# Be Alarmed!

*Michael Calderbank*

*Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, Tate Modern, London, 2001.

'To give people courage', wrote the young Karl Marx in a strikingly surrealist vein, 'we must teach them to be alarmed by themselves'.[1] The Surrealists, too, demonstrated that the more we try to grasp our own 'nature', the more inexorably we are struck by the absence, at once alarming and liberatory, of a fixed core of identity. Instead, we discover the scandalous truth that what underpins this subjectivity is the most disturbingly 'other', the most outrageously unthinkable. Deeply influenced by the discoveries of psychoanalysis, the Surrealists believed that, like dreams, their art was geared to the expression of 'desire' in all its delirious and irrational forms. Surrealism was understood as a revelatory glimpse of the possible, in contrast to an aesthetic that seeks only to mirror that which is immediately given. The Surrealists deeply resented attempts to reduce their status to that of a literary or artistic movement, claiming instead that of a revolutionary project aimed at the transformation of existing reality. In this light, the term 'desire' is extraordinarily polyvalent: capable of providing a strong thematic coherence to Tate Modern's exhibition, whilst at the same time being sufficiently flexible to allow the full magnitude of Surrealism's concerns to be properly apprehended. Yet for the exhibition to be adequate to the Surrealist conception of 'desire', it must be capable of evoking the 'interpretive delirium' of which André Breton speaks, when we are taken 'ill prepared … by a sudden fear in the forest of symbols'.[2] Can their art evoke, as they intended, a sense of alarm so profound as to be capable of shaking the very foundations of our lives?

1. Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', cited in L. Kolokowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* Vol.1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978, p129.

Although this is perhaps the most prominent exhibition of Surrealist works in Britain since the International Surrealist Exhibition held in 1936, it is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Since the 1980s there has been a resurgence of interest in Surrealism. This is a remarkable turn-around for a movement that had achieved near-pariah status: rejected alike by the austere modernist formalism of Clement Greenberg; Parisian existentialism; a strain of feminism that saw in Surrealism both the idealisation and the exploitation of 'woman'; and even, on occasion, by the, otherwise more sympathetic Situationists. Raoul Vaneigem, for instance, speaks of the spectacular-capitalist recuperation of surrealist imagery.[3] For many years Surrealism went either condemned or neglected. So why the sudden re-emergence of interest in a vanguard whose leadership had for so long been regarded as a failure? One reason for its reappraisal, it might be ventured, is the entrenchment of poststructuralist discourse within the Anglophone

2. André Breton, *L'Amour Fou*, translated by Mary Ann Caws as, *Mad Love*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

3. See Raoul Vaneigem, *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans), Edinburgh, AK Press, 2000.

Academy, a trend itself shaped by theoretical influences such as Bataille and Lacan, whose thought developed through a sustained critical engagement with Surrealism. However, this movement is not a simple return to a canonical Surrealism, but rather a re-evaluation of the movement given the experience of May 1968 and the failure of political aspirations often inflected by the repressed utopian-revolutionary rhetoric characteristic of Breton. Indeed, the poststructuralists' reconsideration of the surreal might be seen to re-open an old historical schism, an example of what Freud calls the 'working through' of trauma. If Breton's meditations on desire expressed the very demands for love and liberation which were thwarted on the streets of Paris, then it is as though by inhabiting the position of Bataille's one-time critique of such allegedly 'Icarian' idealism, they can forestall the shock of their political hopes crashing to the floor. We have witnessed a clear displacement of political concerns from much recent critical work on Surrealism, which often aligns itself against 'mainstream' Surrealism's advocacy of a collective revolutionary subject and with Bataille's 'dissident' shift towards the anarchic play of irrational drives. Any contemporary re-examination of 'desire' in Surrealism must necessarily situate itself (consciously or otherwise) in relation to the entrenched positions within this debate.

The institutional situation of Tate Modern's exhibition *Surrealism: Desire Unbound* gives rise to considerable internal contradictions. The Tate is expected to function both as the pre-eminent popular-commercial exhibition space for modern art in Britain and at the cutting-edge of contemporary aesthetic/critical debate. On the one hand, the exhibition needs to be a popular introduction to the Surrealist movement. On the other, it seeks to engage with those radical re-interpretations of the movement prompted by recent theoretical concerns. 'Desire' is asked to function as an umbrella concept, under which are grouped various aspects of the Surrealists' work and, following Bataille, as radically heterogeneous, capable of destabilising the ambitions at the very core of the Surrealist project. Hal Foster's influential 1993 study *Compulsive Beauty*,[4] argues that the play of the death drive threatens to contaminate the Surrealists' goals of liberation, love, *eros* and the like, with their uncanny opposites: trauma, aggression and loss. In this light, the exhibition's articulation of Surrealism through the matrix of 'desire' is laced with considerable ambiguity: it risks prematurely collapsing the movement's self-understanding of its own practice, with its reconstruction in the light of contemporary theoretical concerns. Conceived neither as a general introduction to the Surrealist project, nor as partisan critical reinterpretation, it blurs the line between the two. To put it bluntly, the exhibition refuses to acknowledge the existence of two competing and incompatible versions of 'desire': 'desire' as the dynamic propelling us towards the beacon of a liberated humanity; and 'desire' as a force which can only disrupt our attempts to find stable meanings and projects.

The selection of exhibits clearly suggests the desublimatory zeal the

4. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 1993.

poststructuralist project after Bataille brings to the Surrealist conception. Included amongst the exhibits are Boiffard's *Gros orteil* (Big toe) (1929), which offered Bataille visual stimulus for his theory of 'base materialism', and Dali's *Autumnal Cannibalism* (1936), in which is figured a cycle of obscene consumption that uncannily reflects the perversity of a Europe preparing to devour itself. This spirit is perhaps most evident in the prominent place afforded to the *Poupées* of Hans Bellmer. Bellmer's work (the subject of much recent attention[5]) is extreme, shocking, and viscerally sadistic. It is not difficult to see why some feminist critics have been outraged at an artist who 'depicted female bodies reified, mutated, sodomised, bound, eviscerated'[6] and whose work has been said to 'evoke the aftermath of child abuse, rape and murder'.[7] This view is not without some degree of substance, although as Foster suggests, the sheer insistence and ostentation, not to say *repetition*, of these images seems less a confirmation of Bellmer's absolute patriarchal mastery over the female doll-object than its opposite. The extremity of the images could be seen as parodically signifying an absence rather than a surfeit of control. Indeed, as Freud's discussion of the phantasmatic scene shows, as one regresses towards the archaic layers of the psyche, we begin to (re-)inhabit a realm characterised by a state before the clear instrumental differentiation of subject-object has occurred. The sadistic aggression demonstrated by the artist is therefore, as Foster is surely right to observe, not without its masochistic side. We can see an immanent dialectic in Bellmer's work, whereby the sadistic 'mastery' of the artist is inhabited, but pushed to such an extreme that, in revealing the 'autonomous' masculine subject's loss of control and the 'fragmentation and disintegration' of the ego, it becomes its opposite.[8]

However, I would stress that there is a marked difference between revealing that the subject is decentred, and regressively enacting its annihilation. Even if we accept Foster's suggestion that Bellmer's work represents a defiant protest against his Nazi father, we must also recognise that Bellmer's regressive sadism did not simply *repeat* Nazi violence. Rather, it engaged material artistically by channelling his destructive desires into a productive, law-governed activity. This highlights the dangers of an excessively 'irrationalist' interpretation. For if the Enlightenment was culpable of dismissing the traces of the Unconscious as mental detritus, then Bataille's followers risk falling into an equally erroneous alternative: that irrational drives are valuable simply in themselves. This is wholly alien to the Surrealist project, which was conceived as an extension, albeit of a particularly radical nature, to the Enlightenment project. The Surrealists believed that the procedure of circumscribing 'knowledge' within the narrow confines of the conscious mind was a self-deception. In declaring a whole field of human experience 'out of bounds', the Enlightenment made a fatal, self-defeating declaration of human powerlessness. Hence, the Surrealist fascination with the multifarious phenomena of the Unconscious was motivated by a thoroughgoing commitment to confronting the age-old

5. See Foster, op. cit., Chapter 4, 'Fatal Attraction'; Rosalind Krauss, *L'Amour Fou*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1985; Peter Webb and Robert Short, *Hans Bellmer*, London, Quartet, 1985; Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer: The Anatomy of Anxiety*, Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press, 2000; Therese Lictenstein, *Behind Closed Doors: The Art of Hans Bellmer*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001.

6. Sue Taylor, *Hans Bellmer*, op. cit, cited in review by Peter Webb *Tate Magazine* (Autumn 2001) p.73.

7. Hal Foster, 'Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus', in J. Mundy (ed), *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, London, Tate Publishing, 2001, p207

8. Foster, 'Violation and Veiling', op. cit., p208

injunction to 'know thyself'. The particular value of their endeavours was that they were courageous enough to carry this inquiry into the dark recesses of the mind where the boundaries between subject and object break down. If Surrealism often exhibited a fascination with the alarmingly 'Other' and the seemingly unknowable, this was not an end in itself, but rather a spur to incorporate the whole of human experience into a radically expanded concept of Reason, which could then be deployed in the struggle for human liberation.

In this exhibition, a number of works which the (Bretonian) Surrealists saw as integral to their worldview are simultaneously decontextualised and assimilated into a very different outlook. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23) is read as a representation of the painfully schismatic nature of human relationships, split irredeemably between sex and love, the material and the spiritual, private and shared experience, the ideal as projected in desire and its realisation. For Breton and the Surrealists, however, this 'delay' in glass represented not an irreconcilable dualism in human experience, but an enticing possibility. The non-identity of self and other was not to be regretted, but heralded as the very condition of possibility of 'desire' itself. Similarly, while the foregrounding of an irrationalist understanding of 'desire' allows for the inclusion of material on the Surrealists personal relationships, the essentially collective nature of their whole enterprise is largely obscured. The notion that desire is as much a social and political imperative as a personal one, something absolutely *integral* to the Surrealists' ambitions, is barely even registered. The difficulty with Bataille's 'undialectical materialism', is that it threatens to reduce human behaviour to inner animal urges. Hence, our experience is always threatening to become a matter of private or individual urges, a view which neglects the vital mediating factor of language in human experience, a quintessentially social phenomenon.

This is not to argue that there do not exist, as Herbert Marcuse argued, progressive uses of regression.[9] Indeed, the artistic imagination is evidence of this counter-intuitive notion. For Breton, the eruption of repressed psychic material was not necessarily traumatic. On the contrary, the recovery of such images was integral to the utopian dimension of the imagination:

> I have always thought, for my part, that the purely erotic aspect of the 'scabrous', the kind that enraptured us so deeply in certain dreams that we retained a desperate yearning for it on awakening, has alone allowed mankind to form a notion of paradises.[10]

It should be added, of course, that the realisation of such a utopia does not, in Breton's view, require a literal enactment of fantasy, an immediate discharge of instinctual impulses. Rather, it entails the full expression of the material needs of each individual biological specimen through

9. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, London, Sphere Books, [1955] 1970, pp161-162.

10. André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, S. Watson-Taylor (trans.), London, Macdonald and Co., 1972, p242.

intersubjectively determined cultural forms and institutions. This would require a revolutionary change in the character of society as it is currently constituted. The binary opposition (sublimation = bad/repressive/idealist, desublimation = good/liberatory/materialist) certainly does not do justice to Breton's position. He would not deny that there are forms of sublimation, dominant within modernity, which seek to diffuse the radical heterogeneity of desire by binding energy in ways compatible with social conformity. Desire has, for example, found itself sublimated into 'High Art' and thus found itself an assigned place in a repressive structure of reality. Yet here it is not entirely incorporated but still retains a negative critical value, its *promesse de bonheur*. Moreover, Breton rightly intuits the fact that psychoanalysis points to the possibility of a dialectical reversal: the barriers to instinctual gratification can actually serve to amplify (rather than limit) human freedom. As Freud observed, 'the value the mind sets on erotic needs instantly sinks as soon as satisfaction becomes readily attainable. Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of libido to its height'.[11]

This argument has a direct relevance to artistic production. For example, the surprise and delight induced by Meret Oppenheim's justifiably lauded *Objet* (Le Déjeuner en fourrure) [1936] (the famous fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon) is not just because of its sexual allusions, but because of the object's aesthetic value, which depends on the creative interanimation between the play of the drives and social prohibition. It confirms not the inexorable power of the super-ego but rather its *complicity* in producing enjoyment. Thus, its eroticism is far more imaginative than the pornographic image, which depends to a much greater extent upon desublimation.

11. Sigmund Freud, 'The Most Prevalent Form of Degredation in Everyday Life', cited in Marcuse op. cit., p182.

There is much else in the exhibition to be admired, not least the very welcome presence of important work by female surrealists such as Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning and Dora Maar. Work which, until recently, has suffered serious critical neglect.[12] Similarly the work of Claude Cahun and Frieda Kahlo, along with Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp (in the guise of his alter-ego Rrose Selavy), plays intriguingly with the performance of sex and gender. Cahun's work is also fascinating in its treatment of the themes of narcissism and homosexual desire, demonstrating that Surrealism's provenance stretches beyond the notoriously 'heterosexist' limitations of Breton.

12. See, for example, Whitney Chadwick (ed), *Mirror Images : women, surrealism, and self-representation*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1998.

The exhibits are organised in such a way as to resist any simple narrative or discursive reduction, arranged in rooms, as thematic constellations rather than chronologically or sequentially. This is not, in itself, a disadvantage. However, by following those contemporary critics who rule out judging Surrealism by reference to its own claims, the curators are reduced to a descriptive rather than a genuinely critical assessment of the Surrealists' treatment of desire. The exhibition pays a serious price for restricting itself to the question 'How do the Surrealists depict desire?', namely, it brackets out the equally significant corollary: 'Are these depictions still efficacious in changed cultural/historical conditions?'. Is it enough for a Surrealist

exhibition just to catalogue a historical moment in art? Is it to be more than a mildly diverting collection of novelties (Dali's *Lobster Telephone* for example)? Or can the work of the Surrealists still generate the kind of effects which its creators intended? In other words, can art still be charged with a shockingly subversive social content? For the curator/critic simply to exclude such questions from their remits inevitably risks a failure to grasp what is most remarkable about the Surrealist's endeavours.

If, as I have argued, the a priori dismissal of 'sublimation' (regrettably a current in too much contemporary criticism), is based on a mistakenly monolithic characterisation of Breton's position, then the naïve celebration of 'desublimation' is equally flawed. Indeed, Breton himself launched a penetrating critique of theorists like Bataille who, in appealing to a trangressive moment beyond the reach of language or reason, lock themselves into a performative contradiction the moment they try to give this discursive expression. A more productive point of departure might be Marcuse's recognition that, although contemporary society 'releases' a greater proportion of sexual energy, this can only be achieved in a way that reinforces existing social relations. Hence, modernity is characterised by a paradox: an explosion of sexual licence at the same time as the de-eroticisation of human activity and, in its connection to the natural world, a 'repressive desublimation'. This notion has serious implications for *Desire Unbound*. Emerging from Catholic Europe (especially France and Spain) in the 1920s and 1930s, Surrealism represented a violent response to an environment of harshly repressive sexual morality. In this context, the Surrealists' uncompromising affirmation of the erotic as a vital component of human desire had an unmistakably subversive charge. However, we might ask, what happens to this subversive charge when the society outside the gallery is already saturated with the pseudo-erotica of advertising and the mass media, when sexual desire is everywhere commodified and re-packaged in a million alienated forms? This does not render the surrealist project any the less relevant, but it does introduce serious complications, which first became an issue amidst Surrealist-influenced calls for sexual liberation in the 1960s.

The implicit periodisation of *Desire Unbound* (although post-war material is included this tends to be from artists with existing pre-war pedigrees) means that the curators do not give later developments sufficient weight. Tensions can be seen, for example, in the 'Platform of Prague' written by Czech surrealists in 1968 and recently reproduced in the collection *Surrealism Against the Current*.[13] The document forms a valuable counter-weight to the depoliticising critical trend. In it, they accuse modern society of 'perverting the pleasure principle towards a hedonism devoid of mystery or danger', and fulminate against those who would prostitute love and desire for 'commercial ends'.[14] This certainly does not mean that all surrealist treatment of the erotic is necessarily recuperated by the status quo, still less that their revolutionary demands have been realised by the spread of monopoly capital.

13. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowksi, *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, London, Pluto Books, 1991.

14. Ibid. p64.

In its sheer simplicity Joan Mìro's *Love* [1925], for instance, still points towards a realm of utopian satisfaction. Frank and yet naïve, sensual but also innocent, tender and funny, the painting counter-poses an erotic suffused with genuine human warmth to the instrumental artificiality of commodified sexuality. Similarly, Max Ernst's *Pietà or Revolution by Night* [1923] is effective, in the manner of dreams, registering as it does a violent Oedipal aggression directed against the father in terms of the opposite: a tranquil and gentle scene of paternal care. Even when the conscious mind is accustomed to seeing a degree of sexual imagery, which threatens to become just another storehouse of 'manifest content', this exhibition shows that surrealist art at its best can still manage to shock, surprise and delight. It demonstrates that in art, as in dreams, the unconscious mind is able to disguise its intentions and ingeniously utilise the 'conditions of representation' to smuggle out the most scandalous and alarming of truths.

# Booknotes

Carlo Ginzburg, *No Island Is an Island: Four Glances at English Literature in a World Perspective*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, pp136; £12.95 hardback.

This is a beautifully produced little book, not resembling an academic tome so much as one of those volumes of popular history like Dava Sobel's *Longitude* or Giles Milton's *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*. The cover consists of a fine reproduction of 'Portrait of a Carthusian' by Petrus Christus; there are numerous illustrations in the book itself; and imprinted on the hardback cover is my Uncle Toby's squiggle from *Tristram Shandy*, the significance of which becomes clear in the book's third essay. The publishers appear to be seeking a readership not used to buying academic books; certainly reading this one offers pleasures often denied readers of monographs from university presses.

The book consists of four separate essays, and *essays* they self-consciously are. Indeed, the book's introduction consists of a little disquisition on the essay form, taking in Adorno, but looking back to Montaigne rather than Addison or Lamb. These will not be essays in the deductive mode, moving steadily from starting-point to conclusion; rather, they will start from a *terminus ad quem* and seek to discover the question that leads to it. Scholarly, therefore, and digressive; but convivial, and offering its scholarship in an open and as it were friendly way. The pleasure will be as much in accepting the invitation as in admiration of the thesis or its triumphant demonstration; Ginzburg is not wearing his scholarship lightly, as the old phrase has it, but inviting you to share his delight in his discoveries and surprising connections.

And what are these? These 'four glances at English literature in a world perspective' sufficiently indicate their nature. More's *Utopia*, Elizabethan debates over rhyme, *Tristram Shandy*, and Stevenson's 'The Bottle Imp' are all allied with writing from 'the world', and their inhabiting of varied textual networks is variously demonstrated, suggested, implied, or otherwise deftly constructed. These implied relations vary from the unsurprising to the suggestive; I confess I was not surprised to discover that *Utopia* can be profitably read within the Lucianic tradition, though the alignment of 'The Bottle Imp' with Malinowski's work on the trading networks of the South Seas known as the *kula* came as a pleasant and unexpected discovery. But then my scholarly expertise is in the nineteenth century, so ignorance there is only to be expected.

This is not, then, the Carlo Ginzburg of *The Cheese and the Worms*, lovingly reconstructing the mentality of a heretic hidden from history via close interpretative attention to the documents that tell of him. Something of the

interest of that book remains, however; not only in the sense that these essays are the reverse of dull, but that they are equally driven by curiosity, which can lead Ginzburg as literary sleuth to some surprising places. The metaphor he uses, in fact, is not 'sleuth' but primitive hunter: one who asks us to reconsider these English texts in relation to correlates in Latin, French, Italian, and German and – as secondary texts and via translation – Russian and Polish. The book itself demonstrates the case it asserts in the title – that English literature cannot be isolated from its 'world' connections. The irony is, of course, that the current condition of a world readership for such international scholarship is that it should have to be available in English.

*Simon Dentith*

Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh, (eds), *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music,* London and Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; 371pp.; £15.95 paperback, £38.00 cloth.

With a palpable sense both that Anglo-American hegemony in popular music was drawing to an end, and that European composed 'classical' music could only offer self-parodies from within the living museum of orchestral and operatic performance, 'World Music' appeared late in the 1980s as a potential saviour, offering new sounds and new styles for the jaded Western listener. However, as Simon Frith shows in this very welcome book, the idea of world music was never to do with the broadcasting of the expressive materials of some authentic Other, but a piece of branding concocted by small labels who shared a rock-derived ethos. They were not trying to promote local musical traditions, or ethnomusicological analyses of local cultures, but popular musics which shared many of their performing characteristics and instrumental resources with rock. Subsequently ethnic inflections have also surfaced in dance music. Thus the 1990s may well be retrowritten as the decade of 'world music'; a moment whose political, cultural and economic consequences needed the serious deconstructive attention they get here.

World music, in this late-century sense, encountered an ambivalent welcome from the critical world. Concern with matters of local particularity, authenticity and ownership had already been stimulated by debates over the phenomenon of sampling and by the work of David Byrne and Paul Simon with live musicians; and a 1990 conference which was the moment of inception of this book brought to bear the disciplines of musicology and ethnomusicology, sociology and cultural studies on the concept. It thereby helped to establish that the phenomenon was more a variation on a theme than an original composition. The book's contributors bring the same disciplinary range to bear on a number of those variations, including early twentieth-century composed Orientalism by Albert Roussel and Maurice

Delage; Bartók's mid-century use of Gypsy musics to propose a more inclusive form of Hungarian nationalism; the survival of the populist Arabesk form in post-war Turkey (despite vigorous state disapproval); and debates on sampling, appropriation and the politics of hybridity in the dance music of the mid-1990s.

The book is fronted by an excellent fifty-page introduction which integrates a précis of each article with a far wider discussion of theoretical and methodological approaches, from those indebted to Edward Said's *Orientalism* to Susan McClary's still controversial political musicology. This introductory piece should be required reading for all who are interested in the politics and aesthetics of music. Indeed, the book as a whole is so necessary in so many ways that it is tempting to close the eyes and give it a hug. However, there are as always caveats. The editors themselves characterise their product as a call, awaiting a response: it has taken too long to appear, and it therefore needs to respond to itself. Since the book's inception, even since its appearance, times have changed. To take two obvious, related examples: debates over intellectual property have been widened massively by the Napster case; and the structures of global capital, including the relationship of global capital to 'culture' have come under a new scrutiny which has been informed by the bottom-up spatial relationships of which musical 'hybridities' are often taken as an example. We need another volume, covering the same ground but from the perspective of the early 2000s, please; and we need it soon.

*Andrew Blake*

David Howarth, Aletta J. Norvall and Yannis Stavrakakis (eds), *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, 256pp; £14.99 paperback.

One of very few centres in the UK to pursue such a coherent and sustained intellectual project, the Ideology and Discourse Analysis programme at the University of Essex has been running for over 15 years, comprising an MA of that name, a PhD programme, and a series of seminars which ought to be the envy of the English-speaking world (it is the only institution in the UK which routinely hosts such genuine theoretical luminaries as Slavoj Zizek and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen). Under the tutelage and political-intellectual inspiration of Ernesto Laclau, the programme has both disseminated and developed his and Chantal Mouffe's project of a politically committed mode of post-structuralist analysis for a considerable time. It is perhaps surprising, then, that this should be the first volume to present a selection of work by participants in the programme other than Laclau himself.

The book consists of fourteen chapters, all but three deploying some version of the programme's Laclauian post-structuralist methodology to produce case studies of a localised moment in twentieth-century world politics. From inter-war French fascism to the recent campaign against Manchester airport's new runway, from Northern Ireland to Chiapas, the book's sweep is impressive, and it stands as an exemplary set of exercises in theoretically contemporary political analysis. The results, however, are extremely uneven, and reveal as much about the limitations of the 'Essex project' as they do about its undoubted strengths. The admirably democratic decision to give as many as possible of the programme's research students an opportunity to publish has, unavoidably, resulted in some very weak work alongside the valuable contributions from more established members of the programme such as Howarth and Norvall.

It is not only the lack of experience of some contributors which contributes to the book's unevenness. While Laclau and Mouffe's work combines most of the key elements of post-structuralist thinking and Western Marxism in a rigorous synthesis, it looks here as if that potent cocktail has congealed and separated into its constituent elements. As the editors point out in their introduction, the approaches taken here differ markedly in terms of their debts, usually to one or other of the great post-structuralist triumvirate: Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. The resulting work will probably interest readers largely according to their own theoretical predilections. For my money, it was the deconstructive work, in particular that of Harvey and Halverson, which held the most interest, demonstrating at least some willingness to take theoretical risks. By contrast the Lacanian essays by Glynos and Stavrakakis, while undoubtedly intelligent, and usefully elaborating and illustrating key Lacanian themes, ultimately do little more than that. Like Zizek's work, they leave one feeling that the author is too convinced of the eternal verity of Lacanian doctrine to be interested in doing anything more than expounding it.

The relative lack of direct theoretical engagement exhibited by the volume as a whole – the concern with using and expounding theory, but rarely with moving it on – is compounded by the extraordinarily narrow definition of 'politics' manifested in its choice of objects. As if Cultural Studies had never happened, it is almost exclusively political parties and explicitly political and organised social movements which claim the attention of the contributors. Thus, while much of the book is very successful in illustrating – more concretely than he ever has done himself – the value of Laclau's recent work for direct political analysis, it feels like a rather timid affair, rarely willing to subject theoretical models to the challenge of possible modification in practice, and rarely contributing to theoretical debate about the limits of 'the political', or anything else.

*Jeremy Gilbert*

Mandy Merck, *In Your Face: Nine Sexual Studies*, New York, New York University Press, 2000, 245pp; £39.75 hardback; £12.50 paperback.

*In Your Face* is an acrobat of a book – agile, supple, daring, showy and brave. Its preferred 'method', insofar as this creativity-stifling term can be applied to such a strikingly imaginative text, is the resolutely provocative textual case study, using a film or a critical essay or a political scandal as the gateway to a series of observations, reflections, speculations and polemics about the role, place and meanings of sex and sexuality in contemporary culture. Its range and scope, indeed its occasional and heart-warming outlandishness, might best be summed up by instancing some of the unexpectedly juxtaposed figures whom Merck conjures into dialogue and the hitherto unmapped connections which she obliges the reader to trace. Here is a book where John Donne's metaphysical poetry is cross-referenced with the lesbian erotics of the film *Bound*, where opera and queer theory inhabit adjacent spaces, where Kant and Lacan assist in the elucidation of Whoopi Goldberg, and where the anti-pornography rhetoric of Catherine Mackinnon is scrutinised through the productively distorting lens of Jack London's adventure stories.

The claims put forward in the essays are often purposefully contentious, and those of an intellectually cautious disposition might find some of Merck's conceptual backflips and analytical plate-spinning hard to take, but I found the book's brazen disinterest in playing safe to be one of its real strengths. Merck aims to unsettle, to puncture, to destabilise and, where appropriate, to mock; such lethal playfulness is all the more welcome in an academic landscape awash with dispiritingly lifeless studies that parrot theory by rote. She is not one to linger in the drab minutiae of arguments, indeed she often cuts corners, but only in order to cut to the chase – these essays are sharp, in every sense of that word. She doesn't play fair, she is merciless to those she decides are her political enemies and she is never shy of unleashing a bracingly barbed wit.

All of which makes *In Your Face* that rarest of things, an academic text that can be read for pleasure as well as illumination. Almost all the essays it contains originated as conference presentations, and they retain in their published form a performative flavour that makes them crackle with life. Merck's erudition is undeniable, and impressively catholic (how many of today's dutiful and obedient Cultural Studies graduates can casually throw Darwin, Jackson Pollock, Sylvia Plath and Aristotle into their discursive digressions?), but she remains above all a great communicator. After all, if the things we academics say about culture and sexuality are as important as we like to believe they are, what is the point in restricting their distribution to a closed circle of initiates?

*Andy Medhurst*

Maud Lavin, *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design*, Cambridge MA and London, MIT Press, 2001, 201 pp; £19.50 cloth.

Critical studies of visual culture have yet to get to grips fully with those creative energies that mobilise the formal pizzazz of avant-gardism while keeping themselves obstinately aligned to the resources and protocols of capitalism. While art historical studies has spent its time debunking claims that avant-garde art exists in a state uncontaminated by the grubby instrumentality of capital, there has been less eagerness to recognise an avant-gardism operating within a realm more directly connected to the corporate face of modern culture.

Lavin's book begins in familiar art historical territory (the first chapter is on John Heartfield) but soon unearths less familiar stories of modern graphic design: for instance the Circle of New Advertising Designers founded by Kurt Schwitters, and the women designers ringl + pit. What begins to emerge is an avant-gardism more muddily tied to the purse strings of capital. From Schwitters to the graphic activism of Gran Fury and the Guerrilla Girls, Lavin's fragmentary narrative traces instances of a counter public sphere, as well as noting the concrete possibilities for redirecting the powerful machinery of the spectacle to more liberatory ends. Here the recuperative power of commodity culture is short-circuited: there is nothing to recoup when you are operating within the heartland of the spectacle.

Yet Lavin's book finally disappoints. The chapters that make up *Clean New World* started out as minor sorties in design history, but their collection here lacks a substantial thesis. What is missing is a broad reflection on the possibilities and limitations of generating a counter-public sphere out of the display techniques and circulatory forms so dear to commodity culture. What we get instead is a particular case-by-case discussion of practices and contexts which lacks a cumulative drive. The result is a light, fragmentary book that at times consciously mimes the modalities of graphic design, but which, less consciously, reflects their critical limitations.

*Ben Highmore*

Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*, London, Sage, 2001, 206 pages; £50.00 cloth; £16.99 paperback.

An extremely accessible, well structured and imaginative reading of market and social theory in terms of the myth of the Wild West frontier, Will Wright's book has a great deal to recommend it. To begin with, it provides a lucid, student-friendly introduction to the development of market individualism through Hobbes, Locke and Adam Smith, and to key critical responses to this tradition through Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and more recently the environmental movement. However, its real strength lies in its demonstration

of how the Wild West myth functions as a means both of validating and of criticising market individualism. The extent to which the mythic elements of the western – lone heroic cowboy, corrupt sheriff, struggling community – idealise free-market capitalism is probably fairly apparent to most critics of American culture, but Wright's argument that western iconography also articulates the very problematic limitations and presumptions implicit within this system is revealing and powerful. His exploration of how the frontier is imaginatively renewed and reinvented in order to validate different theoretical and political positions is also very perceptive, demonstrating as it does the extent to which such diverse thinkers as Smith and Marx invest in and idealise the same basic mythology.

My one criticism of *The Wild West* is that it could usefully have historicised and contextualised the mythology which it uses. What is original about this book is that it uses myth to read theory, rather than the more conventional reverse process, by simply using the Wild West as an analytic tool in this way; yet it does not give sufficient space to considering how changes in the popular iconography of the west relate to the development of and responses to market individualism. In a similar vein, whilst the list of relevant westerns at the end of each chapter which illustrate the argument that has just been made is extremely useful, some consideration of the genre's evolution, in relation to the political and social theory under discussion, would also be very beneficial.

*Megan Stern*

Azzedine Haddour, *Colonial Myths: History and Narrative*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000; 203pp; £40 hardback, £14.99 paperback.

In J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate of an imperial frontier settlement thinks to himself: 'Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die'. Azzedine Haddour's study of *pied noir* writers aims similarly to show that his chosen imaginative and theoretical texts are striated by colonial history: 'the history of a moribund society facing a political suicide'. The book is a development from his doctoral thesis on Albert Camus, submitted to Sussex University in 1989. *Colonial Myths* retains Camus as a representative writer of the *École d'Alger* while also considering the work of other 'colonial egotist' writers from the same school (Emmanuel Roblès, René-Jean Clot and Jean Pélégri) plus that of several francophone writers, notably Mohammed Dib and Mouloud Feraoun.

Central to Haddour's argument is the view that the *pied noir* writers depicted an Algeria in ruins, 'internalising its history as a dead past'. Additionally, he argues that Camus's universalist narratives colluded with colonialism by ignoring Algeria's historical specificities, and explicates how a doctrine and a rhetoric of assimilation in fact aimed to expunge the colonised. Thus, the ways in which *L'Étranger* has been incorporated into the Western canon epitomises the thrust of Haddour's argument: that the particularities of colonial discourse are often erased in postcolonial studies which overlook the cultural difference of the colonised (who are *L'Étranger*'s 'true' outsiders).

This is a fair point, but the ways in which *Colonial Myths* upbraids texts and critics for their omissions lays Haddour's book open to similar objections, not least given the lack of specificity in his book's title – especially as it could be argued that he spends too little time on issues of gender and translation, issues that are central to his subject but almost completely absent from his discussion.

Haddour begins the book by lamenting a 'tendency' in postcolonial studies to confuse history with (the ruins of) the past, but it is unclear who he believes has recently conflated the two, and consequently he appears at times to have set up a straw (or at least somewhat dated) enemy. Yet his readings are frequently insightful and original, drawing especially on Derrida to expose or tease out fresh meanings from Camus's much-discussed texts, into which not only the colonised but history itself ought to be (re-)read. In Haddour's reading, Camus emerges as in many ways similar to Coetzee's magistrate: 'I wanted to live outside of history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects'. To expose that desire and its consequences is the chief value of Haddour's study.

*Peter Childs*