A Question Of Sport? Butler Contra Laclau Contra Zizek

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Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Verso, London 2000, 336pp; £15.00 paperback; £45.00 hardback.

Contingency, Hegemony, Universality is a publishing exercise which might either be described as bold, original and refreshing or vain, self-indulgent and infuriating. The book consists of a series of essays by three of the leading theorists currently writing in the English language: Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek. A debate - often implicit, occasionally explicit - between these three figures, all of whom claim to occupy the theoretical and political territory of 'radical democracy' first set out by Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, has been carried out in the margins and asides of their published works and public appearances for some time now. Essays and books by several of their respective followers, and high-profile essays by Zizek and Butler, have foregrounded their disagreements.

This book seeks to demarcate the differences between its contributors, as well as the points of connection, according to a novel procedure. To begin with each contributor poses a series of eight to ten questions to the others, each expressed in a short paragraph, at the beginning of the book. The questions range across the current theoretical preoccupations of the authors and the historic points of contention between them: the meaning and viability of the Lacanian topology of the subject, in particular the conceptual status of 'the Real'; the nature of political identification; the continued relevance of Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist conceptualisation of 'hegemony'; the conceptual and political status of forms of universality; the theory and politics of 'difference' (sexual or otherwise); the political and conceptual status of forms of pluralism and particularism for radical politics today; the relationship between historicism, formalism and transcendentalism in contemporary theory; the relationship between Lacan and other branches of 'post-structuralism'; the philosophical legacies of Hegel and Kant. Each author then replies to these questions in an essay of approximately forty pages. Each then produces a response of similar length to the first three essays, followed by a final response to the preceding discussion. The resulting essays are presented with no index and a rather sketchy guide to contents.

A book largely made up of commentaries on and responses to its own

earlier chapters is remarkably difficult to review, spending as it does more than half of its time *reviewing itself*. At its best, the result is a work which combines an uncommon level of rigorous and direct argumentation with something of the thrill of a sports event: one cannot help cheering on each player in turn as they deftly dodge the rhetorical blows of the others, blocking spurious arguments with lightning logic and scoring points with dazzling displays of scholarship and rigour. At its worst, the effect is a frustrating degree of repetition and pedantry, as each author clarifies again and again positions they feel (rightly, in almost all cases) to have been misunderstood by their interlocutors. Readers are likely to find themselves in equal parts annoyed and entertained by the palpable irritation of the contributors with each other as the book draws to a close, having produced few instances of any of them taking the crucial step of answering the others' questions in terms other than their own.

This, perhaps, is the book's greatest weakness, and yet also its greatest strength - and one which this format renders almost inevitable. Ultimately, the authors spend most of the time expounding and clarifying their own positions and the unique theoretical vocabularies within which they are expressed, and upbraiding their interlocutors for failing to comprehend the same issues in the same terms. This is particularly ironic insofar as one of the key points of agreement reached between Butler and Laclau is on the centrality to successful political projects of practices of translation.

It would be quite unfair, however, to charge the authors with equal complicity in this failure to translate. Butler and Laclau at crucial junctures do indeed make the necessary effort to understand the significance of the different valencies each attaches to particular phrases, while the bitterest exchanges in the book occur at the points where the two of them accuse each other of failing to define and properly historicise their *own* terms (a charge which, it might be objected, can always be levelled at any text). Zizek, for his part, is interested only in a one-way translation, redescribing all concepts and phenomena in the language of 'Lacanese' and insisting that that tongue can only ever be understood as a sub-dialect of 'Hegelese'. Like any fundamentalist, the possibility that other languages might ever be desired or even required is simply outside his frame of reference, and the only reason he can entertain for anyone disagreeing with him is that they have not understood; his response to any question is simply to re-state his position in ever more intransigent terms.

The difference between the approach taken by Zizek and his co-contributors is in fact clear from the start. Where the questionnaires produced by Laclau and Butler consist of open-ended questions, every one of Zizek's 'questions' are rhetorical in nature, stridently demanding that the receiver choose between one of two alternatives: a ludicrously simplistic position attributed to Zizek's bogeyman 'postmodernism'/ 'deconstructionist doxa'/'historicism' and the alternative Hegelian-Lacanian position which Zizek makes no secret of his intention to defend, come what

may. For example, when Butler asks, 'Can the ahistorical recourse to the Lacanian bar be reconciled with the strategic question that hegemony poses, or does it stand as a quasi-transcendental limit on all possible subject-formation and, hence, as indifferent to politics?', it may be clear where her sympathies lie (with a position which is sceptical towards the political utility of Lacanian ideas), but she is clearly asking for genuine clarification of the views of her colleagues. When, by contrast, Zizek asks, 'Is the Lacanian Real the ultimate bedrock, the firm referent of the symbolic process, or does it stand for its totally non-substantial inherent limit, point of failure, which maintains the gap between reality and its symbolisation, and thus sets in motion the contingent process of historicisation-symbolisation?', there is no question of there actually being a question. Not only is it clear that Zizek is certain as to what the answer is going to be (the latter); his question is framed according to a distinction which can only produce the Zizekian response, since no one who knows anything about Lacan is going to defend the former position - unless on the grounds that Zizek's alternative is a false one. Every one of Zizek's 'questions' takes this form, a form which demonstrates his apparent inability even to imagine what it would be like to think outside of his Hegelian-Lacanian orthodoxy.

It would be unfair, not to say unsporting, simply to write off Zizek's contribution. The constant re-statement of his basic positions provokes him, by the time of the final instalment, to present an exposition of Lacan-Hegel of unparalleled lucidity, making quite clear that the terms in which he understands the Lacanian schema are not at all vulnerable to the usual criticisms of it, and indeed present a considerable challenge to any theoretical model predicated on such critiques. As little as Zizek seems to understand the positions of anyone else, he unquestionably remains the key expositor of Lacanian cultural theory in the current era, and the first half of his final essay is a unique defence of Lacanian Hegelianism which casts it in terms refreshingly different from the provocatively metaphysical rhetoric for which he has become famous.

And yet, typically for a theoretical player of such verve and brilliance, it is at precisely the moments when Zizek appears to be at the peak of his form that his game collapses, and he crosses the line into absurdity. Zizek's stunning defence of Lacan and Hegel falls apart when he attempts to reverse the flow of argument and go on the offensive against his perceived enemies. Like so many critics of 'multiculturalism', 'postmodernism' and 'cultural studies' (all, we are assured, players on the same team), Zizek fails to cite even one example of these ubiquitous and mercurial foes. Not a single reference to a text or author is offered in the attacks on these supposed enemies with which Zizek closes his last two contributions. Despite Zizek's early assertion that the answer to the question 'class struggle or postmodernism?' is 'yes please' (a joke he evidently thinks original enough to need explaining), he clearly regards the latter as the enemy of the former. Speaking in the name of a Marxism so orthodox it would have embarrassed

Trotsky (never mind Marx), Zizek's closing attempts to marry it with his Lacanian fundamentalism appear by turns merely clumsy and excruciatingly embarrassing. His assertion that 'capitalism is the Real' of contemporary politics, his suggestion that the world class system can be mapped according to the tripartite topology of symbolic (the 'workers': presumably everyone from primary school teachers to millionaire market analysts), imaginary (the conservative 'middle classes' who still believe in 'the wholeness of society', wherever they are) and real (the lumpen masses) is simply a sociological absurdity, especially from any kind of Marxian perspective, and one which it would really have been kinder for some editor to dispense with. Zizek's reliance on analogical and allegorical arguments which see the logic of symbolic/imaginary/real reproduced at every level of experience carries no logical weight at all, as pointed out by both Laclau and Butler.

At the end of the day, Zizek is only convincing when playing on his Lacanian home ground. In particular, his attempts to bolt a crude Marxist account of the determining effects of 'capitalism' as the absolute horizon of the contemporary and the need for history-changing revolutionary 'acts' onto the sophisticated Lacanian framework which made his reputation is simply no match for a wily old Althusserian like Ernesto Laclau. What is most impressive about the latter's contribution is not merely its displays of technical skill in the matter of abstract argumentation, but the weight of scholarship which underpins it. Laclau's arguments against Zizek's logic - and his accusations that Zizek is, in the end, an apolitical thinker incapable of moving beyond the limits of purely psychoanalytic thought - must ultimately be judged according to the taste and discernment of the reader. The moments when he scores most decisively against his opponent are when he deflects some shot from Zizek with a deftly understated gesture, revealing at last his far greater experience of the game. It is easy to forget, given the nature of their recent outputs and the tone of the early parts of this work, and especially given Zizek's appeals to a Marxist tradition he claims to uphold, that of the two it is Laclau who has the greater standing as a scholar of Marxism, while for Zizek Marx is implicitly read as a follower and interpreter of Hegel of rather less importance than Lacan. For me the most devastating blow which Laclau strikes in the whole book is where he quietly points out that Zizek's 'Marxism' simply ignores the entire past century of Marxist thought and debate. Similarly, to Zizek's insistence that capitalism is 'the Real' which contemporary theoretical discourse, in its complicity with neo-liberal hegemony, forecloses, Laclau merely replies that this cannot be the case as 'capitalism' is quite clearly only effective *within* a symbolic order.

It is his authority as a scholar which is also most convincing in Laclau's disagreements with Butler. In this case, the object of disagreement is the proper interpretation and implications of the work of Lacan, which Laclau believes do not lend support to an essentialist account of sexual difference in the manner that Butler fears. However much the reader may be won

over by Butler's lucidity and passionate political commitment, always more engaging than Zizek's quixotic bluster or Laclau's dry detachment, one is left with the sense that her criticisms of the Lacanian vocabulary are based on a certain textbook understanding of Lacan which bears little relation to Lacan as read by experts on his work such as Zizek and Laclau.

Even if this is the case, however, it does not excuse Zizek's and Laclau's reluctance to engage properly with the issues raised by the facts which are the source of Butler's anxiety: that there *is* an account of Lacan's ideas which is widely circulated in the Anglophone academy and which is implicitly, if not explicitly, essentialist and homophobic in its implications; that there *really are* Lacanian psychoanalysts running around making explicitly homophobic statements in the French press and elsewhere. What is particularly strange is that none of the contributors tackle the issue of the problematic implications of making 'castration', 'sexual difference' and 'the Real' virtually synonymous terms with as much directness as Zizek does in the appendix to his earlier volume *The Metastases of Enjoyment*. Instead, this issue, like that of the historical status of concepts such as 'hegemony' and indeed 'historicity', gives rise to the most protracted three-way conflict of the book, that accurately described by Butler as its 'comedy of formalisms'. Within this comedy, each of the contributors comes to accuse the others of being excessively formalist or empiricist in the implications of their arguments and to refer this disagreement to a misplaced understanding of the significance of Hegel's critique of Kant and a misunderstanding of the relationship between Hegel and Lacan. Zizek has no doubt either that Lacan is the second-coming of Hegel or that simply to find Laclau guilty of 'Kantianism' is to prove him wrong; Laclau disputes the authority of Hegel, as anyone so imbued with the thought of Althusser and Derrida must, while denying that Lacan's thought is fundamentally Hegelian in nature; Butler defends Hegel but remains sceptical that the implicit anti-essentialism of his thought is in fact compatible with Lacan. What emerges, as Laclau points out, is an intriguing absence of clear lines of demarcation.

At least, that is a fair interpretation as long as each of these issues is regarded as of similar importance. However, what really emerges by the end of the book is on the one hand a set of scholastic, exegetic disputes over the proper understanding of Lacan and Hegel and on the other a real political gulf separating Laclau and Butler on the one side from Zizek on the other. While the former remain committed to the 'left postmodernist' project of radical and plural democracy, resolutely refusing the distinction between 'revolutionary' and 'reformist' politics, Zizek commits himself to the class struggle and revolution against capitalism, condemning those who decline to do likewise as petit-bourgeois lapdogs of neo-liberalism.

In the process it is actually Butler who emerges as the most appealing player, and it is clear why she is the one who has cast the most powerful spell over the English-speaking audience in recent years. It is the simple

readability of Butler's contributions, the rate at which they generate concepts and arguments which are readily understood and easy to apply elsewhere, which marks them out. Laclau may be right, for instance, that his concept of 'equivalence' is theoretically preferable to Butler's 'translation' (both of them attempts to describe the logic by which elements are reconfigured within a hegemonic operation), but it is not nearly so suggestive or as amenable to an audience more used to thinking in terms of poetics than formal logic. It is Butler's straightforward indignation at the apparent unconcern with which Lacanian theorists trample over the basic assumptions of queer feminism which is easier to sympathise with than either Zizek's macho posturing or Laclau's intimidating scholarship. Even when she trips and falls, as she appears to when in direct confrontation with Laclau, she has our sympathy, even though it is he who displays that knowledge and skill which finally leaves him in control of the game.

Not that such skill is always required. In particular, Zizek's unqualified, unjustified and unsubstantiated assessments, often framed as rhetorical questions ('Is it not obvious that ... ?'), are as easy to refute as they are to make. On the other hand, Zizek's insistent demand that a position be taken on the question of capitalism, its effects, and its possible replacement is a timely provocation to 'post-Marxist' thought. While Laclau and Butler have both made incisive and important remarks on the implications of their work for the theorisation of capitalism and its relationship to culture, politics and the state, what has yet to emerge is an adequate theoretical formulation of the grounds upon which the post-revolutionary left might oppose - or not - various types of capitalist formation. Whatever his weaknesses, Zizek's capacity to ask the questions which must be answered (how like a psychoanalyst!) remains his enduring strength, while the sense that those questions *are* answerable within the frameworks articulated by Laclau and Butler, but have not been (quite), haunts the work from beginning to end. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* is at last a satisfying and enlightening - not to mention entertaining, if exhausting - work which comes highly recommended. But we will have to wait for a re-match to see if those answers are really there, or if their promise is merely a manifestation of the *objet petit a*, luring us and our three players onwards towards a goal which is never quite reached.

Zizek Against The Fashionable Intelligence: On Totalitarianism

Lois Wheller

Slavoj Zizek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion*, Verso, London and New York 2001, 280pp; £16 hardback.

Readers of Slavoj Zizek's previous work will be familiar with the ideological mechanisms and totalitarian state systems, in particular Stalinist Communism and Nazi Fascism, explored in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* This addition to Zizek's oeuvre significantly extends his concerns, investigating both the notion of totalitarianism and the ideological function of the term itself within academic debate. The threat of totalitarianism, discerned by critics in any argument that even brushes with a prescriptive or universalising mode, comes charged not only with overtones of fascism and racism, but with the unspeakability of a specific violent history that these terms evoke. Zizek argues that 'the notion of "totalitarianism", far from being an effective theoretical concept is a kind of *stopgap*' which inhibits not only action but intellectual thought (p3). Often deployed to neutralise rather than critique, the concept of totalitarianism has, perhaps paradoxically, contributed to the fencing in of political philosophy. As the introduction states, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* does not offer a historical account of totalitarianism or even argue for its redemption or reappropriation. Instead, Zizek adopts a typically broad frame of reference, from Antigone to the films of John Woo, and weaves together five interventions that reverberate with an anxiety over political agency in current Leftist academia.

Rather than forming a single exposition, this collection of essays is united through an attack on those 'conformist liberal scoundrels' that Zizek loves to hate. His writing has been fuelled by the 'burning question of how we are to reformulate a Leftist, anti-capitalist political project in our era of global capitalism and its ideological supplement, liberal-democratic multiculturalism'.[1] In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* he contends that the new populist Right in the West has usurped the anti-capitalist stance of the Left. Without either its radical position or scope for political engagement, the left is now forced to shuttle between artificially constructed poles of democracy and totalitarianism that ensure a liberal democratic hegemony. Whilst Zizek's caricature of liberal democracy may put some readers on guard, a disjunction between theory and practice, and a surplus of taboos generated by this anxiety - of which the Political Correctness row

1. Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Verso, London and New York 1999, p4.

is but a small part - is perceived as a significant cause of unproductive friction in certain academic disciplines. In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* Zizek deploys his distinctive blend of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics to formulate a materialist response to metaphysical notions of totality and political structures of totalitarianism that is as urgent and antagonistic as it is engagingly playful.

The range of material and its fragmented presentation makes this book easy to dip into, but the exploration of mythic narrative structures in the first intervention usefully prefaces a more specific examination of tragedy in relation to twentieth century totalitarianism in the following chapters. In order to ask whether the violence perpetrated under Nazi Fascism and Stalinist Communism can still be interpreted in terms of tragedy, the book's opening chapter, entitled 'The Myth and Its Vicissitudes', examines changes that have occurred in our understanding of tragedy since the classical era. Zizek's concern is to provide a temporal narrative that demonstrates a logical progression from comedy to tragedy, thereby refusing the myth its conventional status as a 'starting point' (p26). Rather than reading Hamlet as a secondary distortion of the Oedipus myth, Zizek argues that the Hamlet narrative in fact preceded its incarnation as myth in the Oedipus story. Likewise, analysis of three successive treatments of Marcel Pagnol's *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources* reveal that the mythical structures of tragedy and Fate are most prominent in Claude Berri's 1987 film version. The main 'lesson' for Zizek's reader is not that contemporary myths are inauthentic, but that '*myth as such is a fake*' (p26). Yet the tripartite classification of the traditional, early modern and contemporary hero which emerges from Zizek's analysis of late Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism, somewhat curiously echoes the mythological matrix of three generations that he draws out of the Oedipus family myth. Whilst explicitly distancing himself from the nostalgic yearning for authentic tragedy which he discerns in Lacan's anti-Americanism, Zizek's argument nonetheless positions Greek tragedy proper above contemporary action films, undermining his own impressive movement between the canonical and the popular, that later enables an insightful Levinasian reading of John Woo's *Face Off*.

A grounding exploration of tragedy is, however, important to the bold probing of Nazism and the Holocaust in the second chapter. Zizek is fully aware that he risks repeating 'the anti-Semitic negation of its uniqueness' when he argues that representations of the Holocaust as the 'untouchable exception' contribute to the occlusion of a violent history of Western colonisation and the splintering of current anti-capitalist forces (p67). The near comic speculation into Hitler's psyche used to introduce these concerns supports Zizek's claim that an increase in Holocaust comedies can be correlated with its elevation into 'the unspeakable Evil' (p68). This chapter provides readings of several comic and tragi-comic Holocaust films, setting them against the tragic narrative of *Schindler's List* which is classed as a

failure. Interpreting the victim of the extermination camps, the figure of the 'Muslim', as 'beyond tragedy' rather than 'dehumanised', Zizek argues that the Holocaust cannot be represented successfully as a tragedy. Building on his allusion to the totalitarian dynamic of laughter in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Zizek resists any simple association of comedy with liberty and unpicks a paradoxical generation of tragedy through cruel humour. In particular, Zizek's analysis of the comic aspect to the automative gestures of the 'Muslim' figure brings his argument right up against the representational difficulties of the subject and opens up challenging correlations of comedy and suffering. The imagery that informs the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and the writing of Sarah Kofman, Robert Antelme, Maurice Blanchot and Julia Kristeva come to this reader's mind. Considering the work of these writers, it is disappointing that this engaging section does not consider the theme of 'the stranger within ourselves' (p57), a 'fashionable thesis' which is rejected outright in the previous chapter.

Through a reading of Vaclav Havel's *The Power of the Powerless*, chapter 3 returns to themes addressed elsewhere in Zizek's work, in particular Stalinist totalitarianism and the miscommunication between the Western Left and dissidents of late socialism in East Europe. This chapter unfolds numerous paradoxes of ethical law that 'harbour a genuine tragic dimension overlooked by standard liberal diatribes against "totalitarianism"' (p101). For example, the old Bolshevik redefinition of "'severe justice'... in terms of excessive forgiveness and generosity" is informed by a *structurally* perverse logic of public confession and unfulfillable economy of duty and is not, therefore, simply a false legitimation of state violence. Any simple notions of belief, betrayal, loyalty or apathy, or any tidy oppositions between ethics and totalitarianism, public action and private belief, are rigorously dispelled. This discussion extends analysis of the Stalinist show trials in *The Ticklish Subject*, where horror defies description and the tragic dimension is absent from the victims' fate ' - that is, they were not tragic heroes, but something more horrible and simultaneously more comical'.[2] The suggestion is that our understanding of tragic and comic structures informs our interpretations of ethical law, problematising distinctions drawn between mental states of innocence and guilt and between acts of collaboration and resistance, but surely also between the terms of conformist and radical politics that motivate this text.

2. Ibid., pp320-21.

Challenging the conceptual and ethical primacy of melancholy in current criticism, chapter 4, 'Melancholy and the Act', proposes an exit to this theoretical 'stop-gap' through a Lacanian interpretation of *the act*. The echoes of postcolonial criticism, most notably of Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory* and E San Juan's *Beyond Theory*, in Zizek's anti-theoretical materialism make his provocative statements concerning a cynical and melancholic attachment to the gesture of loss in postcolonial studies and queer theory sound a little glib. Even less satisfactory is the argument that homosexual desire could fade with legislation that accommodates gay couples. The remainder of

this chapter could be read as a response to Simon Critchley's political appropriations of Derrida, Levinas and Lacan in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*. Zizek contrasts melancholic attachment to the messianic longing brought out in Critchley's reading of a Derridean 'democracy to come', but states that both melancholic and messianic longing preclude the possibility of the act or the decision, leading instead to passivity or pragmatism. Whereas *The Sublime Object of Ideology* finds in Hegel 'the strongest affirmation yet of difference and contingency',[3] *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* attempts to divorce itself further from the 'deconstructionist political doxa' in which 'any stance that does not endorse the mantra of contingency/displacement/finitude is dismissed as potentially "totalitarian"' (p6). Derrida's democratic deconstruction is interpreted as a total renunciation of actual political measures that contrasts with the dynamic possibilities for change accommodated in a Lacanian conception of the act. In conclusion, Zizek relocates naivety in the assumption that reality is a given rather than in the belief that we can break from reality, but it is not clear where this interesting reversal leaves the numerous, and varied, cynics whom he attacks.

3. Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London and New York 1989, p7.

Departing from the philosophical, political and literary emphases of the four previous interventions, Zizek's final chapter, 'Are Cultural Studies Really Totalitarian?', examines the relation of the Freudian Real to the scientific Real and argues for the need to probe the parameters of philosophy and science without reducing either discipline to the other. As Zizek identifies, the critical-theoretical prohibition on both naive empiricism and non-historical metaphysics has opened up an abyss between philosophy and science. His analysis of 'popular science' and the 'Third Culture' suggests that this gap is, and perhaps must be, unbridgeable. Yet Zizek's useful insistence on the reiteration of naive questions, concerning the structure of the universe and the human psyche, does not necessarily lead to a Lacanian privileging of 'hard' science. It is not specified how we are to pursue Zizek's call to untangle real science from its popular ideological counterpart. The scientific discourse addressed here does, however, suggest some major omissions in the field of philosophy and offers a different viewpoint from which to examine the assumptions that inform the stand-off over theoretical and political agency in the social sciences. But perhaps more significantly, and as Zizek notes, it is the scientific specialist who has begun to displace the often less intelligible theorist from the humanities as public spokesperson, a cultural shift which particularly threatens the role, authority and credibility of the Leftist intellectual.

Packed with examples drawn from popular culture and current events, including the *Big Brother* television shows, the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*, (the Millennium bug, right wing politics in Austria and the recent Bosnian conflict), the conclusion of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* is, like the previous chapters, both engagingly nostalgic and up to the minute. Whilst such cultural references may appear to make these interventions acutely political and practical, they also risk a sensationalism which is

counterproductive to this text's anti-capitalist and demythologising project. In contrast, it is out of 'a concern with sobriety' that Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* 'deliberately refrain[s] from recourse to "illustrations" to "actualize" our analysis or in an attempt to demonstrate their necessity today'.[4] It is perhaps such a tension of *currency* that finds *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* framing its insightful analysis in yet another attack on fashionable permissiveness, postmodern cynicism or elitist theoretical jargon. Zizek distances himself from all academic vogues, criticising the rise in popularity of Hannah Arendt (pp2-3) as well as the recent 'return to ethics' which 'shamefully exploits the horrors of Gulag or Holocaust as the ultimate bogey for blackmailing us into renouncing all serious radical engagement' (p4). Nonetheless, the language of *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* frequently evokes such a critical call for a 'return', whether to art, literature, politics or ethics, each one an instance of what Zygmunt Bauman calls "that seriousness which the socially produced world made all but laughable".[5]

4. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, George Collins (trans), Verso, London and New York 1997, p272.

5. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1997, p 126.

Zizek continues to be an excellent and necessary exponent of Lacanian psychoanalysis at a time where Lacan has fallen from favour in certain academic circles (perhaps even to Zizek's secret delight). Zizek's Lacanian twist on ethics, democracy, tragedy and comedy in *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* is rigorous in its detail and refreshingly unfettered. But at times the tone seems to express antagonism for antagonism's sake. Bemoaning a 'false universal critical capacity to pass judgement on everything, without proper knowledge' (p224), and providing a brief 'test' of his readers' 'implicit racism' (p235), this book risks shielding the academic taboos that it otherwise effectively challenges.

VULGARITY, HE SAID: T.J. CLARK'S MODERNISM

Herman Rapaport

T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, Yale University Press, London 1999, pp450 plus 252 illustrations; £30.00 hardback.

Ever since the 1980s people have started to ask, 'what exactly *was* modernity?' For a long time we thought we knew. Modernity, the experts said, had to do with a delegitimation of the past that had its sources in Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Moreover, in anticipation of a full scale cultural revolution, some nineteenth-century artists were intuitively resisting the rational coherence of a bourgeois world picture. One can even hear this in as conservative a composer as Bruckner, whose symphonies are made up of sections that sound like titanic fragments loosely strewn rather than carefully put together. Mahler, Wagner, and Debussy are similar cases, and were followed by an even more radical decentring of harmony by Stravinsky and Schoenberg. The parallels in literature and painting are well known and have often been used to show that an old cultural order was breaking up because, as the Yeatsian cliché had it, the centre wasn't holding. But metaphors and crumbling empires aside, what exactly *had* happened? Had a new age simply come about through a convergence of social-political changes? Had the West somehow passed through a major epistemic break? Had an entire world picture been shattered because the past had been intellectually discredited? Or was the horror of World War One mainly to blame? The answer we've been given is all of the above and then some.

Of course, these questions assume that the modern results from destabilising events of great magnitude. Although T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* doesn't invalidate any of these accounts - in some respects, it bolsters them - it actually goes a long way towards downplaying the rhetoric of crisis and upheaval that has been a common theme for historians of the field. Part of this is reflected in the fact that Clark's examples - David, Pissarro, the Suprematists - are not generally included among what modernists have often identified as modernism's spectacular fireworks. The two big exceptions are Clark's accounts of Picasso's cubist paintings of 1908-1912 and his full scale analysis of Jackson Pollock's major phase.

What makes this a landmark study is that it brilliantly downplays the

well known contours of modernist history in favour of looking at particulars within that history that do and do not fit the familiar master narratives. And seeing those particulars is the genius of this project. Also welcome is that Clark has let the cat out of the bag concerning what happens when art historians *look* at art. Anyone who reads interpretations of paintings has probably noticed that even straightforward descriptions can be misleading, as in the case of Meyer Schapiro's failure to notice that Van Gogh's pair of painted peasant shoes is not really a pair of shoes at all, since in order to have a pair one would need a left and right shoe. Worse, interpretations of paintings often project fantasies onto the work. Heidegger's much discredited account of the peasant woman who was supposedly the wearer of the shoes Schapiro was talking about is typical of this hermeneutical practice.

In Clark's book, we get the rare admission that the relationship between perception and conception is extremely vexed and that there is a major problem concerning the hermeneutics of looking. For one thing, one needs some prosthetic fantasies in order to get an analysis on the right track. What we learn from Clark is that the process of looking and interpreting requires us to indulge in heuristic fantasies that can't be empirically justified. Moreover, Clark teaches us that we don't have an adequate vocabulary for talking about visual art; that often we depend upon anecdotal contexts; that we're not able to tell for sure which particular visual structure should be privileged in a work; and, ultimately, that we're compromised by the fact that one can never be absolutely sure that one's conception of the work is the right conception. Do we really know what El Lissitzky had in mind when he engaged in 'agitprop'? Is it possible to stabilise a history of revolution in process long enough to construct a context for interpreting art? Did Picasso actually understand the conceptual issues he was facing when he painted his most path breaking cubist works? And can we know let alone evaluate with any certainty just what he was doing when he revised his great cubist canvases?

Clark's answer to such questions is yes and no. Though such negative capability is refreshing, it does have the downside of appearing thin and inconclusive. No matter how sophisticated we are, perhaps we still hanker after some master narratives. Happily Clark does have a central thesis, which goes like this. At around the time of the French Revolution an artist such as Jacques-Louis David had to deal with radical contingencies within the life-world that posed a new problem for art: one can't see exactly what it is that one has to represent, because 'reality' is too much in flux. This is the radical epistemic break that modernists have somehow not made enough of, their attention being drawn to issues like the death of God, the Freudian discovery of psycho-sexuality, and the advent of mass man and consumer culture. Instead of taking such a thematic approach to history, Clark notices instances in which art has to struggle with the unrepresentability of a changing life-world which follows from the fact that this world is never

stable enough to be seen as a thing in itself. His opening chapter on David is a brilliant exposition of this thesis, because it is based on the fact that the figure of Marat, whom David painted in the summer of 1793, was being figured or constructed by a number of political revolutionary factions, and that this conflict of interpretations was highly unstable and therefore in flux for some months. David was asked by the Jacobin faction to find a way of depicting Marat that was politically acceptable to revolutionaries but politically useful to the Jacobins. To put this crudely, David was being asked to put a bit of media spin on a figure whose martyrdom was threatening to blossom into a cult so strong that it could render the Jacobins far less powerful than they were. How was David to construct an image that would hegemonically win the day? David *couldn't* know the solution, according to Clark, because he was living at a time when change was too radical and coming too fast. In a sense, he had to paint the picture blind, which is to say, blind to many of the things going on around him. The relation of the work to the political life-world was therefore in suspension until the work was put on display in the fall of 1793, a display that David presumably orchestrated, and that allowed for a retroactive political interpretation. Of course, David was lucky that matters turned out well, for in truth *Death of Marat* is perhaps the best example we have of art as lucky wager at the risky gaming table of revolution.

Later, in a chapter on Suprematism, Clark will investigate an instance in which art is less successful at playing at revolution, given that the politics of the Soviet revolution - its wheel of fortune - will turn against a community of artists dedicated to the cause. There too the question of revolution as radical contingency is raised within a historical context that is far less transparent than the French Revolution, though much closer to us in time. Unlike David, who is trying to spin a hot political issue, painters like Lissitzki and Malevich appear to be pushing the limits of philosophical thinking within a revolutionary context that could conceivably prepare the way for a significant epistemic break in the relation of art and society, that break having to do with destroying the distance between art and ordinary material existence without negating or wiping art out. After all, within bourgeois culture, kitsch or something near to it is often the result when this distance is compromised. In order to hang on to art, the Suprematists insisted on an aggressively intellectual approach to abstractionism so that it couldn't be turned into kitsch or its close cousin, trendy but functional design. This, at least, is what I deduce from Clark's reproduction of Aleksandr Tseitlin's *Ration Card* of 1920 which just about leaves functionality behind, though not quite (its arche-trace is still there). But how were works like this supposed to fit into all the various 'mood swings among those responsible for running the economy' in 1920? That's where the chaos of the Soviet revolution far outstrips the chaos of the French Revolution, or so it seems, given Clark's detailed historical descriptions. Again, as in the case of David, Clark will have to broach the issue of art in relation to terror (recall that David, like

the Museum Section of the French Revolution, was in the camp of the terrorists). Perhaps most importantly, whereas the relation of art to revolution can be known retroactively in the case of David, it *cannot* in the case of the Suprematists, because the Soviet life world was so chaotic and, eventually, so authoritarian and crushingly disastrous that one can't learn much by way of retroaction. This, I'm afraid, is where Lacan's insight about the subject coming into being as a meaningful entity in the backwash of the signifier fails us, according to what we read in Clark, because in the case of the Soviet revolution the logic of the signifier has come apart at the seams and isn't entirely readable or reconstructable.

In contrast to these wide screen chapters of armies clashing in the night, there is a muted chapter on Pissarro (no one's favourite impressionist) who was sympathetic to anarchism. But Pissarro (and this may be his tragedy) didn't get to live in the midst of social revolt. Clark examines paintings of peasant life in the country that are motivated politically in terms of content and execution wherein the contingency of everyday life is reflected as a dematerialization of bourgeois reification (or thing-presentation). Although Clark doesn't say so, Pissarro was concerned with transforming the image into an aura that was radically mutable, though modal, in the seventeenth century sense of maintaining a tonality of luminescent sobriety (desentimentalisation). It would have been useful if Clark had talked a bit more about Millet, whose paintings of peasants have always struck me as rather close to the poetry of Trakl, where one senses an enormous pent up violence in the gentle particulars of nature. To put the matter baldly, Millet's peasants conceal a furious wrath in the stillness of their gazes. Is this the consequence of Millet's construction of depth? In the case of Pissarro the viewer experiences disenchantment where wrath might otherwise appear; or, if one thinks of Poussin, where the sublime (that sublimated side of wrath) might otherwise manifest itself. The technical cause seems to be Pissarro's modernist (Greenbergian) flatness.

Of *Two Young Peasant Women* (1892), Clark says that 'the key to the picture's colour organisation is the fact that its two peasants are taking their rest in a translucent foreground shade, with here and there a trace of sunlight coming through the leaves onto their fists or foreheads' (p65). But one isn't necessarily aware of this, since the shade isn't thrown over the colour but emanates out of its very optical interplay, so that its presence is hardly detectable. This makes for tricky viewing, because one isn't sure what one is looking at, exactly. And this, Clark will go on to show, is a deliberate feature of Pissarro's art that turns the experience of looking into an exercise of undecidable perception, with the proviso, and an important one, that the conditions of lighting are precisely right. For this painting requires strong daylight in order not to look merely 'sullen' (Clark's adjective). Under artificial light we will see nothing but a drab painting that is incapable of materialising and dematerialising before our eyes. Apparently, Pissarro didn't think of art as artefact, but as a phenomenon of

the outdoors.

Two Young Peasant Women would be incidental to the history of modernism were it not that it represented an attempt to change the history of art. At least, this was Pissarro's intention when he exhibited the work in 1892. This is the time, Clark reminds us, when Van Gogh's paintings start to be shown and catapulted to fame, a time when a new wave of modernism erupts that will obscure Pissarro, though from Pissarro's perspective it represents a step back in the history of painting. After all, his aesthetic of optical dematerialization wagers on the eventfulness of what is contingent within the interplay of natural relations between the work, the light, and the optical capacities of the viewer. The new wave of modernism emerging in 1892, and championed by Cézanne to some extent, betrayed that impulse, because it made a transition from an emphasis upon the work as event (the mobile interplay of light freed from the rigidity of form) to the work as structure (as transgressive formalism).

In a chapter on Cézanne, Clark explores how another painter of disenchantment and anti-sentimentality dissolves concrete reference and mimesis by way of structure rather than atmosphere, representation rather than performance, with emphasis falling on the depiction of psycho-sexual constructions as well as superseding single point perspective. Here is a thread that Clark doesn't widely develop - namely, the correspondence between sexual figures in Cézanne (this is where the disenchantment comes in) and that of other modernist painters. The flippant thing to say, I suppose, is that given the list of painters concerned with the psycho-sexual, one would have to include, well, just about everyone. So we can quickly surmise the reason Clark didn't go far in that direction. Yet, we might nevertheless ask why at the very least we didn't get a corresponding chapter on Willem de Kooning's monsters of sexual and maternal affection, with perhaps some detours into the marriage between Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner.

My impression is that readers will find the two most significant chapters in Clark's study to be those on Picasso and Pollock, for this is where our hankering for masters and master narratives comes in. As is the case elsewhere, Clark compares photographs of works with the works themselves as we now have them. With regard to Picasso, Clark examines a moment when the history of painting appears to hang in the balance. In other words, to those who insist on modernism as an epistemic break Clark gives what must be the most highly charged moment in the history of modern art, the years 1908-1912. The thesis is a bit complex, but it boils down to the following point: Picasso faked an epistemic break that he was unable to produce and ended up being credited for having made an advance that, if one looks carefully, wasn't really made. Hence Clark downgrades Picasso to master illusionist, someone who has done what painters have always done: fooling the eye. No paradigm busting here, just a lot of showmanship and trickery, a point Clark backs up with meticulous observations about how Picasso manipulated illusionistic techniques that were hardly new to

the visual arts. The depressing thought that maybe the arts don't have epistemic veracity (they just pose as if they do) is central to the notion that we need to say farewell to the idea of modern art - that idea being that art *has* epistemic clout. More generally, he's suggesting that whatever the idea of modern art may be, it's more like a utopian horizon or an idea to come that not only never really came about but that is no longer conceivable as a real possibility since its historical moment of advent has now passed. This is the debatable ground of Clark's study, debatable because it's not really clear that modernism *is* dead and gone. Maybe, one could argue, we're just living in a phase of modernity without quite realising it. Anyway, isn't it clear today that postmodernism was a 1980s historical fantasy? That today it's horribly dated as a stylistic vogue in which architectural fashion played such an enormous role? Clark wriggles out of this sort of debate by breaking off his study in the 1950s. But, as we will see, he seems to be of the view that after Pollock American art, at least, went into some sort of major decline. 'Vulgar', he calls it.

Obviously no artist in the twentieth century had the good fortune to find him- or herself at the forefront of art history in the way Picasso did. Jackson Pollock was a close runner up. Still, Clark wants to know whether this was essentially a media stunt or not. Clearly the New York intelligentsia - Greenberg and company - were cheering Pollock on as a major event in the history of modern art. Had some kind of tawdry truth emerged when magazines like *Vogue* used his paintings as designer backdrops for pretty blonde models? The thought that the epistemic break of abstract expressionism was a media stunt is the thesis of a book by Serge Guibaut, who wrote about how New York was the Grinch that stole modern art from France. But, as Clark's chapter on Picasso has taught us, Picasso had already shown everyone how this sort of fakery is done. Hence it is highly misleading to say that New York simply stole the idea of modern art; what it stole was the *illusion* that there is an idea of modern art as epistemic break. In fact, Clark suspects that all art does is stage or fake this event in a way rather similar to the advertisers' cameramen at *Vogue* who posed their models as if they were busting up the bourgeois world picture by giving it one right in the kisser. That is Clark's disenchanted reading of this history and what leads him to suspect that art under capitalism is merely vulgar, 'in your face' stuff.

'He was, need I say it, a petty bourgeois artist of a tragically undiluted type - one of those pure products of America (of Riverside County, California) we like to believe will go crazy strictly on their own class terms.' (p300) Like Picasso, Pollock didn't have the sort of intellectual background that would have enabled him to deal with anything as major as an epistemic rupture in the history of Western art. And yet, he did make an enormous breakthrough that cannot be denied. He alone had gone beyond what Clark calls 'the grid' (for example, the schema laid bare in Mondrian's late works). Whatever one wishes to say of Pollock, he manages to free form

from geometry in a way that is extraordinarily convincing. Was it a conjuring trick? This is where Clark starts to have reservations about the fakery thesis, because a close formal examination of the work discredits the kind of cynicism that chalks Pollock up to Madison Avenue hype.

Then there is the contingency and instability factor. Pollock, too, couldn't really see his work completely, because it was in process. 'But what [Pollock] seemed increasingly to want in practice was a situation where the synthesis of aspects - the reading - came about as part of a sequence of movements: it took place but was never arrested.' (p326) Yet as Clark notes, Pollock and his friend Clement Greenberg did manage to look at the paintings in ways that they could be viewed as propositions. This, we recall, was already at work in David. The real question is, what kind of proposition does a painting make?

Clark often underscores the metaphorical ways in which modern art proposes something, as if the modern work of art was what Jean-Francois Lyotard once called 'paralogical.' It simulates a definitive statement about something without possessing the means really to make that statement valid. But what is it that modern art doesn't possess? According to Clark, it is certainty. In the case of Pollock we can't be certain the works are really as discomposed as they appear, or that they are as abstract as they appear, or that they are as unrhetorical as they appear, or that they are as anti-figural as they appear, or anti-painterly as they appear, or anti-perspectival as they appear. Clark takes pains to show us this and in so doing gives us a brilliant lesson in close examination of visual works. There is more to learn from a couple of pages of these speculations than in most of the art books in print, whatever the veracity of Clark's overall thesis. The main sticking point is that there is so much speculation and change of direction that we don't know whether to hate Pollock's work or love it. Even Clark is so unsettled that he gives us three endings, none of them particularly convincing.

This unravelling of focus is a prelude to the last chapter which ends on that sour note of the vulgar. Pollock's work may be redeemable. But when one turns to Hans Hofmann, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Willem de Kooning, the big ugly secret about Pollock's work is hard to miss. Abstract expressionism as a whole is in bad taste. 'A good Hoffmann,' Clark writes, 'has to have a surface somewhere between ice cream, chocolate, stucco and flock wallpaper. Its colours have to *reek* of Nature - of the worst kind of Woolworth forest-glade-with-waterfall-and thunderstorm-brewing. Its title should turn the knife in the wound' (p397). Hoffmann is the symptom of what art has become under the reign of the bourgeoisie; one can imagine Clark making similar comments about Morris Louis (painting as candy for the eye), Helen Frankenthaler (department store abstractionism), and Jules Olitski (kitchen counter-top aesthetic). As if to hold back the big guns, Clark spares us plates of Warhol's famous silk-screens of money, David Salle's sex playmates-cum-graffiti, Cindy Sherman's female grotesques (deformed

women again), and Nan Goldin's wasted youths on beds smoking a fag after a bad fuck.

Vulgarity - there you have it. If one thinks about this a bit, one immediately realises it is the obvious next step in a decline from sublimity (Poussin, but also Turner), to disenchantment (Manet, Courbet, Pissarro, the lot), to vulgarity (Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, and Lucas Samaras). No doubt, putting the shoe on the American foot is a bit unfair if one considers the vulgarity of painters like Kirschner, Klimt, and Grosz parading their whores onto the painterly stage, Duchamp's urinal and peep show gynaecology, Picasso's spread eagled models lusting for penetration, Dali's kitsch Jesus and kitsch Gala, and Bacon's 'gross-out' scenes of religious desk murderers. You could go even further back in time to the infamous painting *Origin of the World* by Courbet, once owned by Lacan, that now hangs in the Musée D'Orsay. If one looks at it from a certain perspective, one will notice that it brings the sublime, the disenchanted, and the vulgar into relation, something whose traces can be seen in the work of Warhol, Salle, Koons, and many others. It's here that Clark's history lesson falls on deaf ears: mine. I simply don't buy into his decline-of-Western-art scenario.

In the end, though, I'm less interested in taking issue with Clark's unsatisfactory ending, which reminds me a bit of the degenerate art thesis sponsored by fascism in the 1930s, than in holding out the possibility for a more careful examination of the vulgar as a cultural distinction. I'm also not overly concerned with the fact that Clark's thesis about the instability of the life-world in the arts is so general that it becomes blunted as an analytical tool, if not questionable as an epochal characteristic (was the Reformation any more stable?). Rather, I think we should pay attention to the particulars of Clark's painterly analysis which opens the possibility for considerable reflection on the most basic issues of what is at stake when we look at art, the premise being that perhaps this looking may be greatly restricted, given all the things we can't know. Yes, it's the 'blindness and insight' argument all over again; but this time from the perspective of someone who is not simply making clever arguments, and who deals with the particulars of what it is one cannot see or know that constitute the thing one is trying to perceive. Just *what* did Picasso think he was looking at in 1912? And how could *we* ever determine this? Do we know how to look at cubism? If so, how do we know? And *what* was it that Pollock thought he saw when he looked at his drip paintings hanging on the studio wall? According to whose principles did he decide a work was finished or not - his own or Clement Greenberg's? In any case, how is any principle applied to an art as unstable or unresolved as Pollock's in the early 50s? Are we any closer to such answers in the case of Suprematism or David's *Marat*? As I said, all of this is very uncertain. But admitting this is more than half the battle; it's an act of liberation.

The Limitations Of 'Duckology'

Adam Roberts

Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan, *Deconstructing Disney*, Pluto Press, London and Sterling, Virginia 1999, 216pp; £13.99 paperback.

Deconstructing Disney is a timely, impressively inventive, extremely entertaining and deeply flawed book. It is hard to disagree with the tenets of the book: of course Disney represents a hugely significant body of cultural texts, and not nearly enough properly theorised critical study of that body has been undertaken. Of course the ideological bases out of which these American texts are produced are the same bases as determine American foreign policy (amongst other things), so there are good reasons for reading these films with a view to their historical, cultural and political contexts. Many readers are going to be sympathetic with Byrne and McQuillan's overall perspective; although this does not mean that they're going to be entirely convinced by declarations that, for instance, *The Lion King* is 'about' South African apartheid (pp82-93). Isn't it a little more complex than that? Which is to say: doesn't ideology construct questions of race, political opposition or otherwise, and intertextuality in a rather more complex manner?

On the other hand, given that Byrne and McQuillan's critical idiom is polemic, the fact that it provoked a series of strong disagreements in at least one reader (this one) is certainly a good rather than a bad thing. And there are prodigious strengths in this book; the fact that it has no pretensions beyond wanting to 'open a move in the wider strategy of criticism' (p17) frees it up to make a large number of rhizomatic connections between Disney texts, contexts and theory, many of which are very interesting. Sometimes, by the same token, it comes over as random, even frantic, in its yoking-togethers. The whole is uneven.

Byrne and McQuillan begin by emphasising how soft a target Disney is to left-sympathetic theoretically-informed criticism. Previous critics have arraigned the corporation for 'sexism, racism, conservatism, heterosexism, andro-centrism, imperialism (cultural), imperialism (economic), literary vandalism, jingoism, aberrant sexuality, censorship, propaganda, paranoia, homophobia, exploitation, ecological devastation, anti-union repression, FBI collaboration, corporate raiding, and stereotyping'. 'It would seem,' say the authors, 'only a matter of time before conclusive proof is discovered linking Walt Disney to the assassination of J.F. Kennedy and the production of anti-personnel landmines' (p1). As the reader stifles her chortles, she goes on to read that we must 'not only ask questions about Disney', but also

'ask questions about the questions we have been taught to ask about Disney' (p7); and that 'if we are interested in the political circumstances which oppress us then we can never know too much about Disney' (p18). It is, they claim, using Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's awkward phrase, 'a study in "Duckology"' (p17).

There is a problem with the authors' use of humour. There is clearly nothing wrong with critics using humour per se, especially if the writing has a polemical aspect. The problem is that Byrne and McQuillan's humour isn't very funny. Like the John F. Kennedy gag quoted above, too many of the jokes here are obvious, or actively wince-inducing, and instead of pointing up the thrust of the thesis, or making the whole thing livelier and sparklier, they come over as flat and tired. 'There is something fishy about the *Little Mermaid*' (p22). 'Serbs sat watching *Aladdin* on video while their country was at war with America ... perhaps this episode is a case of a spoonful of sugar helping the bombs go down' (p176). Or take the following reading of *The Lion King*.

> 'Yes Simba, let me explain. When we die our bodies become grass and the antelope eat the grass and so we are all connected in the great Circle of Life'. This seems a thin argument even by Disney's philosophical standards; it is Hamlet's advice to Claudius that 'a king may go through the guts of a beggar' ... the lions manage to square the circle even if they do not acknowledge that they are talking shit (pp86-7).

The thinness of the lion's 'circle-of-life' philosophy, which was inflated by the Elton John song that functions as an ideological short-hand for the film as a whole, is a very interesting thing indeed; it mediates capitalist consumption and oppression through mystical obscurity that contains within it the necessary but repressed transformation of Capital into refuse. Its contradiction goes to the heart of the contradictions of contemporary ideological constructions of society. But Byrne and McQuillan's punchline here undersells what could have been a more interesting point.

On a par with this, the authors sometimes use bad jokes in order to set up serious points, which can read as plain pompous. An example is the 'perhaps over-familiar Glasgow pun' they cite in their introduction: 'what's the difference between Bing Crosby and Walt Disney? Bing sings but Walt Disnae' (p17). In itself, this, to my ear, lacks the chuckle-factor; but worse is the way Byrne and McQuillan laboriously explain the joke beforehand [in] Glasgwegian dialect ... "disney" is a homonym of "disnae", meaning "does not"'), and go on to make points about negativity and deconstruction ('deconstruction disnae do enough') on the back of it. As with the tiresome punning associated with 1980s deconstruction ('sexual/textual' bah!), you end up just wanting them to stop.

The meat of the book is a series of readings of major Disney films from 1989 to the present (from *The Little Mermaid* onwards); so 'classic' Disney

such as *Dumbo* - a 'parable of tactical aerial bombing' it seems (p16) - and *Pinocchio* get only glancing mentions. Let me give an example of the sort of reading the book favours. The section dealing with Disney's *Hercules* (1997) begins with a quotation from Toni Morrison: 'Bill Clinton is the closest thing we have to a black president'. It goes on to specify two public engagements, from the many, that Clinton undertook after the Lewinsky scandal burst, as it were, over the blue dress of the world media: 'attendance at an all-black southern Baptist church and appearing on stage at the end of a performance of the broadway production of Disney's *The Lion King*' (p151). From this constellation of reference, the authors go on to assert that Disney disavows race by 'encod[ing] black experience as white'. This is relevant for *Hercules*, the argument continues, because '*Hercules* is a more or less explicit character reference for the Clinton defence team' and 'it is the only Disney feature-length animation in which African-Americans appear as themselves'. Assuming we don't want to quarrel with this last assertion (although it seems to involve a rather fuzzy sense of 'representation' to argue that animated painted-pots represent African Americans 'as themselves' where, say, animated crows do not) - we then proceed to the reading itself. The authors' eclectic referencing (Star Wars, Fidel Castro, Michael Jordan and so on) embellishes and to some extent tries to veil a straightforward reading of the text as political allegory: Hercules is Clinton; Zeus is Abraham Lincoln ('his statue resembles the monument to Lincoln on Capitol Hill' (p154)), or maybe John F. Kennedy, but either way the mythic authoritarian strong-father figure of the American political establishment; Meg is Monica Lewinski and so on. This fairly banal reading of the text as coding an easily mapped political significance is complicated a little by the cross-vectors of race, and livened up by the verve of intertextual reference deployed, but doesn't escape a certain flatness for all that. One problem is that it seems arbitrary: given the conjunction of race and political icon-status that the authors want to bring to this text (although its not entirely clear why), does the Toni Morrison quotation really authorise the Clinton/Kennedy reading of Hercules/Zeus? Why not, say, Jesse Jackson/Martin Luther King? Why, when texts like *Aladdin* are related directly to the explicit Arabic context ('*Aladdin* is a representation of the Gulf War', p81), and *The Lion King* to the explicit black-African experience, is this Greek text not seen as articulating something more racially Greek, or Mediterranean? There was certainly unhappiness amongst some Greeks at the cavalier fashion in which Disney had appropriated their culture. If this doesn't merit a mention, where the disapproval of 'the General Secretariat of the Arab League' at 'negative portrayals of Arabs' in Disney films does (p7), it may say more about the calcified sense of approved left-wing causes than the actual texture of ideological signification implicit in these texts.

A deeper problem with this reading of *Hercules*, it seems to me, is that its undeclared assumption of a surface/depth model of text is both rather

rusty, and also at odds with the deconstructivist and postmodern patina of the book as a whole. Quite apart from anything else, seeing this sort of pattern in the carpet can lead to distortions of the primary text, and a degree of crudity. Can we really buy *Aladdin* as 'the story of an evil Islamic dictator' (p74), even if Byrne and McQuillan qualify the assertion with an 'on a superficial level'? In the case of this movie the code comes over as muddled. Aladdin himself, apparently, is 'a Palestinian "street rat" whose antics in the marketplace and ongoing feud with the palace guards call to mind the teenage revolutionaries who raised *intifada* against Israeli troops' (p76). But somehow, at the same time, authority in this film is not Jewish, but Islamic, 'Jafar ... a cross between the Ayatollah and Saddam Hussein' who 'is encoded with the familiar markers of Western racism, wearing black clerical robes and a "sinister" Islamic moustache and goatee' (p77). What is going on here? How can a goatee, 'sinister' or otherwise, carry the weight of Western orientalist racism? *Aladdin* makes no explicit reference to Islam at all, unless a general visual shorthand for stylised 'Arab-ness' necessarily embodies this. (An equivalent syllogism: Edward Said is an Arab; therefore he is Muslim). But the beauty of this sort of argument is that evidence in the text supports it, and lack of evidence supports it even more potently. Assume we want to read *Aladdin* as being 'about' the Arab-Israeli conflict. What do we do with the fact that there are no Jews in the film? Not a problem: the very absence of Jews is significant, since 'Israel is a ghostly absence from Aladdin as a film which responds to the specific historical conjunction of the Gulf War' (p77). Since we have already decided the film is about 'the specific historical conjunction of the Gulf War' and 'the intifada', its absence of Jews must in fact constitute a sort of haunting presence. Besides, *Aladdin* reminds Byrne and McQuillan (although it didn't me) of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and there's a load of Jewish stuff in that film which can be sleight-of-handed over into the Disney text, so that 'the Ark of the Covenant as representative of Israel "yet to come"' filled with ghostly Jews somehow illuminates *Aladdin* as well. Out of this comes the reading: Aladdin as Arab (plucky street-boy fighting the intifada, Aladdin) and Jew (bad authority figure, who is also oddly the anti-Islamic caricature, Jafar) fight for the magical, wise-cracking smart-ass genie who 'is an encoding of American support' (p78) - hence his 'technological prosthesis', the magic carpet which gives him command of the militarily crucial aerial arena.

Byrne and McQuillan conclude by asserting that 'these films open themselves onto the entire history of the West and act as a symptomatic concentration of all the ideological contests which are currently being fought in our world today ... [if] there is no "limit" to deconstruction, we would like to add that there is no "limit" to Disney' (pp168-69). Fair enough; but this is very specifically *not the same thing* as 'I can write down anything that pops into my head about these Disney texts, it's all equally valid'. The very importance of Disney means that more thoroughly thought-through readings are required.

Booknotes

Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 2000, 532pp; £27.50 hardback.

Ulrich Lehmann's *Tigersprung* knits together work from Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Simmel, Benjamin, and various dadaists and surrealists to articulate a 'philosophy of fashion' as it emerges amongst a European cultural avant-garde between 1840 and 1940. For the writers discussed in Tigersprung the connections between *la mode* and *modernité* (or *Mode und Moderne*) are more than just etymological: viewing modern life through the optic of sartorial fashion is both compelling and necessary. If modernity witnesses the contradictory amalgam of rationalism and irrationalism, of the eternal and the ephemeral, of newness and repetition, then such themes are writ large in fashion. *La mode* becomes the 'royal road' (so to speak) for understanding the decidedly undecided qualities of modernity.

The foregrounding of fashion allows Lehmann to rework overly familiar accounts of cultural modernity. At times this includes resurrecting seemingly minor figures and placing them at the centre of a cultural formation; for instance, the enigmatic dandy Jacques Vaché is seen here as the essential *animateur* of French dada and proto-surrealism. At other times it means privileging work that could be seen as relatively incidental to a writer's oeuvre: here, the fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode* becomes Mallarmé's most significant production. More generally, though, it allows for a sense of the everyday lives of these theorists and artists to be registered. One of the arguments continually encountered in *Tigersprung* is that sartorial fashion is an attempt intimately to inhabit modernity (as a second skin), so it is of more than passing interest to find that Georg Simmel, for instance, opted for bespoke English tailoring. A photograph of the dapper sociologist is accompanied by the information that Simmel sports a 'summer suit in cool wool, waistcoat in off-white gabardine, white cotton shirt with detachable collar and cuffs, assorted silk tie. The perfect relaxed outfit for the intellectual-about-town' (p128).

Tigersprung takes its title from Benjamin's assertion that fashion (and by extension all that is modern) is the 'tiger's leap into the past'. Fashion thus registers a modernising impulse that struggles to 'draw its poetry from the future' (as Marx would say) by continually quoting the past. Parisian haute couture, of course, evidences such tiger's leaps, as does the (male) surrealist penchant for monocle and top hat. It would, however, also be worth considering connections between fashion and avant-gardism at moments of more emphatic social revolution: the work-suit designed by the Soviet

artist Rodchenko in the early 1920s, for instance.

If *Tigersprung* leaves the reader with a sense of unanswered questions (the uneven rhythms of male and female fashion, although continually discussed, never really come into clear focus), this should be taken as a sign of the continued relevance of investigating *la mode* of modernity.

Ben Highmore

Michèle Barrett and Duncan Barrett, *Star Trek: The Human Frontier*, Polity, Cambridge 2001, 264 pp; £50.00 hardback, £14.99 paperback.

There are only a handful of book length surveys of *Star Trek*, and this mother-and-son collaboration is a welcome contribution to those. It provides a valuable overview of the programme from its original appearance 35 years ago, tracing the ways in which successive series have reproduced and challenged the original 'liberal humanist' ethos of *Star Trek*. The first section of the book is particularly interesting in this respect. Here the Barretts trace the numerous nautical allusions in *Star Trek* to the British and American naval discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These in turn are seen both to represent the ideals of modernity - progress, exploration, freedom - and to facilitate its hegemony through acts of colonisation. *Star Trek* emerges from this reading with an ambivalent investment in modernity, celebrating its humanist, rational ideals whilst also attempting to distance itself from colonising tendencies. This section does an excellent job in situating *Star Trek* within the tradition of nautical fiction, as well as providing a specifically British perspective on the second *Star Trek* series, *The Next Generation*, in which the Royal Navy features repeatedly as an idealised reference point. Given that most writing on *Star Trek* comes from the States and situates the series in relation to American culture, this is an unusual and valuable critical position.

My chief criticism is of the book's third section, where the Barretts discuss the two most recent series, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, which they identify as postmodern, and consequently as rejecting or undermining many of the principles which lie at the essentially modern heart of *Star Trek*. Whilst I fundamentally agree with this point, the negative way in which the Barretts define postmodernity weakens their argument. It is too easily identified as what modernity is not; hence the appearance of religion, insanity and moral ambiguity are focused on as examples of how the modern qualities of reason, humanism and clarity are brought into question. The explanation for why this shift in perspective should happen in the mid-1990s is inadequate, and there is a tendency to collapse the considerable historical and cultural distance between the original series and *The Next Generation* in order that they may both be read as modern. This is particularly problematic given that the latter did not finish until 1994, by which time *Deep Space Nine* had already started, while the original series finished 25 years earlier.

The Barretts' definition of the postmodern also falls short of engaging with the idea of the posthuman. They justify this position by arguing that both the original conception of *Star Trek* and its popular reception are fundamentally humanist; consequently, a 'posthumanist' reading would simply be inappropriate. As such they miss the valuable opportunity of reading *Star Trek* against its own grain and discovering posthuman uncertainties lurking behind its overtly humanist agenda.

Megan Stern

Laura Chrisman and Benita Parry (eds), *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism* (The English Association Essays and Studies series Vol. 52), DS Brewer, Cambridge, 2000; £30.00 cloth, 168pp.

This is a diverse collection of essays whose subjects range from a critique of diaspora and postcolonial theory, questions of subaltern representation and agency, interventions in the way contemporary postcolonial studies shapes up in the US, and more overtly 'literary' readings of works by Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson and Hanif Kureshi. These essays are collected together because of their commitment towards a more grounded, localised and materialist approach to cultural and philosophical analysis. For example, Tim Watson's essay on *Kim* explores how the text functions as a fictionalised space which negotiates the problems raised by Indian and Irish nationalism. There is a complex and richly textured treatment of colonialism and disease in South Seas texts, by Lawrence Phillips, and a very suggestive (if all too brief) discussion by Gautam Premnath of how one might try to understand Homi Bhabha's theorisations of hybridity in the context of the political terrain of Thatcherite Britain, or R. Radhakrishman's diasporic displacement within the 'transformations in the state-civil society relationship in the USA during the epoch of Reagan' (p61).

Alongside these pieces are disciplinary interventions on the shape and future of postcolonial studies in the US context (Vilashini Cooppan), and more theoretical interventions on the nature of subalternity, particularly in the Latin American context (Fernando Coronil). Ato Quayson's essay reminds us of the ethical dimensions of postcolonial studies. While exploring the value and productivity of interdisciplinarity in postcolonial theory, such as we find in Bhabha's deconstructive crossings and Mbembe's 'cultural studies' approach to political subjectivity, Quayson cautions that such interdisciplinarity should not become caught in a theoretical loop but must move towards political effectivity. For all this volume's ostensible commitment to a materialist approach, it will probably be read more for its notable interventions in, refinement of and supplements to the existing canon of high postcolonial theory.

Gail Low

Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds), *A Companion to the City*, Blackwell, Oxford 2000; 640pp; £80 hardback.

If cities demand interdisciplinarity, as the editors of this volume forcefully assert, then anthologies may well be the destiny of the written city. There is after all something 'urban' about 58 contributors crammed in between the covers of a book, all clamouring (very politely, of course) for the reader's attention. And if the urban is an unmanageable totality (a cacophony of competing images, differences, economies, and so on, blaring out descants from hundreds of cities across the globe) then recourse to 'team work' might be considered essential. Yet even a compilation on this scale (600 or so pages long) seems to suggest the impossibility of anything but an amalgam of partial views. As one of the contributors puts it, 'cities do not add up. Rather they accumulate' (p406).

The vast majority of the chapters in *A Companion to the City* were specially commissioned by the editors, whose cast list brings together some less-familiar names with 'old-hands' such as Saskia Sassen, Richard Sennett and Ed Soja. One task that the editors have set themselves has been to redress 'a tendency within urban studies' towards 'analysis and argument based on Western cities and Western assumptions of cultural, social, and economic life, with little attention paid to the profound differences of social, cultural, and economic processes and the local specificity of cities across the world' (pp1-2). Here the success of a more global perspective doesn't rely simply on the addition of non-Western urban centres to the catalogue of cities considered, but on also offering cross-cultural perspectives on Western metropolitan centres (London as articulated in Caribbean novels, for instance). This physical and cultural expansion is accompanied by various speculative considerations of how urban studies might account for less visible (and less textual) aspects of urban experience (smells and tastes, performative experience, and so on). Such suggestive possibilities for future urban studies are sketched alongside more familiar geographical discussions of mapping, planning and policy.

Yet the question that the urban still poses (and that this volume necessarily avoids) is the possibility of a writing practice that can attend to the polyphony of the urban: that can register the accumulation of the city not as a series of discrete views but as a multi-layered weave. From this perspective, anthologies might be seen as stopgaps that try to manage the awkward overabundance of the city, while urban studies awaits the invention of more 'orchestral' forms of attention.

Ben Highmore