of cultural configurations of life under capitalism, from exhibitions and interiors to iron constructions and railroads. As Buck-Morss notes, if Benjamin demanded that we "'wake up from the world of our parents" ... what can be demanded of a new generation, if its parents never dream at all?' (p209). Hence Benjamin's own sense of the critical potential, for the cultural present of the 1930s, buried in for example the ridiculed and discarded utopian fantasies of a nineteenth-century socialist like Fourier.

Similarly, for Buck-Morss the critical task at our present has to involve a salvaging and reconfiguration of the fragmented images of the distinctly twentieth-century dream of mass utopia, despite the catastrophes that such dreamworlds, in both East and West, have all too often left in their wake. Thus, she asserts, we 'would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear' (p68). Only in this, she suggests, might the continuation and flourishing of 'oppositional cultural practices' be possible (p276-7). As such, the 'catastrophic effects' that the utopian impulses of industrial modernity have brought to fruition 'need to be criticised in the name of the democratic, utopian hope to which the dream gave expression, not as a rejection of it' (pxiv).

This impressively bold statement of intent finds its socio-historical backdrop of course in the events of the twentieth century's last decade, which saw the fall of the Iron Curtain and thus of the dividing line between the alternate dreamworlds of socialism and consumerism that had

characterised its history since 1917. It is the juxtaposition of the images and desires of these two dreamworlds (and ensuing catastrophes) - the presentation of their proximities and distances - that provides the basis for the main part of this beautifully written and illustrated book. Such juxtaposition throws up a number of compelling constellations and collisions, presented in both word and picture - among the most audacious of which is a comparison of the film *King Kong* and Iofan's plans for the never-built Palace of the Soviets - that conjoin East and West in a shared fascination with, among other phenomena, 'early cinema, urban architecture, mass leaders, media manipulation, the mass-utopian myth of industrial "modernisation"' (p235). It is this modern conception of the 'mass' as *the* political and cultural category central to the utopian imaginary of both East and West that is pursued in the first chapter's confrontation with twentieth-century political theory and its various attempts to resolve the paradoxical demands of 'democracy' and 'sovereignty'. As Buck-Morss convincingly argues, at the root of the catastrophic forms of modern political life has been the problematic legitimacy of sovereignty in the era of mass politics opened up by the French Revolution. Here both the spatial politics of nation-states and the temporal politics of revolution have worked to justify those structures of power which - in bringing forth a 'zone which is above the law and thus, at least potentially, a terrain of terror' - have turned collective dream into collective nightmare (pp2-3). In this, as Buck-Morss notes, power in both the socialist and capitalist worlds 'thrived' precisely by 'inserting itself between the dreamer and the dream's fulfilment, drawing upon the energy of the former and sustaining itself by the perpetual postponement of the latter' (p205), whilst simultaneously threatening the nightmares of either incarceration or poverty to those whom it had the authority to banish from the future world of happiness to come.

Although Buck-Morss is clear that tracing this 'story of similarities' entails a critical attention to the dream images of both East and West, as 'variations of a common theme', it quickly becomes apparent that it is the former dreamworld which is to be the object of the most sustained focus in this work. Part of the reason for this is explained in the book's final section ('Afterward') which touchingly documents - often in the form of a melancholic representation of 'missed opportunity' where 'actors seized the chance, but missed their lines' (p213) - Buck-Morss' own (increasingly fraught) collaborations with the Institute of Philosophy in Moscow during the collapse of the Cold War world. However, the predominant concern with the dreamworld and catastrophe of the Soviet Union is connected here to the argument that the failure of the attempt to realise the socialist dream of mass utopia has repercussions not only for the formerly communist sector of Europe but for 'the whole Western narrative' itself (pxii), threatening to abandon us to a historical moment without any dreams of liberation or other futures at all.

The search for redeemable fragments of dream images that might be

brought into critical constellation with the present leads Buck-Morss, obviously enough, to the repressed activities of the Russian avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. At stake here are the oscillations of association and dissociation between the experimental practice of these avant-gardes and the determinations of revolutionary time to be found within the official ideology of the Communist Party. As Buck-Morss notes, this involves what might be termed a 'politics of conflicting temporalities' (p61); a conflict in which the artistic avant-garde's 'lived temporality of interruption, estrangement, arrest' (p62) was ultimately to be vanquished by the hegemony of the political vanguard's claim for 'a monopoly over time's meaning, a cosmological understanding of history that legitimated the use of violence against all opposing visions of social transformation', including those of Malevich, Tatlin, Mayakovsky et al (p60). By this process, art's function under Stalin became not to 'set reality in question' but to 'stage affirmative representations of reality' as constructed by the predetermined march of history (p61).

If the 'phenomenological experience of avant-garde practice' is viewed therefore as a lost opportunity in the simultaneously utopian and catastrophic historical landscape of the twentieth-century dreamworld (and one which might yet be reactivated in our own present), it is because for it 'what was to come remained an open category' (p48), where the attempted "reconstruction of daily life" (*perestroika byta*) anticipated the socialist future *without sacrificing the present*' (p66). The explicit contrast is of course with Leninist vanguardism, where the otherness of the future is always foreclosed by the determination of 'a "plan" that locks in future meaning', and through which 'the utopian dream becomes a reality of oppression' (p67). Ironically, as Buck-Morss notes, the post-Soviet demand for an accelerated introduction of market forces into Eastern Europe actually replicates this 'rhetoric of high Stalinism, where the masses were told during collectivisation to make sacrifices in the present for a time yet to come' (p267).

In its own way *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* is a book about the spectres of Marx, a defence of Marxian thought and desire that pits itself against the 'dissolution of critical thinking' which characterises 'the new atmosphere of cynicism' (p276). Yet the achievement of this quite brilliant book is to be found in its refusal of any nostalgia for grand narrative; a refusal which, in its recognition of the catastrophes that have all too often accompanied the dreams of future freedom, is far closer to thinkers like Derrida or the later Lyotard than I imagine Buck-Morss would herself acknowledge. Whatever its philosophical affiliations, as an argument for a politics of time that retains the openness of the future *as future*, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* is a call for a rethinking of the present as a site of hope and possibility which should not go unheeded. Benjamin for one, would, I am sure, have approved.

BOOKNOTES

Malcolm Bull, *Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality*, Verso, London 2000, 342pp; £40 hardback, £15 paperback.

Seeing Things Hidden, as its title indicates, is a book of contradictions. Malcolm Bull teaches art history - a Poussin painting adorns the front of the paperback - yet this is not a book about art. He claims to offer a new 'philosophy of history', yet his argument reiterates the postmodern fragmentation which renders such grand ambitions unintelligible. The book sets out to defend the concept of totality from 'perspectivalism' - the proliferation of perspectives on the world implied in Cartesian dualism - yet it ends by acknowledging the reality of multiculturalism as an era of 'souls dawning around us and within us'.

These contradictions extend to the question of the genealogy of Bull's enterprise: the tone of the writing, the patient, piecemeal exposition and the range of philosophical reference suggest a work within the 'analytic', Anglo-American tradition rather than the continental one, yet the argument mobilises Lukács as often as J.L. Austin, Kristeva as often as Kuhn, and Lévi-Strauss as often as MacIntyre.

Bull's project, in fact, is a synthesising one; the vehicle of this synthesis, and of his attempted recuperation of totality, is the concept of 'necessary contradiction'. Bull puts forward a theory of modernity as a process of 'coming into hiding' - his term for the revelation, through history, of what Marxists used to call 'the dialectical nature of human reality'. Explicitly opposed to Derrida's concept of 'undecidability', necessary contradiction refers to a real historical process: the disappearance of (false) identities and their replacement by (true) disparities. Recent examples of this process - the dissolution of social taboos, the acceptance of racial and other minorities into the body politic, the increasing visibility of border or hybrid identities - demonstrate the optimism and inclusiveness of Bull's thesis. Contradiction is conceived here in *substantive* rather than negative terms (as absence, ambivalence, or lack): 'hiddenness', or contradiction, is the realisation of the modern project, rather than its unintended consequence.

The key images of the book are accordingly paradoxical. Walter Benjamin's angel of history, backed up against the present and contemplating the past, but blasted helplessly, backwards into the future, is a defining metaphor. This apocalyptic vision provides historiography with a model for an affirmative approach to the past, which is filtered redemptively through the lens of the present. The moment of redemption is wrested out of the future into the here and now; thus 'apocalyptic', as Bull calls it, is

reclaimed as a tool of political reality, becoming life-affirming rather than life denying.

This is an immensely ambitious book. Its central motif, and *coup de main*, is its overturning of the twentieth-century tendency to think about history and progress in the tragic terms of loss and catastrophe - a tendency exemplified by Lyotard's description of postmodernity as 'incredulity toward metanarratives'. Bull inverts Lyotard's formula: late modernity is characterised rather by the 'gradual recognition of unknowable true contradictions'. Thus he preserves both the idea of a philosophy of history and the Enlightenment faith in rationality in the face of their postmodern critique. His is a political rather than religious vision of apocalypse - a climactic event belied by its familiarity, a series of achievements which we take for granted, a moment of totality which is never recognised as such. It is articulated here in an 'epilogue', an appropriately non-eschatological ending to an expansive, anti-dogmatic and reconciliatory work.

Timothy Bewes

C. Richard King (ed), *Post-colonial America*, University of Chicago Press. Urbana and Chicago 2000, 361pp; \$49.95 hardback; \$23.95 paperback.

The peculiar position of the United States within postcolonial studies has been noted ever since the US was confidently declared the postcolonial model country by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* (1989). All but a few of the present essays, however, written by scholars from various disciplines and theoretical orientations, are united in their silent or explicit agreement that the term 'post-colonial' applies to the historical reality and cultural production of the United States in the period after the Second World War. This produces some very sophisticated scholarship but also raises terminological questions. The essays collected in this heterogeneous volume, though most of them closely argued and convincing in the particular issues they address, remain unsatisfactory in their fundamental concern - to show that the present-day United States was susceptible to analysis from a postcolonial viewpoint.

The heterogeneity of the volume can be illustrated by the divergence between E. San Juan who, describing the quasi-essentialist evocations of 'home' and 'people' by resistance fighters in Guatemala, the Caribbean, and the Philippines, rejects postcolonial theory because of its close links with poststructuralism and its potential complicity with post-Fordist capitalism and the inequalities of the international labour market, and Elena Glasberg's call for a 'Transnational U.S. Studies' that would release us 'from fictions of place and nation' by tracking transnational economic and virtual relations and interstices as 'the tentacle ends of empire'.

The virtual equation of postcolonial with contemporary US studies,

transnational studies, or perhaps even world studies, produces a vagueness in the definition of the term 'postcolonial'. In his introduction, Richard King conceives of 'postcolonial America' as 'the intersections of local, national, and transnational formations, as specific articulations of histories, processes, and relations' (p8). 'Postcoloniality', King claims, 'permits us to speak of the forms of power, fields of discourses, and conditions of possibilities germane to the present'. Fortunately, the essays are more focussed than that. They range from descriptions of the post-apocalyptic and postcolonial mood in American culture in response to the Vietnam War (Jon Stratton) to American legal attitudes toward Asian immigrants (Donna Maeda), a critique of the New Americanists' rhetoric (Susie O'Brien), a critical internet exploration of Chrysler's postnationalist marketing strategies (Elena Glasberg), examples of complicit postcoloniality in the social life of middle-class migrants in New Mexico (Arthur Martin), a critique of the limitations of religious studies (Russell McCutcheon), a study of the counterhegemonic force of hip-hop culture (Brij Lunine), and an examination of a Hawaiian museum exhibit that seeks to deconstruct exotic fabrications of Hawaiian culture (David Prochaska).

Though individual essays try to locate their analytical practice within the coordinates of postcolonial criticism, the volume as a whole fails to address some of the most striking 'postcolonial' hiccups within the present-day United States. Authors look at definitions of Native American citizenship up to 1965 (Rachel Buff) or the conflict between Native spiritual rights and the tourist industry around the Devil's Tower monument (John Dorst); but there is no essay addressing the more blatant continuation of the colonial exploitation of Indian land. At least one writer (E. San Juan) points out the neo-imperial violence against indigenous peoples in countries occupied or dominated by the United States, but there is no essay on the physical and structural violence against Blacks within the US.

Unlike *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993), edited by Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, the present volume almost completely eschews the period most often identified as properly postcolonial: the decades after independence from Britain, in which the postcolonial discourse of national exceptionalism attended a continuation of European imperial practices. The laudable exception to this historical reluctance is Laura Donaldson's fine essay on the ambivalent postcoloniality of Pequot activist William Apess's life and letters. Donaldson convincingly tests out critical postcolonial theoremes in her analysis of Apess's traumatic transition from initial voicelessness to finding a surprisingly 'transnational' voice of resistance and ethnic solidarity.

Post-colonial America deserves attention for the empirical quality of its individual glimpses at contemporary American life. As a contribution to postcolonial studies, it partakes in the dilution and dehistoricisation of the concept.

Gesa Mackenthun

Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray (eds), *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures: Dislocations*, Macmillan, London 2000, 283pp; £42.50 cloth.

Comparing Postcolonial Literatures is a timely and important collection of essays which challenges the intellectual and disciplinary borders of postcolonialism while attending to a variety of literatures often neglected in studies of postcolonial culture. As Ashok Bery and Patricia Murray make clear in their lucid and thought-provoking introduction, the current practice of postcolonial studies in Britain is endangered by the frequently uncritical acceptance of key terms such as 'hybridity' and 'ambivalence' gleaned from cheerful readings of Homi Bhabha and his ilk. In addition, the privileging of a select body of specifically Anglophone literatures - a hangover, perhaps, from the older paradigm of 'Commonwealth literature' studies - has meant that, on the one hand, Francophone and Hispanic postcolonial literatures have not been read comparatively with Anglophone writing, nor examined in their own contexts as part of postcolonial studies in Britain. On the other hand, certain Anglophone literatures, such as Anglo-Irish, have been incorrectly passed over in postcolonial criticism; indeed, the collection is eager to promote the study of Anglo-Irish literature as postcolonial with the first five of the seventeen essays dealing specifically with Anglo-Irish subjects (including an excellent essay by C.L. Innes on 'Postcolonial Studies and Ireland'). Hence the aptness of Bery and Murray's subtitle, 'dislocations': the collection as a whole attempts to explore a wide variety of writers and cultures dislocated as a consequence of the histories of colonialism, empire and transculturation, on the way to making its own dislocation of orthodox critical approaches in postcolonialism by crossing the limited borders within which much postcolonial scholarship takes place. Yet, the collection is not always as revolutionary as it might seem; at times it appears that an advocacy of Bhabha is being replaced with an equally uncritical lauding of Stuart Hall's work, especially his writings on the importance of positioning in constructions of identity.

The essays by Willy Maley and Gerry Smyth offer witty, penetrating critiques of the current vogue for all things hyphenated, piebald and hybrid. Other essays deal expertly with the problems, crises and pain of crossing or living between borders, such as Sujala Singh's compelling exploration of the dire consequences for women created by the partition of India and Pakistan in her essay 'Nationalism's Brandings: Women's Bodies and Narratives of Partition'. But there is also an admirable attention to the new cultural forms being created as a consequence of dislocation. I enjoyed particularly Nara Araújo's lively and thoughtful exploration of Cuban and Cuban-American literatures and David Richards's revealing discussion of Christopher Okigbo, which traces the relations between Okigbo's African modernism and his interest in Picasso. Postcolonial literatures in other languages are also fruitfully explored: Sam Haigh offers an eye-opening discussion of the *nouvelle* in Francophone Antillean literature with particular

reference to Sylvaine Telchid, while Catherine Davies analyses the work of Cuban poet Excilia Saldaña and focuses intelligently on the issue of translation, both within and of the text.

The collection concludes with a closing statement by Wilson Harris, who emerges, one suspects, as the objective correlative of the dislocated, plural, many-tongued new cultural formations delineated by Bery and Murray that cannot be contained within the increasingly inflexible borders of postcolonial critical orthodoxy. As well as constituting a busy and intelligent contribution to the field, *Comparing Postcolonial Literatures* shows the way forward for postcolonial studies by pushing against its disciplinary borders in a healthy spirit of self-critique and innovation.

John McLeod